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ABSTRACT

While progressive education has been practiced in formal learning settings for over a century, there is a relatively limited amount of contemporary scholarship on such schools. Acknowledging the nebulous nature of this genre, my study was undertaken to identify the philosophies and practices of a contemporary progressive school. From the conceptualizations found in Kohn 2008's work on the characteristics of progressive educational settings, this project used field observations and interviews to examine the daily work done at a small, independent progressive school in Upstate New York. Taking Pondiscio (2019)'s suggestion that scholars pay more attention to what actually goes on at schools, the study describes the daily teacher-student interaction and ways in which it expresses the beliefs and philosophies of the teachers and setting as one iteration of contemporary progressive education. Case study, narrative, and autoethnographic methodologies were used in considering what is done in this progressive environment. This school was found to be congruent with Kohn's set of descriptors and through the use of a Schoolwide Curriculum and Mixed Age Grouping to also be consistent with existing scholarship on progressive schooling. In doing so they present a set of conceptualizations of teachers, students, and assessment that serve as an example to be considered for all learning settings.

PEACHTOWN 2019:

PRACTICE AND PEDAGOGY IN A PROGRESSIVE LEARNING SETTING

by

Dean Kloss

B.A. Niagara University, 1980

M.S. Niagara University, 1987

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Teaching and Curriculum.

Syracuse University

May 2021

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This work would not have been possible without the continual and unfailing openness and cooperation of the people of Peachtown Elementary School. From my first phone call to the school to the present day, the students, parents, staff, and leadership of the school have always been open to my presence, moving among them, and frequent queries. More than just tolerating my being there, they let me draw close enough, in so many ways, so as to experience the true heart of this remarkable place. I especially need to acknowledge Barbara and Alyssa, who were always willing to answer my questions, sit for interviews, and thoughtfully reflect on what Peachtown is.

A writer can have great opportunities, rich subjects, and still not be able to complete work like that which I was attempting here. That is not possible without having the one irreplaceable and indispensable person to stand by your side throughout this long process. So to my wife, Eileen, I promise that never for a moment, will I forget that without, you none of this would have been possible.

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Introduction

Traditional Public School (TPS) and Its Alternatives

There have been alternatives to the nation's system of public schools for nearly as long as the institution has existed (Avrich, 1980). Public education, as the single institution through which most Americans pass, is so pervasive that the practices and policies enacted there have become synonymous, not only with the concept of schooling, but with the process of learning itself (Kirschner, 2008). The educational landscape is dominated by the "Traditional Public School"(TPS) (Ni, 2007,) defined as being the school to which a child is assigned due to their residence.(Stitzlein, 2017) However, throughout the history of schooling in this country , alternative choices have existed for parents to select for their children's learning. (Little & Ellison, 2015) This right has been affirmed by the Supreme Court on more than one occasion (*Meyer v, Nebraska, 1923; Pierce v. Society of Sisters, 1925; Yoder v. Wisconsin, 1972*). The existence of an alternative constellation of schools, often intentionally set in opposition to the corresponding institution, has been both persistent and vibrant. (Reese, 2001)

Public schooling emerged in the mid-19th century in a time when children were educated either at home or in small informal settings. (Farenga, 1999) This is an archetype that has remained and been repeated as small learning collectives have again and again sprouted up, some for a short time, others with greater longevity (Neef, 1808). The growth in educational alternatives seems to accompany societal changes, such as that found after World Wars (McWilliams, 2003) and following the social upheaval of the 1960s (Miller, 2002). Some have seen this repeated tendency to form educational alternatives as evidence of an American

tendency towards the small and intimate in opposition to large institutions, especially in matters that directly affect families (Dennison, 1969). Growth of educational alternatives, including homeschooling, has been particularly noticeable in recent decades (Davis, 2013), and it can hardly be surprising that a counter-narrative to the established educational system, has emerged that conceptualizes students in a different manner. Many such schools operate with a different pedagogy, including the one being profiled in this study (Chernetskaya, 2013). Their continuing presence is an important aspect of the current educational landscape (Little & Ellison, 2015).

The school in this study simultaneously stands outside of this landscape while still being affected by many of the expectations and protocols that have come with the Age of Accountability. I wanted to see what it means to be a “progressive school” in an educational era characterized by a narrowing of curriculum and instruction. I used frequent field observations and numerous interviews to be able to depict what goes on during the school day in such a setting. This work is structured by the findings of Kohn (2008) on the characteristics of contemporary progressive schooling. Case study, narrative, and autoethnographic methodologies were applied to depict what it means to be educated in a progressive setting today. In doing so, I hope to contribute to what contemporary schooling consists of.

In order to properly understand the distinctiveness of an independent school it is necessary to place it in context in today’s educational landscape. Much that is done in such as settings runs contrary to developments of the last 20 years in educational policy and practices. Before beginning to discuss the approaches used in one such school, I will consider the pedagogy of today’s TPS.

TPS Pedagogy

It has been observed that contemporary TPS pedagogy minimizes a student's individual interests and natural abilities to learn and, instead of seeing them as equals in the learning process, treats students as needing to be managed (Chaplain, 2017). Critics of contemporary public schooling have described it as a coercive environment, built on conformity, control, and compliance (Holt, 1981). Students who successfully follow along a path established by authorities far from the classroom, regardless of their personal circumstances, are those who do the best in this atmosphere (Spring, 2016). The result is that institutionalized schooling is short on what has come to be known as "productive learning" (Glazek & Sarason, 2006), that motivates students to independently pursue further learning.

The established public school setting is "curricularly atomized," where knowledge is not only discretely sliced into "subject areas," but the portion of that knowledge that is to be revealed is further dissected into 13 segments each assigned to one of the K-12 grades as dictated by a state's educational "standards (Gatto, 2003, Kohn, 1993). The setting for each individual child is determined by their birthdate, not their ability level or interests, in a long-established system of age segregation (Robinson, 2006). You learn daily with those closest to you in age, not those with whom you necessarily share a learning style or needs.

The instruction received in public schools is standards-driven, based upon a set of learning targets for each grade level that are not necessarily developmentally appropriate or relevant outside of a formal schooling setting. (David, 2011). This has led to a narrowing of instruction and learning that both teachers and students have noted (Cochran-Smith, 2003). The

elevation of data that is used to judge the effectiveness of teachers, students, and schools has shifted the focus of schooling to test preparation (Gishey, 2013). Students are to be filled with knowledge (Freire, 1970; Illich, 1971) that they are expected to reproduce in the near future on standardized tests. That is how success is determined.

This standardization of assessment has led to a standardization of instruction that has eliminated much that is unrelated to test preparation.(Scot, Callahan, & Urquhart, 2009). Public schools have become primarily focused on the product of test success and have minimized the importance of each individual's learning process, the learning how to learn that is a skill that each student should be able to carry far beyond their days in the institutional classroom (Mausethagen, 2013). How public school classrooms have been radically changed by developments in the last 20 years will be discussed in the next section on the current educational era.

In this section I have examined the current climate and characteristics of today's TPS. Much of what has changed is due to the increasing emphasis placed on standards and assessment. In the section that follows I will trace the origin of these changes. These significant developments and constricting of what goes on in TPS classrooms are part of larger cultural changes and societal shifts that have significantly influenced school practices.

The Age of Accountability

The "Age of Accountability," is characterized by several features that have emerged as, "School Reform" (Ravitch, 2016). I shall focus on those elements most relevant to my study for

the changes in public education during this time that can be contrasted to the work being done in independent progressive schools. (Kohn, 2008)

Influenced by Neo-Liberalism, the past three decades of American educational history have been dominated by an increase in accountability, choice, and a narrowing of instructional techniques to those directly tied to test success. “It’s about the victory of whatever can be quantified over everything that can’t. It’s about the quiet retooling of American education into an adjunct of business, an instrument of production” (Slouka, 2009, p.32). Many scholars have cited the beginning of this Age of Accountability and choice as 1983’s, “A Nation at Risk” (Gaona, 2008, Johanningmeier, 2010, Ravitch, 2016). *ANAR,* along with fueling the discussion that led to educational standards, called for elevated requirements for graduation, more instructional and homework time, higher standards for beginning teachers, and increased expectations for academics and conduct (Marzano & Kendall, 1996). The Clinton Administration’s Goals 2000 program promoted the idea that states should develop their own standards, tests, and achievement standards (Marzano & Kendall, 1996). The use of standards is a legacy of the social efficiency movement (Waldow, 2015) which attempted to apply industrial production concepts to educational environments.

2001’s *No Child Left Behind* was a federal education law that mandated assessments in Reading and Math beginning in 3rd Grade. including a whole universe of requirements and consequences that affected every public school in the nation. In many ways the mental images we have of school in the “The Age of Accountability” is the legacy of *NCLB* (Linn, 2003). It has changed public school teaching and learning and an entire generation of students has grown up associating success in school with achievement on standardized tests (Bailey, 2014). While

NCLB was reauthorized and modified as the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015), its effects on classroom instruction and learning remain.

The school in this study is noteworthy for its not participating in the developments discussed above. Rather than focusing on tests and data, the leadership there has intentionally chosen to operate in the progressive educational tradition of child-centered learning. (Russell, 2012).

In this section I have considered the effects of The Age of Accountability on TPS classroom practices. During this time, TPS have been moving in a direction distinct from the progressive education tradition and the way in which it conceptualizes learning. The next section will examine the legacy of the progressive education movement and what makes those settings that draw on it distinct from today's general educational landscape. I will also consider children's innate learning abilities, the practices of progressive school teachers, and a prominent characteristic of progressive learning environments---educating for democracy.

Distinct Elements of Progressive Education

My intention here is not to summarize the aspects of the progressive education movement which are voluminous (Cremin, 1961), but instead to point to those elements most prevalent in contemporary small independent progressive schools. While John Dewey is most often associated with this model of learning, he was reluctant to provide a definition. (Read, 2014) Another scholar has suggested that progressive schools attempt to provide an answer to, "How do you help students find their own voice, work together, take responsibility for their own learning, and all the rest?" (Featherstone, 1991, p. x)

Progressive schools for over a century have emphasized their students' individuality, abilities and interests, over the institutional criteria adopted by TPS (Engel & Martin, 2005). While many authors have traveled to survey progressive schools throughout the United States (Dewey & Dewey, 1915; Semel & Sadovnik, 1999; Knapp. 1994; Zilversmit, 1993), there has been no concise definition of progressive education perhaps because it is constantly adapting in its different settings (Washburne, 1952). However, the practices there have been described as distinct from TPS pedagogy (Kohn, 2008). My observations in progressive schools since 2015 have been consistent with the observations of Russell (2012), who identifies "the three basic philosophies---child-centered learning, community integration, and democratic decision-making." (p. 53) Another scholar wrote of the "Attributes of the Ideal Progressive School" as, "children are responsible for their own learning," "students' independence is encouraged," and "the learning environment for children is extended." (Chernetskaya, 2013, p. 50) "Progressive school educators are concerned with helping children become not only good learners, but also good people." (Kohn, 2008, p. 1)

In this section I have examined progressive schools and their characteristics that make them distinct from public schools. In my research I discovered that a belief in the natural abilities of children to learn was foundational to this school's work. In the next section I will describe how this belief is enacted in a progressive environment.

Children as Natural Learners

The pedagogy of progressive schools may be understood through their faith in children's innate abilities to learn (Read, 2014). If we trace American progressive education back to Dewey's writings, there is significant evidence of his belief that children possess within them the essential elements needed for learning. "For Dewey, the child is already active and the question of education is taking hold of his or her activities, of giving them direction." (McWilliams, 2003, p. 26) With this as a starting point, it is not surprising that many progressive schools see students as sufficiently equipped to be co-learners with adults, enriching the learning experience for all (Kloss, 2018a). In repeated interviews with teachers at the school in this study, students were described as have to the capacity to be both co-learners and, at times, teachers.

In being "child-centered," as has been noted in the studies cited in the previous section, progressive schools are intentionally designed so to provide a latitude, one with wide margins, for these children to explore their interests (Potts, 2007). In describing their experience at the school I studied, one alumnus told me that a lack of rigid academic rules led to a freedom that allowed them to learn in the way that they were most comfortable with. This eventually permitted them to develop an individual learning style that included exploration of areas of their own choosing. This individual saw such a combination of factors as leading to their developing a confidence that was a significant asset going forward. This emphasis on an individual's exercising learning choices is consistent with progressive school tradition. Dewey wrote, "…experience has proved that formalization is hostile to genuine mental activity and to sincere emotional expressivity and growth. Emphasis is upon activity as distinct from passivity." (Simpson & Stack, 2010, p. 19)

In this section I have examined what it means to be a child-centered environment and what practices are used there. An important part of this is the role that teachers play in a progressive educational environment. As I wrote in a previous study (Kloss, 2018a), the culture of progressive schools can be characterized by an informality that allows for greater student freedom. In order for this to work, teachers in progressive schools need to have a distinct relation to the work that they do.

Notable Approaches of Progressive School Teachers

Read (2014) who studied a progressive elementary school, saw, "teachers as curriculum enactors, active agents in creating curriculum, rather than passive recipients of ideas handed down from above." (p. 18) Progressive school teachers have been identified as creating environments that are "child-centered." (Russell, 2012; Chernetskaya, 2013) Dewey identified the reality of education as being found in a direct teacher-child relationship (1902). If the work of progressive schools is in taking children seriously by including them in decision-making about their learning (Kohn, 2008), then the role of the adults who work with them there must reflect that reality. A very clear statement of how progressive school teachers see what they do was found in an account of the work at a progressive high school. The teachers there see what they do as "artisanal", explaining that,

> "Artisanal teachers design learning environments where students are encouraged to engage with the tools they will need to grow as individuals within a democratic society. Artisan teachers are constantly learning. They view their students as an ever-changing subject matter. Working with curriculum and students as their medium, artisan teachers design learning

opportunities so that all students can understand their individual approaches to learning, which makes them more self-reliant and self-aware of the world around them and their place in it."

(Gambone, 2017, p.197)

The observations included in that dissertation are strikingly similar to the comments made by the teachers at this school when I conducted a pilot study there in 2016 and 2017.That research laid the groundwork for this study, using interviews and participant observation to document the culture of such a school and the effect it has had on its students. (Kloss, 2018a)

In my interviewing and observing the work of these progressive teachers, the carefulness and intentionality with which they do their work, along with the trust they put in their students' abilities, revealed practitioners far from the data-driven TPS teacher's world. One teacher at this school told me, "We educate in the traditional progressive model, not in the standard way, so that they develop critical thinking skills, based on their individual strengths. A child can walk out of Peachtown with a true sense of self, the ability to recognize their own voice." In speaking with teachers there, they were quick to direct any conversation back to the learning relationships they had with their students. The important differences between what I saw there and teacher-student TPS dynamics will be contrasted in this study through my use of personal reflections that draw upon my own teaching career.

Progressive schools have instituted practices that allow a student's interests to be one of the guiding forces in forming their educational program (Chernetskaya, 2013). Such schools have long been associated with "project-based learning, "as they allow students to decide what medium they will use to demonstrate what they have learned (Semel & Sadovnik, 1998). Time, space, and choice are fluid in these settings, allowing students significant latitude in the study

and pursuit of knowledge in areas of interest (McWilliams, 2003). I spoke to a former student who recalled having the latitude to take their interest in a topic as far as they were capable of. She enthusiastically remembered the freedom that they had, which she described as “artistic” in the topics they studied and the projects they did.

I have seen progressive schools that treat students as co-learners in communities with a significant degree of heterarchy and lateral contributions to production of knowledge. Teachers there have to be willing to forgo some of their traditional authority and control in allowing space for their students to be a part of the learning dynamic; in doing so, they have seriously altered the traditional teacher-student and adult-child relationship. “We don’t fit our students into the curriculum,” one progressive school teacher told me. “We fit our curriculum around our students.” Without the pressure of a testing regimen to adhere to, progressive school teachers have the freedom to have “school learning” better resemble learning outside of the classroom, where a topic is introduced, a group explores, and knowledge results. Or a dead end is discovered. A Vermont progressive school teacher told me, “I always have a plan, but somedays I steer the boat, and somedays we just see where the tide takes us.”

In this section I have discussed how progressive school educators perform their work in the environment in which they teach. Part of the way in which instruction is conducted in these schools is affected by the significance that they put on preparing their students to participate in democratic environments. The next section identifies the key components of the theory underlying this practice.

Educating for Democracy

Anne Angell's 1991 study identified the four most significant characteristics of democratic learning environments as peer interaction in cooperative activities, free expression, respect for diverse viewpoints, and student participation in democratic deliberations and decision making. (p. 241) Each of these aspects requires a learning arrangement that includes both adults extending trust and faith in children's ability to responsibly participate in decision-making (Oliner, 1983) and children having an increased sense of agency in their capacity for expression and collaboration (Chavez, 1984). The practices of the school can contribute to the environment that allows these interactive dynamics to take unfold.   These elements are more likely to be present in schools that are intentionally child-centered and focused on creating a community (Kohlberg, 1975).

The school in this study, with its unique schoolwide curriculum creates additional opportunities for student interaction that both strengthen learning and the skills needed for democratic engagement. Children of various ages regularly work with each other on academic projects. A teacher there told me, "The culture of this school is community, we all have ownership of the school. It's based on respect, and there's a certain level of formality and informality in relation to that respect." When asked to describe their school , another teacher said, "This is a school that teaches children to be good citizens, first and foremost, to create a better society through our students." A conversation with the director of the school, included her comment that, "Our school-wide curriculum, where we're all learning about the same thing, keeps us from all that judging and comparing that is a part of public schools these days. That destroys community."

Next I will turn to the specific site being studied in this work, considering how such a unique setting has affected the instruction and learning that has gone on there. Included in this section are considerations of the practice of mixed age learning, an innovative approach to time, space, and choice, differentiation of instruction, and what success looks like in such a place.

The Study Site

The location where the research for this work is being done is noteworthy among learning settings in contemporary schooling. There is much about it that contributes and supports the characteristics of the school and its approach towards its students. This school community meets in a one-time residence, complete with a working kitchen, living room, dining room, and bedroom areas, all of which contribute to its intentional informality. Congruent with such a non-institutional setting, the practices that are being examined in this study, are also distinct from contemporary accepted “best practices.” These include a devotion to Mixed-Age Learning, that allows for considerable latitude in the time, space, and choice afforded to all members of the community. There is both a stated commitment and a series of supporting practices that are evidence of devotion to each student learning what they need as an individual and different manners of measuring learning success.

These characteristics are intentional and were part of the founder’s original vision for this school nearly 30 years ago. At the same time, the freedoms that allow for such measures are only possible because of its status as an independent, private school, outside of the institutional assessment requirements of contemporary schools. Lacking the public

funding that supports such settings, this school regularly is in a precarious financial position and operates with uncertainty about its future existence. The founder has shared, in multiple interviews, the constant concern that fiscal stability has been since she started the school decades ago. These topics will both be elaborated on in the Methods section.

In the last section of this Introduction I will consider the reasons that I have undertaken this work. I will then discuss the conceptual framework that I will use to interpret what I find at the school. Finally, I will discuss my role in the study and how my personal history in the educational field has affected this research.

This Study and Its Significance

In this study I asked the question, “What are the principles and practices of a small independent progressive school in the Age of Accountability?” My primary interest was in documenting what progressive education looked like in practice in a small rural setting today. I accomplished this through a series of day-long observations at the school, supplemented by interviews with adults who work there. My work has been very influenced by other studies of progressive schools (McWilliams, 2003, Russell, 2012, Chernetskaya, 2013, Read, 2014). If McWilliams’*, “The Ideals of Progressive Education at Work: Little Red School House, New York City,2000,”* (2003) can present progressive education in a contemporary urban environment, then I believe that my study can do the same for a small, rural, progressive school.

It is my perspective that current depictions of the school landscape are incomplete, too focused on contemporary TPS and their acceptance of “student achievement” as being

synonymous with standardized test success. To the degree that non-TPS options have been studied, research has been primarily dedicated to charter schools and religiously-affiliated private schools. In many ways these are both structurally similar to TPS. What is missing is a study of learning settings that are not imitative of the organization, curricular atomization, and assessment model of TPS. There is limited recent research on truly alternative learning settings. What I am undertaking with this work is a study of a truly unique learning environment, one that challenges TPS notions of curriculum divisions, age-segregation, fixed protocols, time limits, and academic success. It generally coheres with Paula Kane's work on characteristics that are shared by all "independent schools." (1992)

The subject of this study has a schoolwide curriculum, mixed-age learning, considerable informality, flexible time constraints, and no formal testing. At a time when most accepted forms of assessment are standardized, at this school those choices are collaboratively produced by teachers and students. What it does directly challenges the pedagogical model of TPS in many ways. For nearly three decades it has been successfully educating students who have gone on to success in high school, college, and their careers. Their work, as an example of a persistent progressive model of learning, deserves this study.

My Conceptual Lens

The framework through which I will be examining the practices of this school can be found in Alfie Kohn's 2008 work on Progressive Education. This piece will be further

considered in the next two chapters. It is noteworthy for the author's identification of seven characteristics that can be used to identify contemporary progressive schools. This piece has been cited in more than 100 articles and mentioned as a topic of discussion among progressive faculties in other dissertations on progressive education, attaining a level of acceptance among those engaged in the field.(Gambone, 2017) I will be looking to see how the practices of the school I am studying here resemble Kohn's identifiers. My interest is in what the school does that is congruent with this framework for contemporary progressive schools, for as Kohn wrote in this piece, "Progressive educators don't merely say they endorse ideas like 'love of learning' or 'a sense of community.' They're willing to put these values into practice. " (p. 3) In a larger sense, I want to do this work to see how the practices that Kohn points to and the ones that this school uses allow us to see the manner in which they see children as learners and conceptualize them as students.

My Place in this Work

I have been a public school teacher for more than 30 years, about 30 miles from where this school is located. In that time, I have seen the education profession change from one at least partially committed to helping students come to know themselves as learners and begin to envision their lives to a 13-year test preparation and administration service. In the process, education, the key to that envisioned life, has become "Education: The Product"--- another consumer good. The teachers I know come to school every day wanting to do good. It is the institution that has changed, bowing to political pressure, putting data collection above all else. If it cannot be measured in a standardized form, then public schools do not prioritize it.

I began my PhD studies in the Fall of 2014 and was quickly drawn to studying alternative learning settings and philosophies. Specifically, I became interested in small independent progressive schools and how, operating outside of the mandatory assessment requirements, they were both different from, yet also affected by the changes in TPS. What I found at the progressive schools that I observed were environments very different from the ones I had worked in for decades. The distance between students and adults was smaller, hierarchies were fewer, and the students were valued and trusted as co-learners, able to have significant influence on what their learning would look like. These were not just different types of schools, they were distinct universes, ones that looked at learning and instruction as part of the same mixture, with all members of the school community having an opportunity to assume either role.

In progressive schools I found places whose leadership and design were intentionally set up to honor each child as an individual natural learner and to help them know how they learned and pursue what mattered most to them. Absent the data mania, children there could be allowed the time to follow their interests. This is exactly what I was seeing squeezed out in my own school. These environments and their communities were both encouraging and remarkable.

In 2018 I published three articles on various aspects of progressive schools, including alumni's assessment of how their time there influenced their lives. They confirmed my belief that these learning settings are characterized by informality and heterarchy. I have spent the largest piece of my PhD work researching, reading, and writing about small independent progressive schools. For me these are examples of true

learning communities, where everyone learns together and from each other. The focus is on what is best for each person there, adult and child, not on what standard is being addressed at the moment or how this will affect future testing results. At a time when schooling wants to be seen as a Science, these are places more about love and concern.

The founder of this school once told me, “I like to leave room for the mystery in learning.” The changes of the “Age of Accountability” have made this harder and harder in TPS. The Data-Driven school is much more interested in measurement than mystery and has gone so far in the other direction than I’m not even sure that most of those employed there even think something is wrong anymore. But I do and did not want this to be another study looking at aspects of that misguided system. My intention with this work is to describe just what that mystery looks like each day, in a school that honors what all children are and can become.

The next chapter will consider literature relevant to the study that I did. The scholarship on progressive schooling is considerable, stretching back more than a century. I have included some of the classic texts, legendary figures, and traditions of the progressive legacy. However, in selecting what to include in my literature review, I have focused on those areas that would most significantly influence the practices and philosophy of a progressive school operating today.

Literature Review

This review is intended to discuss the literature that is relevant to my study of the principles and practices of a contemporary small independent progressive school. I have attempted to include a wide variety of studies related to the history, influences and demands of operating such an alternative school today My initial section is an attempt to tell the story of progressive schooling in America. In speaking with the faculty at the school in this study I frequently heard them reference the fact that they are a school, "in the Progressive tradition." The founder of the school often expressed a respect and admiration for the progressive priorities of child-centered education, educating for democratic engagement, and community involvement. To understand the work being done here, it is important to recount the history of progressive education in this country, the overarching themes that have repeatedly made themselves apparent, and what makes a progressive educational approach distinct from accepted practices of mainstream schooling. I have chosen to group the existing research into two distinct areas. The first of these will focus on the Historical Lineage of progressive schools. This includes subsections on some of the key ideas and individuals that influenced the formation of educational progressivism. I then go on to consider John Dewey and the legacy of "The Laboratory School," and finally a history of progressive schooling in this country. The second section concerns itself with Progressive School Pedagogy, including an examination of democratic education, assessment, and progressive school teachers. After having reviewed the scholarship on these varied topics, Chapter Three will discuss the research methods being used to contribute to this scholarship with my study.

Historical Lineage of Progressive Schools

In this section I will discuss three of the most significant influences on today' s independent progressive schools: the origins of the movement, John Dewey, and a history of American progressive schooling. Taken together these three still have significant effect on what goes on in small progressive schools today

Progressive education

Origin

Long associated with American educational options, progressive education can be traced back to European thinkers and American writers prior to the establishment of state-sponsored educational systems. Reese's 2001 work, *The Origins of Progressive Education* ,cites the influences of European literary figures such as Blake, Rousseau, and Wordsworth being influential in a, "child-centered progressivism that was part of a larger humanitarian movement that permanently changed the nature of educational thought in the modern world."(p. 3-4) Rousseau, in his work, *Emile* (1762), introduced the basis for the pedagogy that is still used in progressive schools. John Dewey was to later trace his belief in "organic learning" that was relevant to immediate life to Rouseau's work (Miller, 2002). In this work, Rousseau conceived of an approach opposed to the model of institutional education, "one where children were not admonished to learn, but provided with an environment that supported their emerging interests, where learning—as understanding, not repetition—unfolded naturally." (Dent, 2005).

Rousseau's writing embraces a view of the child as a natural learner, one whose intellect develops developmentally and is best left unhindered to inquire freely.

Reese identified the work of European thinkers Pestalozzi and Froebel as being central to the development of American educational progressives, who he sees as, "the descendants of those who, invented a whole new vocabulary and way of thinking about the child, the curriculum, and the purposes of schools." (p. 23) Swiss educator Johan Pestalozzi has been identified as one of the architects of the principles that came to underpin progressive education in the United States. Pestalozzi, an early advocate for an appropriate and not merely adequate education for all students; " saw as the root of the problem how the schools were driven by the curriculum and not the needs of the students.   He believed that it was the development of the individual which was the goal of education, not society's needs." (Ruddy, 2000, p. 4) Pestalozzi was among the first to found schools which set out these ideas of "head, heart, and hands" as pedagogical practice. (Darling and Nordenbo, 2002). "The first rule is, to teach always by Things rather than by Words." (Pestalozzi, 1827, p. 122)

"Sketch of a Plan and Method of Education"

Pestalozzi's most effective disciple in American education may have been Joseph Neef. Neef was deeply influenced by his time in the New Harmony socialist community and started schools in Kentucky, Indiana, and Pennsylvania in the first quarter of the 19th century. Personally sent to America by Pestalozzi, Neef came to the United States for the expressed purpose of starting schools, the first of which opened in Philadelphia in 1809. He is relevant to my study for

his establishment of independent schools and the connection between his writings, practices, and those later promoted by progressive educators. “He was one whose educational philosophy was at least a century ahead of his time.” (Farrell, 1938, p. 357)

A student from Neef’s Philadelphia school recalled, “I lived at the school for four years (from my seventh to my eleventh). During this period I saw no book, neither was I taught my alphabet. The chief subjects taught us orally, were the languages, mathematics, and the natural sciences; and the idea was to make us understand the object and application of all we learned.” (Monroe, 1891, p. 15) Neef avoided having his students rely on memorization and individual recitation and instead used collaborative work and conversations before moving to more formalized instruction (Gutek, 1977). As the initial promulgator of Pestalozzian concepts, Neef has been seen as an educator whose work would likely have been more accepted later in the 19th century (Trohler, 2013; Jedan, 1982). “Neef believed that an education based on natural principles should be gradual and simplified, and should originate in the learner’s immediate environment.” (Gutek, 1977, p. 187)

Neef’s principles were set forward in his primary writing, "Sketch of a Plan and Method of Education." (1808) “Probably the most accurate account of what Pestalozzi really intended was Neef s 1808 book.” (Hewes, 1992, p. 9) Neef encouraged the use of manipulatives, models, and drawings, noting that a child , "always sets out from the known, proceeds with slow speediness, to the yet unknown and complicated." (Neef, 1808, p. 49) He writes of each student’s having innate capacities to learn and understand. This was in contrast to existing theories of education which saw each child as a Lockean “blank slate.” Neef also wrote of the importance of students studying objects in nature and for them to be physically active outside as

a regular part of their learning routine (Johnston, 2018). Neef asserted that students should tell teachers when they believed they were incorrect. In many ways, Neef was more of a Pestalozzian than Pestalozzi!

History of the founding of alternative schools

Alternatives to the "common school" existed before the establishment of compulsory state education. Prior to the formalization of a "common school" system there were established learning settings with expected practices. Pestalozzi was an early advocate for an appropriate and not merely adequate education for all students and," saw as the root of the problem how the schools were driven by the curriculum and not the needs of the students. He believed that it was the development of the individual which was the goal of education, not society's needs." (Ruddy, 2000, p. 4) By placing emphasis on the student as an individual deserving particular attention and instruction, Pestalozzi highlighted the importance of education in a child's life and the health of a society. "He forced education to be democratic… and he introduced the concept of child study, by insisting that the child must be treated as a living and growing organism." (p. 9) Pestalozzi began schools based on these principles, two of the more notable of which were located in Burgdorg and Yverdon (Trohler, 2013).

A student of Pestalozzi's, Friedrich Froebel was a 19th century German educator who designed learning environments that responded to children's individual needs (Valkanova & Brehony, 2006) ."The purpose of teaching and instruction is to bring ever more out of man rather than to put more into him; for that which can get into man, we already know and possess as the property of mankind; what human nature is yet to develop, that we do not yet know." (Baader,

2004) His ideas have been identified as central to the establishment of "kindergarten" and the formation of child-centered schools in both Europe and the United States (Willekens, Scheiwe, & Nawrotzki, 2015). It is worth noting that the work of both Petalozzi and Froebel was initially opposed by governmental authorities in their native countries (Hewes, 1992).

The European Romanticism of Pestalozzi and Froebel combined with the American Transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau gave birth to notable examples of free learning settings in the early 19th century. At a time when public schooling, characterized by rote learning, was just beginning to be adopted, Thoreau was running a school in Concord, Massachusetts. In contrast, the Concord School used project learning, [counted] nature as a classroom, and encouraged teachers to be peers alongside their students (Hoagland 1955). Revealingly, Thoreau (1849/ 1906) wrote: "How vain to try to teach youth, or anybody truths! They can only learn them after their own fashion, and when they get ready." (67)

In 1834 Bronson Alcott founded the Temple School in Boston. "He seemed to believe that children, even the youngest, had minds of their own, and should be encouraged to use them" (Shepard 2007, p. 77). Alcott's school discarded rote memorization, quite prevalent in the nineteenth century, and instead focused on a child's natural learning abilities, reflective of the work of Pestalozzi (Gutek, 1999). Interestingly, Alcott, in a conversation with Horace Mann, Massachusetts' Secretary of Education and the originator of the first public school system, remembered, "I was told that my educational opinions were esteemed to be hostile to the existence of the state." (Shepard, 2007, p. 195)

Later, the European "modern school" movement of the early 20th century was to continue this lineage of radical educational vision. Francisco Ferrer, questioned the authorities'

establishment of state-regulated schooling and established the first of these “modern schools” in Spain in 1901(Black, 1997). Inspired by Ferrer, a group of anarchist writers opened a school based on his model in New York City in 1909 (Tyack, 1974). Within the next four decades, twenty such schools were established where, “People were allowed to develop their own potentialities.” (Cremin, 1988, p. 227)

Kohn

This piece begins with an acknowledgment of the variety of perspectives that is common among progressive educators, while referencing that, “Progressive schools are the legacy of a long and proud tradition of thoughtful school practice.” (p. 1) Kohn defines this tradition for contemporary progressive schools by identifying and defining eight “values”: Attending to the whole child, Community, Collaboration, Social justice, Intrinsic motivation, Deep understanding, Active learning, and Taking kids seriously. He provides a summary of how these values can come together in truly providing a child-centered education in his final point when he remarks, “Progressive educators take their cue from the children…The curriculum isn’t just based on interest, but on these children’s interests…but they don’t just design a course of study for their students, they design it with them.” (p. 2)

Kohn states that progressive educators are willing to take these principles and put them into practice, even if that means eliminating normative school traditions. He goes on to address two frequent criticisms of progressive education, that it is defined by individualized attention from teachers or is, “an undemanding exercise Rousseauian idealism.” (p. 3) Again, he brings the focus back to the role of the students, repeating, “what distinguishes progressive education

is that students must construct their own understanding of ideas." (p. 3) He supports the use of these progressive principles, citing numerous studies that connect progressive instructional methods with academic achievement, noting, "this approach can be recommended purely on the basis of its efficiency." (p. 4) However, he sees progressive education as a rare thing in the nation's schooling overall (p. 5), raising significant issues about what actually goes on in classrooms devoted to, "a predictable march towards the right answer", with the teacher exercising almost all of the control, places where, "It's all about teaching, not about learning." (p. 6)

Making the choice to conduct educational experiences with the values that Kohn has provided here, rather than the traditional direct instruction-homework-standardized testing model, reveals much about the beliefs that schools are operating with. Chief among these is how they conceptualize children as learners. A whole-child learning environment, whose primary focus is on children creating their own understandings in settings that are truly about them, their interests, and their innate abilities, has made some very different decisions about how children best learn. This is an area that I was very interested in for this study: how do progressive schools see their students and what practices and beliefs are they applying to their work that makes them distinctive environments?

The teachers and founders of these contemporary progressive schools nearly all point back to Dewey and his work as being crucial to what they still do today. It is to that figure, more than any other, that progressive education is still linked to I briefly consider Dewey and his ideas in the next sub-section.

John Dewey

Dewey's pedagogy

John Dewey's considerable writing is the center point around which a significant portion of literature on progressive education revolves. As I consider the observations of the progressive teachers that I have interviewed and their work. so much of it is reflective of Dewey's thought. In order to place the school in this study in the correct context it is necessary to consider his life, ideas, and work. My interest is not in tracing Dewey's very involved philosophy, but to point to those aspects of his work that would affect a progressive school today

Dewey is considered to be one of the most influential western philosophers, whose intellectual reach crossed many disciplines (Thomas, 1962). He worked in the department of pedagogy at both the University of Michigan and the University of Chicago. His time in Chicago influenced Dewey, who was raised in rural Vermont, yet became concerned about the education that would be needed for children in an industrial and urban environment (Wirth, 1966). He viewed the urban environment around him as both complex and rapidly changing (Mayhew & Edwards, 1936). "There was an urgent need for a radical revision of the schools' role in socialization and for new approaches to instruction." (Lauderdale, 1981, p. 11)

Dewey had come to believe that the study of occupations was an important element of a child's education. He believed that for the youngest formal learners the emphasis should be on motor skills and direct social interaction---learning as a socially cooperative undertaking

(Dewey, 1959). “The child’s thoughts are not something to be realized, they are the living meaning and value that saturate everything they do.” (p. 43) He believed that in time, normatively children were able to employ greater self-control and self-direction in addressing less immediate interests, while balancing their individual desires and the needs of the community (Dewey, 1900). Dewey observed that learners, beginning in their early teens, were more reflective and sophisticated, increasingly individualistic, and able, “to abstract natural fact and experiment with it, and formulate statements or principles in regard to it.” (Mayhew & Edwards, 1936, p. 218)

Unlike many educational philosophers, Dewey was able to implement his ideas and watch their effects on actual students. From 1896 to 1904, the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago applied these principles and that is the most vivid example of Dewey’s beliefs coming to fruition. “The Laboratory School was intended to test those principles in educational practice.” (Lauderdale, 1981, p. 12)

The laboratory school

Similar to the school in this study, The Laboratory School, for most of its existence, was housed in a residence that had once been occupied by a family. Beginning with just 16 students the population eventually grew to 140. There were no “grade levels” as we think of now, but instead the students were organized into small groups (no more than 15 children), aligned with Dewey’s three recognized stages of growth as described in the last section, although there were also transitional groups preparing students to successfully enter the next stage of growth (Jorgensen, 2017). The school was organized in such a way that all students were interrelated, no

matter their learning level. All learners would address a common problem as the centerpiece of their learning and frequently shared the same physical spaces for meals, exercise, and the arts (Hendley, 2010). These are also characteristics of the school in this study.

Occupations were studied at all levels, beginning with household occupations for the youngest students. (Jorgensen, 2017) Dewey believed that for learning to take place a student had to do more than passively be exposed to abstractions, they needed to actively apply knowledge to solve problems. In his, *My Pedagogic Creed* (1897), Dewey wrote,“ I believe that the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself… I believe, therefore, in the so-called expressive or constructive activities as the center of correlation.” (p. 78, 79) Instead of being centered around designated subjects, the learning at the Laboratory School frequently considered the meeting of basic human needs such as shelter, food, and clothing. (Jorgensen, 2017) In doing so the idea of “occupations” was broadly conceived (including cooking, weaving, sewing, and gardening, woodwork and metalwork), allowing the instruction there to bring in a wide variety of subject matter from various disciplines and also include frequent field trips throughout the city of Chicago (Wirth, 1966).

As originally conceived (Knoll, 2014), teachers at this school were responsible for innovating projects that would require students to consider, apply and reflect upon prior knowledge and their experiences in their work there (Durst, 2010). “Learning by doing is a better way to learn than by listening.” (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 120)

Both teachers and students were afforded considerable freedoms and it has been observed that this led to an "embryonic democracy" with few of the discipline and motivational problems associated with most schools (Knupfer, 1999). It needs to be noted that after only five years of operation a reorganization of the school restricted many of these freedoms, curtailing students' input severely (Ord, 2012). The school I am studying here has many similarities to the original Laboratory School model and at no point has taken similar actions in restricting students interests and controlling their learning.

Dewey and the PEA

Despite being so closely associated with progressive ideas and having founded a school that many looked at as a model for schooling going forward, Dewey found it necessary to critique what progressive schools had become in the first few decades of the twentieth century. "He sharply warned against the aimlessness and dangerous permissiveness of the notion of the 'child-centered school." (Dworkin, 1959, p. 10); Dewey always maintained the need for "intellectual rigor."

In imitating The Laboratory School's respect for students' active participation in their own educations, Dewey observed that some progressive schools had forfeited their responsibility to sufficiently boundary their students' days. "To fail to assure [students] guidance and direction is not merely to permit them to operate in a blind and spasmodic fashion, but it promotes the formation of habits of immature, undeveloped and egoistic activity." (Dewey, 1930, p. 205) His most noteworthy critique of such excesses occurred in his keynote address to the PEA in 1928, criticizing a lack of adult supervision in some progressive schools (Cremin, 1961; Graham,

1967) in his remarks, " Progressive Education and The Science of Education." Despite having accepted the honorary presidency of the PEA the previous year, he used the occasion of his acceptance address to express his misgivings about those who would let a students' interests be the most significant determinant of his course of study. "Bare doing, no matter how active, is not enough. An activity or project must, of course, be within the range of the experience of pupils and connected with their needs which is very far from being identical with any likes or desires which they can consciously express…What assurance is there that what they do is anything more than the expression, and exhaustion, of a momentary impulse and interest?" (Dewey, 1928, p.202) In the same address, he called on teachers to, "suggest lines of activity," (p. 203), indicating his belief in the importance of guidance and direction in a child's education, a concept he would later elaborate upon: "The fundamental issue is not progressive against traditional education but a question of what anything whatever must be to be worthy of the name *education*." (Dewey, 1938, p. 115)

The school being studied here has taken Dewey's warnings seriously, having found a middle ground that includes both allowing for student choice and maintaining a defined environment with an established curriculum so that, "All children may learn at a pace that challenges them in a setting where academic rigor is always essential." Student interests and choices are allowed within the school's established curricular plan. This places them within Dewey's preferred middle ground between an exclusively child-centered and teacher-led environment. (Dewey, 1902a)

Dewey and the progressive education legacy

While there appears to be a scholarly consensus that Dewey's influence on progressive education was without peer (Goodlad, 1997) and that the literature on the topic is voluminous (Cremin, 1961; Krug, 1964, 1972), agreement on tracing this approach of schooling to a single individual, has not yielded an agreed upon definition of what progressive education is. Volumes have been devoted to observing and comparing progressive schools in an effort to settle the issue (Lauderdale, 1981; Semel & Sadovnik, 1999; Zilversmit, 1993), but no resolution has been accomplished. Kohn (2008), as detailed earlier in this section, is a more recent attempt to define contemporary progressive educational practice.

In the famous 1928 address detailed above, Dewey observed that progressive schools had, "a common emphasis on the respect for individuality and increased freedom; a common disposition to build upon the nature and experience of the boys and girls that freedom and informality to enable teachers to become with children as they really are." (McWilliams, 2003, p. 22) Still, the history of progressive education is one filled with nearly constant debate over its fundamental precepts (Cuban, 1990). The phrase "progressive education" has become so broad, having been defined and redefined so often (Kliebard, 1995) that it has been observed that it is unlikely that any concise definition of the term will ever be arrived at (Cremin, 1961.) The point I wish to make is that Dewey's status in the progressive education universe has not helped to clarify what progressive education is, due in part to the ambiguity of much of his writing (Hofstadter & Smith, 1961) and scholars of different perspectives have used Dewey's writings to support their own, often idiosyncratic perspectives (Fallace, 2011). This has allowed for individual progressive schools to develop practices and methods unique to their own

interpretations (Semel & Sadovnik ,1999; Little & Ellison, 2015). This study highlights one such set of policies in a small, independent, rural progressive school.

In this section we have examined the contributions of John Dewey, the preeminent figure in the progressive education tradition. Despite Dewey's stature, this is a tradition that has been characterized by frequent disagreement. The development of progressive schools in practice has revealed both a great disparity in the way that different schools claiming this tradition carried out their work and, in many cases, a significant distance between Dewey's vision and the day-to-day experiences of children there. The lack of an accepted definition of progressive is revealed in the actual work being done in schools that claimed to be "progressive." It is also reflective of a movement that lacked a cohesive center even at its most vibrant moments (Graham, 1967). The following section considers the journey of American progressive schooling, its aspirations and inconsistencies, and the defining figures in its development.

The Journey of American Progressive Schooling

The founding of the Progressive Education Association

"In 1919, at an organizational meeting in Washington, D.C., the Board of Trustees of the newly founded Progressive Education Association (PEA) adopted its founding tenets." (Little, 2013). Seven leaders of the movement, dedicated to spreading progressive ideas in the nation's schools, met in Washington, D.C., attempting to found an organization to formalize their efforts. "This group of seven educators, public and private wanted to establish a national group to rise up, protect, clarify, and celebrate the successful principles of Progressive Education and to

fashion a revitalized, national educational vision."(Bohan, 2003) The principles that were to guide their group's efforts were expressed the next year in the founding committee's "Seven Principles of Progressive Education"(Cohen, 1968):

1. Freedom for children to develop naturally
2. Interest as the motive of all work
3. Teacher as guide, not taskmaster
4. Change school recordkeeping to promote the scientific study of student development. More attention to all that affects student physical development
5. School and home cooperation to meet the child's natural interests and activities
6. Progressive school as though leader in educational movements.

Two sources are noteworthy for their study of this organization. The first of these, Lawrence Cremin's, "The Transformation of the American School," has been cited as the definitive work on the path of progressive education in the 20th century (Rudy, 1962, Cunningham, 1962). While a great deal of attention is devoted to the growth in popularity of progressive education and the establishment of the PEA, Cremin also discusses the internal conflicts over how best to develop educational practices that emphasize child-centered learning and democratic communities. He discusses how the image of progressive education in the public mind can be traced to the work of the PEA (p. 248) and that the many conflicts within that organization can be traced to the important role they believed they needed to play (p. 273) in growing progressive education. Many scholars have noted the difficulty in even defining what progressive education is and in this volume. Cremin documents the nearly-endless battles between the movement's leaders as to the PEA's direction.

Patricia Graham's, *Progressive education: From arcady to academe.* (1967) confirms this picture. "Progressivism is not a system at all; Like most Reformers, the Progressivists jumped on too many horses and rode off in too many directions…they have never settled on where they should go, or how fast." (p. 102) She describes the breaks that the educational progressives made with the established authorities of their time, noting their "anti-historical bias" and "subversion of traditional subject matter." (p 115.) This detailed work documents the many changes that the PEA underwent, as it evolved from a fledging small group to a well-funded force in the educational debate.

Progressive schools in practice

Dewey himself was interested in the ways that progressive education was being practiced. He and his daughter Evelyn visited schools from New York City to Missouri that claimed to operate as "progressive." "As a record of what progressive education actually was and what it meant to Dewey in 1915, the book is invaluable." (Cremin, 1961, p. 162) In doing so they hoped to, "illustrate the general trend of education at the present time." (p. 207) While noting that, "Bright and intelligent children often have distain for the schoolhouse and what comes out of it," (Dewey/Dewey, 1915, p. 24), the Deweys documented their visits on this trip so as to, "show what actually happens when schools start out to put into practice some of the theories that have been pointed to as the soundest since Plato." (p. xxvii).

The descriptions that they provide show students engaged in active learning , using both play and work, to create learning experiences that would prepare them for the complex world they would soon enter (p. 125). The authors point out that while the methods in these schools

varied, depending on their location and context, they were all about the work of, “making the connection between the child and his environment as complete and intelligent as possible, both for the sake of the child and his community.” (p. 289) Making distinctions between the public schools of their day and what they observed in these progressive environments, they write, “The pupils are learning by doing…The children must have activities which have some educative content, that is, reproduce the conditions of real life.” (p. 292) This work frequently indicates that it is this style of learning that is key to training children to participate in democracy. (p. 304) Rather than, “The conventional type of education that trains children to docility and obedience,” (p. 303), the Deweys believed that what they saw in progressive schools, “prepared children for the life they ought to lead in the world.” (p. 288). To maintain the status quo was a danger not only for the schools, but also for the future of democracy. They conclude in no uncertain terms: “The schools we have described in this book are showing how the ideal of equal opportunity for all is to be transmitted into reality.” (p. 315-16)

However, other scholarship is less enthusiastic about the pace of actual change that was taking place in classrooms. Zilversmit (1993) explored the degree to which progressive practices were actually being employed in schools, beginning in the 1930s. Along the way he discovered, “some promising examples and many others where progressive rhetoric did not match action.” (Read, p. 13) In the Winnetka, IL schools, he found a district that both focused on the needs of children and connected to the circumstances of the individual community while not adhering to Dewey’s precept that a child’s interests should be at the center of their learning. Conversely, Zilversmit also found numerous districts in this pre-WWII period, which has been identified as a time of ascendancy for progressive education (Cremin, 1961) , where progressivism had had

little influence. "Many schools were unaffected by progressive ideas, where students studied the same thing at the same time from the same books. " (p. 83) New York City curiously was discovered to be an example of a place where progressive verbiage was used, but in reality, " a traditional educational system functioned behind a screen of progressive rhetoric." (p. 83)

Zilversmit includes in his text comments on why progressive education has had difficulty making significant changes to the established schooling system in this country. Cyclically, political and world events lead to renewed calls for basic skills and rigorous curriculum (p. 169) and progressive education, with its openness to change, is less welcome in such times The author notes that, "The ideals of progressive education were anomalous in a society that stressed competition more than cooperation." (p. 170) " American schools have become governed by rigid patterns of rules and assumptions, relying on set procedures that are known in advance." (p.170- 171) He also points to the gap between statements made by teachers supporting progressive ideas and the reality of their teaching methods (p. 173)

Considered historically, Semel & Sadovnik, (1999)**,** discovered that a number of progressive schools founded early in the 20th century, changed their focus over time, being influenced by the overall educational landscape (p. 354) although they remained resolute in their commitment to "child-centered education (p. 355), while also emphasizing academic rigor. (p. 357-58). These authors also noted several traditional critiques of progressive education, including elitism (p. 358), a focus on affective principles at the expense of excellence (p. 357), and a lack of diversity (p. 370)

A particular issue they discussed that is relevant to this study is succession of leadership. "As many of these schools were founded by charismatic leaders, the problem of following in their footsteps remained a problem." (p. 357) The authors of this book write in detail of the difficulty of this process (p. 353), while reminding us of the resiliency of this approach, declaring that "progressive education is alive and well" (p. 376) and "may be the most enduring educational reform movement in this country." (p. 353)

A legacy of the work carried on by these schools has been a progressive tradition consistently focusing on creating learning settings that are expansive, even as mainstream schooling becomes more narrow. This is an emphasis that continues up to the present day. "We're just now learning how to create schools that work for everyone…If we abandon a system of common schools—through apathy or privatization----we deprive everyone." (Meier, 1995, p. 10-11). Describing a contemporary progressive example, Knoester (2012) sees a "democratic school" and in this work shows how a school can counteract the forces of inequality and suppression within our society. (p. 6-7) Such schools have always been concerned with, "stopping the suppression of children's creativity via oppressively boring and irrelevant curricula, to discontinue the reductionist way schools view children as numbers in a hierarchy." (p. 146) This tolerance for an ongoing search for the better at the expense of the convenient is an issue larger than education, extending to the very foundation of our society. At times this has meant some to go to unreasonable extremes (Little & Ellison, 2015 ,p. 156). Little attempts to place progressive schools in the history of education in this country, admitting that, "The story of Progressive Education is one of chaos and invention, messiness and failure, inspired rebels who threw away rulebooks," (p. 150) For the ultimate legacy of progressive schools may lie beyond

their walls: “Schools can build models of altruistic societies that one day may be replicated on larger scales.” (p. 95).

Key to the development of progressive education in the early nineteenth century was the work of a series of female founders of such independent schools. Their ideas and the manner in which they put them into place in the schools that they formed was very influential for the subsequent founders of progressive schools. This is quite relevant to this study of a school, founded by a Mom desiring a better learning environment for her daughter.

Female leadership in progressive schools

Even the most casual examination of progressive education reveals that a number of notable progressive schools have had female founders. (Sadovnik & Semel, 2016) Among these are Carolyn Pratt (City & Country School), Elizabeth Irwin (Little Red Schoolhouse), Sheila Sadler (Village Community School), Marietta Johnson (The Organic School), Lucy Sprague Mitchell, (Bank Street School) Elise Clapp (Arthurdale Schools, and Deborah Meier (Mission Hill School). This is very significant to this study, for the school I have observed also had a female founder whose vision and focus has guided the education that has developed there.

“Often these educational experiments were in the form of independent child-centered schools.” (Semel, 1995, p. 339) It has been noted that gender difference can be understood as reflecting the work of difference-making. (Weiler, 2006) Given that many of the schools established by these women emphasized the child over academic content and cooperation over individual achievement (Kraushaar, 1972)---the established practices in public school at the time---it is difficult to separate the kinds of schools that they began from the acknowledged

characteristics (Russell, 2012) of progressive education. It is important to recognize, however, the individual differences in these schools, one from another (Hendry, 2008; Naumberg, 1928; Dworkin, 1959), many of which can be traced to the founder's vision (Rugg & Schumaker, 1969) ."What I was trying to do with the school was make it a self-renewing society…The basis of what I'm in this for is improving society." (Stern, 2005, p. 71)

This is why this section is an important part of this Literature Review. I would hope not only describe the practices of a single progressive school, but to place it in the context of the progressive educational tradition. One way to do this is to situate the influence of the founder on to the school within the lineage of important female progressive school leaders. Unfortunately, "Women's contributions to educational history have been devalued due to the dominance of theory over practice and to women's marginalized position in schools as teachers rather than administrators (Sadovnik & Semel, 2002, p. 252). For each of the following four educational figures, I will attempt to show how their work has influenced the school in this study.

Caroline Pratt

"The purpose of schooling is not to finish, but to begin education." (Pratt, 2014, p. 21) At The City and Country School, which she founded in 1914, Pratt developed a system that she hoped would produce interested, self-motivated learners. (Marott, 1915) "What makes the school and Pratt's foundational ideas stand out is precisely the importance she placed on the role of curriculum.(Takaya, 2018, p. 207) It is this connection that Pratt makes between what is being done at school and the effect it has on her students that is central to her work.(Turley, 2014) Pratt classified the types of activities that students there did into 4 main

groups: Play, Experience , Practical Experiences, Special Training (Reading, Language, Spelling, Writing) and Enrichment of Experience: (Discussions, Trips, Orientation, Stories, Dramatizations, and Science) (Pratt 1924, p. 58, 2014, pp. 82–83). It is her creative combination of developmentally appropriate activities, community interactions, and academics that led to students who remember their time there as engaged and interesting (Beck, 1958). In doing so, the child's imagination is developed because, "Imagination gets its greatest opportunity in play, including play with ideas; thought runs ahead and back again and establishes relations" (Pratt, 1924, p. 40).

These same elements are present in the school being studied here. Engagement with resources in the community, imaginative play, theatrical productions, and academics of the highest demand are all used there, each with enough space provided for the child to explore their own ideas and pursue their thoughts, all the while attached to a relevant curriculum, that like Pratt's, uses a student's "receptiveness" (Pratt 1948) to take advantage of the "imagination of childhood" (Cobb, 1977) and allow them to begin to develop as learners. A teacher in this school once told me, "A child can walk out of here with a true sense of self, the ability to recognize their own voice."

Lucy Sprague Mitchell

Among the many accomplishments of her career, Lucy Sprague Mitchell founded the Bank Street School for Children in 1919. Mitchell may be best known for her emphasis on "experiential learning" and the children there studied, "home and school in relation to the immediate environment." (Mitchell 1950, p. 206) Teachers that she trained were encouraged to

take their students into the surrounding community as much as possible through field trips and other engagements that allowed them to see, discover, and learn from what was nearest around them. (Field, 1999). “Mitchell asserted that the best way for children to learn about the world was to explore the familiar deeply.” (Field & Bauml, 2014, p. 95) In doing so, she believed that children can become authentic learners, even at a very young age, when they become interested in something near to them, remain engaged with it, and are challenged in pursuing further learning.

The school in this study has no choice, but to regularly connecting with its surrounding community. They are located in a residence on a college campus and regularly use different resources there. College work-study students are employed at the school. The students walk to and use the books at the town’s libraries weekly. Field trips and guest instructors have always been an important part of what’s done there. Volunteers from the community are a necessary part of their existence. Having little technology, they regularly use what surrounds them to guide their learning. They are continuing Mitchell’s legacy of learning from outside of the classroom.

Margaret Naumburg

Development of a student as an individual and the role of art in advancing that process were among the contributions of Margaret Naumburg, founder of the Walden School (Cremin, 1961, p. 212). She was prominent in the “New School” movement and has been recognized as the founder of “Art Therapy.” (Rubin, 1983) “I saw that there might be ways of modifying orthodox education, either to enter the system and work from within, or to make a fresh start, outside of all accepted institutions, and construct a plan with new foundations." (Naumburg,

1928, p. 31) She was close friends with Carolyn Pratt and the two at one time considered starting a school together (Hinitz, 2002). A student of Maria Montessori, Naumburg was to eventually open her own school that, “came into being in response to the need of developing a type of education suited to the interests of children growing up in the world of today as contradistinguished from the traditional methods of education.” (Naumburg, 1921,, p. 7). Eventually Naumburg was to focus on honoring the individuality of each child, including their own interests and self-expression. “The reason the children have done what they have is because they have been allowed ever since they first took up the pencil to depict just what they felt impelled to portray, not what they were told to.” (Naumburg, 1921) In a movement that included many prominent figures that championed sensitivity to students’ interests, Naumburg may have been one of the more radical. (Curtis, 1983)

The school in this study does not use art therapy or subscribe to many of the psychoanalytic theories associated with Naumburg. However, I believe that the freedom that they provide to their students as such an essential part of what they do was made possible by pioneers like Naumberg. An alumni of the school once told me, “What we really loved about [the school], was the freedom to excel to whatever level you want to. Just being able to have those opportunities and the freedom to excel to whatever level we were capable of, and pushed to do so, I think was really appealing.” Naumburg’s use of the arts is also replicated at this school where opportunities to perform musically and onstage are regularly provided.

Marietta Johnson

In the history of progressive education, Marietta Johnson's Organic School, founded in Fairhope Alabama, in 1907, is legendary. It was featured in both the Deweys' *Schools of Tomorrow* (1915) and Semel and Sadovnik's *Schools of Tomorrow* ,*Schools of Today* (1989). Residing in the Marxist Fairhope colony, Johnson decided that she could no longer work in the nearby public schools (Gaston, 1984) and founded a school that would follow the precepts of "Organic Education" (Henderson. 1902), which focused on an education of sense development, good health, and expansion of personal control (p. 128). In the Organic School this resulted in no tests, little homework, no traditional grades, and a delay in formal literacy training for young students. (Edwards, 1913). Instead students were encouraged to study environments immediately surrounding them and had regular practice with folk dancing and craft-making (Bourne, 1915). A 1909 newspaper article stated that Organic Education "aims for the sound, accomplished, beautiful body — the intelligent, creative mind — the sympathetic, reverent spirit." (Prang, 1909, p. 13) In the same year, Johnson wrote, "There are many earnest teachers who see a new day dawning for education. They see a time when there shall be no more driving of children to their tasks even by so apparently harmless incentives as 'grades,' 'marks' or 'promotions.' A time when the work of the school shall really be the joyous self-expression of the child." (Johnson, 1909 p. 1143)

As much as any of the figures detailed in this section, Marietta Johnson was an evangelist for progressive education. It is hardly surprising that she was one of the forces behind the founding of the Progressive Education Association. There is very little that Johnson promoted that the school in this study would not endorse: little homework, no tests, honoring a child's self-

expression within the bounds of an established program. In reading her words, written many years ago, my mind immediately conjures up images of what I saw there. An alumni told me:

> "We could get out in our community, and doing all kinds of science projects and history projects and stuff like that, at least when I was there, it was very easy and very fun to do. So you had this attention from the teachers, combined with all of these great fun projects that got you super interested in the stuff you were learning, and really made you want to understand what you were doing."

Perhaps more than any of the other leaders profiled here, I see a direct connection between the Organic School and what is being done at the school studied here. In this section I have considered the work of five prominent female progressive school founders. In discussing each of them I have identified elements of their work that is similar to the practices of the school in this study.

The eight year study

From 1930 to 1942 the Progressive Education Association led an experiment in curricular design and instructional experimentation that included thirty of the nation's high schools. These institutions were allowed to depart from the traditional use of "Carnegie Units" to guide students' class schedules (Pinar, 2010) and were given special consideration for college admissions. "The spirit of the Eight Year Study ultimately took form in three fundamental beliefs: schools can experiment with their programs…without jeopardizing their students educational futures; there are many paths for college success; genuine educational reform cannot

be packaged and disseminated." (Kridel & Bullough, 2007, p.23) Students from the experimenting schools were found to outperform their colleagues educated at traditional high schools (Pinar, 2010), at the college level. This study involved curricular innovation guided by teachers at the participating schools (Aikin, 1942) that varied from significantly different to very similar approaches. However, "…each of the schools…judged to be the most experimental…together formed the basis of the Study within the Study evaluation…The 323 graduates from these 6 schools significantly exceeded their matched pairs in college work and…dramatically outperformed students from the 23 other participating schools." (Kridel & Bullough, 2007, p. 150) In summary, progressive school approaches have been found to improve student achievement.

More recent research has affirmed the positive effects of progressive schooling methods on student achievement. These include studies of elementary and middle schools (Knoester, 2012, Bensman, 1994) who employ student-centered learning at even the youngest grades. Even more extensive proof of subsequent success at the high school and college levels has been documented (Meier & Knoester, 2017, Little, 2015), including the positive effects of progressive methods in training classroom teachers (Horng, Zheng, Lit, & Darling-Hammond, 2015). Included in this work has been the use of alternative assessment measures aimed at measuring the effects that a progressive learning environment may have on students outside of the classroom (Kunkel, 2016).

Progressive education decline

Following the organization of the PEA, progressive education attained sufficient enough status in the United States to have some influence on policy and reform movements (Ravitch, 1980). Progressive education had evolved from a philosophical approach assembled from a wide variety of authors and thinkers---many of whom never worked in schools---to a more codified set of educational prescriptions primarily authored by John Dewey and finally into an educational movement(Davies, 2002). It has been observed that their intent was to create schools that were more democratic and respectful of their students as individuals (Cremin, 1961). However, the leaders frequently had internal conflicts over how best to develop educational practices that emphasize child-centered learning and democratic communities (Van Til, 1962). The PEA itself evolved from a fledging small group to a well-funded force in the educational debate to a group that featured a number of the major educational voices in the country, fighting over what their philosophy was to be. (Howlett, 2013). Subsequent scholarship has pointed out that among the progressives there was a consistent conflict between groups concerned with increasing efficiency and those focused on child-centered education (Kliebard, 1995). The history of progressive education is a complex one and there has been no shortage of attempts to clarify it (Tyack, 1974; Zilversmit, 1993).

. The history of American education in the past 60 years can be considered as the story of times of freedom displaced by times of reaction, the latest of which was ushered in by 1983's *A Nation At Risk.* While progressive schools are rare and often hard to find (Kohn, 2008), there

was a noteworthy period characterized by the founding of many alternative learning environments.

Democratic schools of the 60s and 70s

The social upheaval and questioning of institutions that occurred in the 1960s led to a brief time in which many independent schools were formed. (Graubard, 1972). This movement began to grow in 1967 and 1968 and by 1970 these disparate reformers and visionaries became aware of each other (Kozel, 1972). Many of these schools used experimental models of learning, with teachers seeing themselves more as mentors than authority figures (Dennison, 1969) and in many cases viewing their students as equal learning partners (Mercogliano, 1998). These, "democratic schools were less about educating children through an established curriculum than they were about meeting their evolving needs (Neumann, 2003)." "Some of us wanted to change the whole world starting in that little place." (Ayers, 1998)

Ron Miller's *Free Schools, Free People* (2002) synthesizes many of the primary sources on this educational period. This effort was mostly led by young teachers, nearly 70% of the teachers in "free schools" were under the age of 30. (p, 116) "'Curriculum' was replaced by open-ended learning determined by students' as well as teachers' personal interests." (p. 118) Creating a sense of community through 'participatory governance' was an extremely important part of these schools'mission. (p. 120) Three important factors emerge from Miller's account: there is no reliable account of how many such schools existed (p. 121), in a short time disagreements emerged among different factions in the movement (p. 123), and many of these schools closed within a few years (p. 124). Still, this era is remembered fondly by many who

were involved: “We loved the thought of forming this community of ideas, with like-minded people. Starting a school gave us a sense of connection in an impersonal, disconnected world.” (Hausman, 1998, p. 31)

The democratic/free school movement represents an important connection to both the 19th century child-centered thinkers and the more formalized progressive education movement of the early 20th century. It was an attempt to create learning settings that included the beliefs of both groups, in the spirit of late 1960s thinking and activism. In its own experimental, fragmented way it represented the birth of independent learning settings that included children’s interests and alternative definitions of success in its daily practices.

The entrepreneurial sense that led to the founding of many of these settings was also present at the beginning of the school in this study.. It has been my experience that in interviewing and observing at progressive schools like the one studied here that there is a general agreement on some of what constitutes progressive education today. This work is not overly concerned with historical debates, my interest is in what occurs in independent progressive schools today. Such places currently emphasize a child-centered approach (Labaree, 2005), that is alive and growing (Washburne, 1952), asking the question, “How do you help students find their own voice, work together, take responsibility for their own learning, and all the rest?’ (Featherstone, 1971, p. x) Perhaps the “connective tissue” between the progressive schools of Dewey’s day, the Democratic Schools of the 1970s, and today’s progressive settings is their independent status. It is this characteristic that I will discuss in the final section of this portion of the scholarship.

"Independent Schools in American Education" (Kane, 1991)

This piece that identifies six characteristics of independent schools is relevant to the school being studied here. The author points to a series of descriptors which are all present in the subject of this study. They are all important for both describing this type of learning setting and suggesting what there is in a school like this that distinguishes it from TPS.

Independent schools are self-governing. While they must abide by state and federal regulations governing all schools, their independent status frees them from some of the obligations regarding assessment, hiring, and scheduling that guide public school decision-making. (p. 7) Most independent schools answer to a board chosen by the school's founder, not elected by the town (Kane, 1992). There is a greater likelihood that such a small group will share a similar vision regarding the school's mission.

Independent schools are self-supporting. They are in effect private schools, not public ones, and receive no tax revenue from state or local governments. They are totally reliant on contributions and tax dollars for their financial health (p. 8). Because many of these schools are small, an economic downturn or a change in the fortunes of a few families can put their futures in peril (p. 9).

Independent schools have a self-directed curriculum. While these schools are required to adhere to state guidelines, the materials, sequence and how instruction is conducted depends on the approach of each individual school. The standardization of approach that dominates TPS is not a part of what is done in these schools. (p. 10) The school in this study uses a unique curricular model developed by their founder at the school's inception.

Independent schools have self-selected students. Unlike TPS, who are legally required to accept all students within their established boundaries, independent schools may develop individualized criteria for determining admission (p. 10). Independent schools, operating outside of many of the district and state requirements, may also remove students as they see fit. By being able to craft their student population, these schools are better able to construct an environment congruent with their mission. (p. 11)

Independent schools have a self-selected faculty. They are not required to hire certified teachers who have passed a state-approved program of learning. Independent schools can employ people with degrees outside of the field of education or with no degree at all, if they wish. (p. 11) As with the previous criteria, this allows them to carefully only bring people into their setting that agree with their particular vision. It is worth noting that schools, such as the one in this study, have fewer teaching candidates to choose from, due to the limited compensation they are able to provide. (p, 12)

Independent schools have a small size. Unlike their TPS counterparts, because independent schools can be self-selecting, charge tuition, and have limited resources, they service fewer students in more limited settings (p. 12). Historically, independent schools have met in locations not intended for learning (Avrich, 1980). This allows these schools to take on a less formal nature in their practices and relationships. The school in this study meets in a house that was built as a residence.

In this section I have discussed the history of progressive schooling in this country. While its current place in the landscape is separate from the educational mainstream, its history

includes many significant figures and it has had a profound effect on the debates and educational practices of the past century. While it may currently operate on the margins, it continues to attract a significant number of teachers and students.

The final section of this Literature Review focuses on how progressive school pedagogy intersects with educating students to participate in a democracy. The use of assessment in these alternative learning settings is also examined. Finally, the work of progressive school teachers is considered.

Progressive School Pedagogy

Educating for Democracy

"*Democratic Climates in Elementary Classrooms: A Review of Theory and Research*"

Anne Angell's 1991 writing summarizes previous research on educating for democracy in the elementary classroom. She unifies the previous work on classroom practices that can lead to outcomes as citizens. She uses Gutmann's (1993) work on Democratic Education to show the importance of establishing democratic climates in such classrooms as a key element in promoting effective participation in a democracy.

Angell notes the inevitable conflict between forces intent on preserving democracy and those dedicated to its reform (Engle & Ochoa, 1988). "Educators who aim to prepare students for full participation in this dialogue assume apparently conflicting responsibilities to foster both commitment to democratic principles and an attitude of informed skepticism about how these principles are to be interpreted and applied." (p. 241) She both identifies the importance of

student perceptions of democratic climates (Ehman, 1980b) and the need for work on connecting these climates to citizenship outcomes. (p. 242) She relies on the concept of democratic classroom climates as defined by three important studies, including Dewey (1916), in proposing that we, “conceptualize the classroom as an organ of a democratic system,” (p. 243) a view that is synonymous with Butts’ (1979) assertion that a goal of schooling should be to empower its’ students with a sense of the responsibilities of democratic participation.

She disagrees with the traditional role of “civics education” in transmitting knowledge and instead points to the, “informal learning experiences that occur at school and often unintentionally influence the development of citizens.” (p. 244) Her writing identifies four elements common to classrooms that provide these experiences (p. 241) Each of these will be discussed in the remaining parts of this subsection and related to the independent progressive school environment in this study.

“Peer interaction in cooperative activities”

“Classrooms were categorized as open or traditional primarily on the basis of teacher behaviors. The traditional classroom teacher was characterized as an authority figure who presented lessons, enforced rules, and limited student participation, whereas the open classroom teacher acted as a facilitator who encouraged peer teaching and student interaction.” (p. 252)

The degree to which classrooms allow for students to work cooperatively on tasks that they choose to engage in will affect the democratic climate present (Allman-Snyder, May & Garcia, 1975). TPS classroom teachers and students are evaluated on the basis of standardized tests aligned with defined learning standards (Teitelbaum & Brodsky, 2008). They are working

according to a pre-determined schedule, requiring that they cover the concepts that will be tested by a certain date (Gish & Markham, 2013). These restrictions may reduce the opportunities for cooperative activities that Angell is referring to in her work. The system in place, that rewards individual performance over cooperative endeavor, can affect both the instructional methods used and the classroom environment (Pignatelli, 2005).

Independent progressive schools, operating outside of the "testing culture," have the latitude to make curricular and instructional decisions more likely to include peers cooperating with each other. In a self-identified "child-centered" setting, teachers can make space for student ideas, even when they depart from the lesson plan, leading to a greater tolerance for the ideas of others (Hawley and Eyler ,1983). Absent the restrictions placed on TPS by "pacing guides" (Charlesworth, Fleege, & Weitman, 1994), teachers in independent environments can instruct based on what is best for their students as learners, not just test-takers. Progressive schools have been identified as settings where educating for democracy is a focus (Chernetskaya, 2013) so this first aspect of instruction is more likely to be found there.

"Free expression"

"Perceived freedom to express opinions in class was the best predictor of both general political and school-related attitudes of trust, social integration, confidence, and interest. Exposure to controversial issues was associated with increased social integration and political interest." (p. 253) TPS, as public institutions, need to respond to societal pressures and sensitivities, often expressed through the policies of their governing school boards (Dervarics & O'Brien, 2016). At times this can include restrictions of tolerated forms of student expression and

speech (Ekstrom, 2016). Schools themselves are political units and issues have been raised about appropriate levels of classroom discussion of controversial issues. (Dagley,& Weiler, 2017)

Angell wrote that, “Elementary students suggest that open discussions of sensitive issues and perceived freedom to express one's opinion may also be related to positive political attitudes of younger students.” (p. 253) Clearly the more open the climate for discussion in the classroom, the better the students there will be prepared for future engagements in the wider democracy (Glenn, 1972) “ The only school-based variables that appeared to contribute positively to outcomes in all categories were classroom climate variables where students were encouraged to have free discussion and to express their opinion in class." (Torney-Purta, 2001, p. 18) The dilemma that can arise is the degree to which individual schools will allow for discussions that could be controversial and offensive (Underwood, 2017).

As smaller environments with limited circumference, independent progressive schools are more likely to be made up of people with similar visions (Manilow, 2009). They are likely to attract people with a tolerance for open discussion and as settings that have been identified as child-centered and educating for democracy (Russell, 2012), a greater breadth may be allowed for student expression. A student from the school spoke to me about the acceptance there: “I think of the amount of genuine human interaction that we had. Everyone was honest with each other. There was very little fakeness or anything like that from teachers or from students to teachers or students to each other. Everything felt really genuine because there was that accepting culture and that community culture.” (Kloss, 2018c, p. 13) The opportunity for more open discussions is present at these types of schools.

"Student participation in democratic deliberations and decision making"

"Student participation—especially participation in making decisions that have a direct bearing on the quality of life at school—contributes to the development of pro-sociality, high level moral reasoning, and a sense of community among the students." (p. 255) In recent years schools have become increasingly standardized and predictable environments (Grannäs, & Frelin, 2017). As scientific management principles have been more widely used to control both students and teachers (Bailey, 2014), student participation in decision-making has become more problematic. "Without children being able to make connections between ideas and their basis in a child's sense of reality, the ideas remain abstractions without meaning or applicability." (Hopkins, 2018, p. 3) Pedagogists back to Dewey (1907) have indicated the importance of allowing students to make decisions about their areas of studies and the organization of the setting that they learn in (Fielding, 2007). Alexander's work on "dialogic teaching' has stressed the importance of diverse student decisions affecting their time in school (2008).

"Participation in democratic decision-making processes is key to the establishment of an atmosphere that promotes positive social-moral development." (Angell, 1991, p. 254) The more empowerment that students have over the structure of their time in schools the more positive social-emotional results occur (Jones & Bouffard,2012). Additionally, increases in moral reasoning were demonstrated in another study (Weissbourd, 2003). "Cooperative activities help to create a classroom climate that influences positive civic outcomes." (p. 255)

It seems clear that learning environments that accommodate student choice are increasing opportunities for growth in many areas. Students have been shown to make both emotional and social gains (Murphy, 1988) as their decision-making increases. In independent school

environments where students have choices of areas of study and assessment, these opportunities are frequent (Little, 2013). These allow for increases in behaviors that promote future civic engagement (Lickona, 1977).

"Respect for diverse viewpoints"

Near the conclusion of her study, Angell connects cooperative classroom activities with increases in tolerance for diverse viewpoints. She cites the Johnson & Johnson (1974) study that found, "that cooperative learning promotes a climate of tolerance and pro-sociality in the classroom." (p. 255) Comparing traditional, individualistic classroom models with cooperative ones, another study showed, "slightly more favorable attitudes toward social relations in the class." (Zahn, Kagan, & Widaman, 1986) Additionally, students' perception of their classrooms as cooperative environments led them to view them as places of greater social cohesion (Johnson, Johnson, &Anderson,1983).

Considering the attributes in this analysis, it is necessary to again mention that TPS are competitive settings where students are evaluated as individuals, one against the other (Coleman, 2018). Progressive schools exist to offer an alternative to that environment, one that emphasizes freedom and individuality (Kohn, 2008). Absent the tests that have come to determine success, progressive schools are not required to determine students' individual progress at regular intervals and are more likely to emphasize community and reliance on each other as part of the learning process. (McWilliams, 2003) A student at the school in this

study recounted, “ ‘I think the advantages of [the school] is here you are ... learning with people of different age groups, which I think is absolutely beneficial for your overall development because you have to be patient with people who are younger and you have to be humble with people who are older, that are going to do things quicker than you and so you're challenged is also kind of reminded that people have varying abilities ... and interests.’” (Klossc, 2018, p.12-13).Progressive schools provide the latitude that enables educating students to become citizens to in a healthy democracy.

In this section I have discussed Angell (1991) and its relevance to the educating for democracy that has been identified as being a part of progressive school education (Chernetskaya, 2013). While being outside of the mandatory assessment requirements, alternative schools often use student-led projects to demonstrate learning. In the next section, the history of PBL and the faith that progressive schools have in student autodidacts will be discussed.

Progressive Schools: Measuring Student Achievement

Assessment

As self-declared child-centered environments, independent progressive schools are not required to administer standardized testing as is done in TPS. However, as formal settings of learning, these schools are not without measures of student progress. These measures have traditionally been congruent with one of the accepted themes of the progressive education movement: “…the application in the classroom of more humane, more active, and more rational

pedagogical techniques derived from research in philosophy, psychology, and social sciences." (Cremin, 1988, p. 229) Typically, progressive schools do not administer standardized tests as a measure of student success. It is not unusual for a progressive school to have eliminated testing altogether. In environments that are constructed around children as individuals with differing needs and interests, the use of such objective tools to measure achievement is unusual. "Progressive education has defended the thesis that activity lies at the root of all true education; it has conceived learning in terms of life situations and growth of character; it has championed the rights of the child as a free personality." (Counts, 1938, p.113)

But in examining the history of progressive education there is one approach to learning and assessment that is commonly used to measure learning. It has been used for over a hundred years and is closely associated with one of the stalwarts of the movement.

William Heard Kilpatrick

Kilpatrick is frequently cited as one of the major historical figures in the history of progressive education. A long time instructor at Teachers College, Columbia University, Kilpatrick was deeply influenced by the writings of both Froebel and Dewey (Beineke, 1998). He came to believe that students should be able to have a significant influence on the course of their learning, depending on their individual interests (Tentenbaum, 1951). "We learn what we live," he wrote. Dewey's belief that children are innately self-directing (Stern, 2005) and the practices at the Laboratory School led Kilpatrick in a similar direction (Beineke, 1998).

In 1915 he published, *The Project Method,* where he promoted the use of projects as a more authentic way of learning for students, one that could tie their interests to real world

concerns. “The contention of this paper is that wholehearted purposeful activity in a social situation as the typical unit of the school procedure is the best guarantee of the child’s native capacities now too frequently wasted.” (p.18) Rather than the rote learning that was so common at that time, (Beyer, 1997), Kilpatrick encouraged centering learning around, “the hearty purposeful act.” (p. 4) In this article, Kilpatrick goes on to identify four different classifications of projects (p. 16) and their procedures. Kilpatrick takes great care to communicate the importance of these projects emanating from the students themselves: “The use of coercion seems a choice of evils.” (p. 16) “He cautioned against student-coerced projects where the extrinsically motivated student obtains fleeting skill and knowledge, views school as a bore, and considers teachers, school, and social agencies as instruments of suppression.” (Pecore, 2015, p.158) In suggesting the use of projects as a learning model, Kilpatrick was advocating a significant change in a schooling system guided by its pre-determined curriculum. (VanAusdal, 1988). Additionally, under this approach the teacher was no longer filling their students with knowledge, but rather guiding them through the steps of their own inquiry (Beineke, 1998).

Criticisms of “The Project Method”

Although accepted by many, there was also criticism of Kilpatrick’s article from somewithin the progressive school movement. The ambiguity of what Kilpatrick was putting forward was of concern to many (Herreid, 2003) who pointed out the lack of a detailed method in what was being suggested. “Kilpatrick broke from tradition by redefining the project from the more precise “independent constructive activity” to “whole-hearted purposeful activity,” which infuriated some.” (Knoll, 2010, 2012 in Pecore, 2015) In 1921, a symposium was held to discuss the problematic nature of implementing the suggestions in “The Project Method.” (Kilpatrick et.

al, 1921), Many of the concerns had to do with the role of the teacher in the process of selecting topics for project and guidance in the process of it being completed. Some worried that the topics for projects would not be substantial enough, while others felt that student choice and interest would need to be supplemented by traditional academic instruction (Kilpatrick et. al, 1921). "Kilpatrick freely admitted that there was no "mechanically perfect formula" and that the task of devising an appropriate technique was the greatest difficulty (p. 319). The vision was an "ideal difficult of attainment." (Mooney-Frank, 2000, p. 321).

The debate surrounding the use of projects to assess learning as opposed to more standardized measures has relevance today for schools like the one in this study. In an environment that is student-centered, where individual interests can affect a course of study, how much adult guidance is needed to ensure that what is happening is "education" and not mere self-indulgence? John Dewey himself indicated that he thought Kilpatrick had confused means with ends and that to allow a child to self-direct their learning was not appropriate and not congruent with his beliefs (Knoll, 2010).

"Autodidaxy" – children as natural learners.

The practices of progressive schools put a tremendous faith in the ability of even very young children to make important contributions to their own learning. Dewey wrote of having, "respect for individual capacities, interests and experience…respect for self-initiated and self-conducted learning." (Dewey, 1928, p.115) "Dewey's idea of the whole child, his vision of mining for riches, rather than filling vessels became the focal point for progressive education to come." (Stern, 2005, p. 11) This belief and trust in children's capacities is what distinguished

progressive pedagogy from public school practices in Dewey's day, and in many ways, ours today.

Wacker (2009) defined autodidaxy as, "self-directed learning as characterized by educational endeavors pursued in noninstitutional, natural societal settings," that include learner control, autonomy, and self-management. (p. 26-27). By connecting autodidaxy and the informal learning culture outside of institutionalized learning (p. 31) , this study was able to isolate the most vital factors to self-directed learning outside of the traditional learning environment. He notes the importance of learners having the freedom to follow their own interests and cites research on adult SDL (p. 43) that shows the importance of beginning with no clearly identified goal in order for learning to be most effective. This is how all of us begin our lives as learners, he says, citing the groundbreaking research of Thomas and Pattison (2007) and their observation that, "There is no developmental or educational logic behind the radical change in pedagogy from informal to formal when children start school." (p. 5). This aligns with Dewey's writing that, "Formalization is hostile to genuine mental activity and to sincere emotional growth and expression." (Dewey, 1928a, p. 198) The belief in children's innate learning abilities connects the concept of "autodidaxy" and the progressive belief in children's natural learning capacities as described above.

Earlier in this literature review I referenced a number of the historically prominent progressive schools, founded early in the 20th century. Stern (2005) notes that each of these settings were in agreement with the concept of Experimental Education, "meaning that the child was free to experiment as he or she saw fit, choosing materials or activities, or not, according to his desires or interests." (p. 18) Winsor (1973) wrote, "In every case there is a belief and

expectation that in an atmosphere of freedom the child will discover his intellectual interests and capacities and will become sufficiently self-disciplined to pursue the tasks that lead to competence." (p. 14, in Stern, 2005) Again, there is a reference to this animating belief in children's competence to playing a significant role in directing their learning. Caroline Pratt said : "Experimenting means experimenting by children and not experimentation with children." (Sadovnik & Semel, 2002, p.63) Materials from the Village Community School, a progressive school founded in 1970 by Sheila Sadler state: "To understand an idea, a child may need to build it or act it, paint or sing it or dance it, laugh it or graph it, as well as read and write about it." (Stern, 2005, p. 25)

In all of these cases, proponents of progressive education are affirming a belief in children's natural learning abilities and suggesting that the important pedagogical step is not filling them up with knowledge (Dewey, 1934; Irwin & Marks, 1924), but facilitating environments where they may have experiences (Sadovnik & Semel, 2002; Antler, 1987; Dewey, 1928) that will lead to the type of knowledge that they can use in their lives (Stern, 2005). Progressive school leaders have expressed that this is not just good pedagogy, but is also beneficial for society (Antler, 1987; Dewey, 1915; Featherstone, 1991; Noddings, 1988). "We need to do all we can to strengthen in them the conviction that democracy is a workable and practicable ideal…If the school can do these things for children, it is educating them to function in and make a democratic world." (DeLima, 1942, p. 238) In the final part of this section, I will look at progressive school teachers, first within the larger context of contemporary teaching and then as a distinct group.

Progressive School Teachers

Progressive school teachers as a distinct group

As private educational settings, independent progressive schools are not bound by all of the state regulations regarding testing, so their teachers may not experience the pressures and restrictions described above (Rosenblatt, 2017). However, some progressive school teachers have indicated that the changes in the overall educational landscape have affected parental expectations about what they do (Read, 2014). Teachers who choose to instruct in such an environment can be considered as a distinct group, a definite subsection of the overall teaching category (Bullard. 1992).

Members of this group have chosen to instruct for schools with less financial support and job security. Their salaries tend to be lower, the benefits they receive there are less comprehensive, and they work without the most significant financial advantage that most teachers enjoy---a pension in retirement (Swidler, 2010). Additionally, the populations at progressive schools tend to fluctuate considerably from year-to-year and a teacher may find their position eliminated based on the decisions of a few families. With all of these factors, progressive school teachers have affirmed their commitment to what t.hey do and the freedoms that they enjoy, despite the financial uncertainty (McWilliams, 2003) The longer that a teacher teaches in one of these independent schools, the less likely they are to leave.

A significant number of teachers in this category initially spent time in a TPS environment. (Davies, 2002) In interviews, they have described the discomfort with what they were being asked to do in the classroom. “The way public school is set up, the teacher is the expert and you’re in there to be filled with information, and we’ll test you on it to make sure you learned it the way I told you should understand it. Here it’s the little things. They can go to the library and learn about what they want on their own. Our mission is to teach every kid where they’re at and give them a feeling of excitement about what it means to learn.” Others have mentioned the autonomy they have in how they instruct, “I like that I can teach any way that I want to as long as it fits within the parameters of what they need to learn. No one’s telling me what or how to teach. (personal interviews, March 19, 2019) Some research has shown that progressive school teachers are happier in their current assignments than they were when working in TPS. (Read, 2014)

Teachers as artists

Many notable scholars have equated teaching with artistry (May, 1993, Eisner, 1985, Rubin, 1985, Chiarelott, 1986). Eisner (1985) identifies four distinct ways in which teaching can considered to be an art. The first of these involves teachers who display “extraordinary skill and Heather” (p. 176) to the degree that what they produce in their classrooms is an aesthetic experience for their students. Secondly, the qualitative judgements continually made by a teacher using “ tempo, tone, climate, pace of discussion.” (p. 176) are aimed towards a qualitative goal. The third artistic sense of teaching is the balance that skilled teachers maintain between the use of established routines and the creative use of more spontaneous actions. (p. 176) Finally, in

artistic teaching, the final goals of the work emerge through the teaching instead of their being determined in advance. (p. 176)

Rubin (1985) sees teachers as performers who use, “Skill, originality, flair, dexterity, ingenuity, and virtuosity. “ (p. 15)). He identifies imagination, ingenuity (p. 157) as the three main categories that lead to artistry in teaching. Chiarelott (1986) explores the concept of “fluid intelligence,” as an attribute of teaching artistry that can be used to create “enabling environments” (p. 9) He goes on to cite the work of Phenix (1975) in identifying the results that such teaching should produce in students :“Hope, creativity, awareness, doubt and faith, wonder, awe, and reverence.” (Chiarelott, 1986, p. 9) May (1993) provides a clear description of the teacher as an artist with curriculum as the substance of their creative work. She reminds us that teachers, “reconfigure and decorate our spaces, make our marks, elevate ourselves, and other above confinement, routine and the mundane. We expand our capacity to see, hear, critique, and act on our possibilities in the world. “ (p. 211)

Through the work that has be done to this point, we can start to see a picture of the artistic teacher emerge. The willingness to experiment, to allow learning’s ends emerge in the course of their work, and to use intuition and imagination to guide their work are all descriptions touched on in these works. But among the population of classroom teachers, who are these artistic teachers and where are they to be found?

"Trusted to Teach: An Ethnographic Account of 'Artisanal Teachers in a Progressive High School"

Considered in the light of the comments from the first section and how the ongoing "Age of Accountability" has affected TPS classroom practices, this study illustrates and contrasts that with what is possible in a progressive school. The author quotes teachers in an intentionally progressive environment as describing the, "relational nature of their school that allows the space for them to work as "artisanal teachers." (p. 195) There they are granted, "The professional flexibility to construct a dynamic, successful learning environment that is responsive to their students' needs both as individual learners, and as members of a classroom community." (p. 195) Throughout this study she shows the ways in which school leaders, parents, and students co-exist with the teachers in an environment of trust. (p. 103). This dissertation shows," In this type of school environment, administrators and parents trust that teachers have the capacity and desire to shape such a learning space and accordingly provide them the latitude to do so." (p. 196)

At the same time, "That freedom carries with it the added responsibility and work of creating their own curricula and teaching materials." (p. 196) Another teacher told the author that her progressive school, "has asked me to identify and focus on skills, but never dictated how I should accomplish that. This freedom is very intellectually exciting because teachers have a sense of ownership over and appreciation for the meaningful work they do." (p. 197) This piece is very important to my study because it shows what can occur in a progressive school setting, where teachers can work more as artists than instructional agents. This important inquiry clearly illustrates what the difference can be for progressive school teachers: "Working with

curriculum and students as their medium, artisan teachers design learning opportunities so that all students can understand their individual approaches to learning, which makes them more self-reliant and self-aware of the world around them and their place in it." (p. 197)

"*Remember Childhood: Stories from a Progressive School*"

Read's depiction of the work done at the "Marsh School" describes the progressive school teacher as sometimes guiding, sometimes backing off to allow her students space to learn (p. 54). In doing so, she focuses on improving both their social and emotional skills along with their academic achievement (p. 64) This is a conception of the kind of teaching possible at a progressive school that is less likely to be found in TPS environments. Absent constant test preparation, a teacher has greater latitude to create a learning environment best suited for the students in front of them. This particular iteration of a communal learning setting, where everyone present learns from each other, is part of the distinctiveness of progressive schools (Kohn, 2008). Kierstead (2006) saw this as connected to the pedagogy of wonder, while Read notes that, "wonder can be found in many places." (p. 114)

Read's 2014 piece, focusing on the work of two primary grade teachers in a progressive school recognizes this, commenting that they, "…make their work an art by maintaining a spirit of wonder." (Read, 2014, p. 120) They do this, "through imitating the methods of others, but by applying their individuality in the most personal way. (p. 21) Read makes a significant contribution to the scholarship on progressive school teachers through her application of the "pedagogy of wonder." Additionally, she suggests that teachers can become, "fellow wonderers through living and working alongside children." (p. 23) This echoes what I heard in an interview

that I did with a progressive school teacher for one of my articles: “We use really accessible materials. When I teach Main Lesson I always make a point of telling the kids: ‘This is a topic I don’t know anything about. I can’t wait to learn about it with you.’” (Kloss, 2018b) There is evidence that some progressive school teachers see themselves as co-learners with their students.

Finally, Read invokes Jardine (1990)’s concept of the teacher as, “provocateur’ (p. 116), someone who incites learning in their students through her interactions with them and the way that they, themselves, display wonder in their approach to learning (Read, 2014, p. 118) Again, it is necessary to point out that this is contradiction to the messages that are delivered to young teachers today (Murphy, 2015) and in the ways that teachers are evaluated as being “successful.” (Newberg-Long, 2010). Considered in this light, the freedoms allowed to progressive school teachers are “counter-cultural” to the prevailing educational landscape. “This era of teacher accountability leaves little space for teachers to exercise their own sense of wonder, to try new things, and learn alongside their students.” (Read, 2014, p. 121)

In this section, I have considered three areas of research relevant to the school being studied here. First there was an examination of the ways in which progressive schools educate for democracy, followed by a discussion of how Progressive Schools use alternative conceptions of students as learners to influence their choice of assessment tools.. Finally, the scholarship on progressive school teachers was examined.

In this Literature Review I have attempted to document what I consider to be relevant scholarship concerning three areas that influence the practices of contemporary progressive schools: Progressive School legacy, their Independent status, and the distinctive progressive

pedagogy. To understand the progressive school paradigm, it is necessary to recognize that it has an historical evolution that even predates Dewey. Independent progressive schools occupy a position outside of the mainstream and have responded in different ways to the changing educational landscape of “The Age of Accountability.” Progressive schools are deserving of study because they approach the education of children in a distinctive way from TPS that begins with how they see children as learners, how their students demonstrate growth, and the importance they place on educating for democracy. All of these are reflected in this study, where I will show how one independent progressive school has designed practices to intentionally address each of these areas.

In the next chapter I will discuss the methods that I will be using in this study, my procedures to analyze the data that I gather, and the position that I occupy in this discussion of contemporary progressive schools. My methods include case study, narrative and autoethnographic research. The approaches that can be taken in examining even a single progressive school are many and while my published work has also addressed small independent progressive schools, this study is distinct from that research, focusing on how it is that progressive schools carry out their daily work.

Methodology

Summary

The research for this study was carried out entirely on-site at the school that is being studied---"Peachtown Elementary School." Multiple methods of data collection were used, all focused on telling the story of how an independent progressive school operates in the Age of Accountability. This case study focused on three traditional qualitative research methods: interviews of instructors at the school, my participant observation during the school day there, and a consideration of artifacts relevant to this study. I also used narrative inquiry methods, since my interest is in showing what goes on in one specific progressive environment and narrative approaches allow for, "a change from a focus on the general and universal toward the local and specific." (Colorado State University, 2018)

"The basic qualitative research method uses a central question rather than a hypothesis to analyze data to identify key categories and themes." (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My intention with this study is to describe a particular type of alternative learning setting in the contemporary educational landscape. I am interested in what is done at such a school, what ideas produced these practices, and what this intersection of theory and practice has to say about how this school approaches children as learners. Heeding the counsel of the scholars quoted above, my single research question is: "What are the principles and practices of a small independent progressive school in the Age of Accountability?"

Throughout this process, I used analytic memos (Rogers, 2018) to clarify what I was seeing and hearing in this work. Once my data was gathered, I used a thematic approach to analyze my data, by identifying the most common themes of the practices that I observed during my time at the school (Elliott, 2005). This was followed by interpretation of what I gathered (Denzin, 2007) in an attempt to begin to construct a coherent depiction of what it means to be a philosophical and practical alternative in this Age of Accountability. My goal was to use qualitative methods to present my data so that patterns of practice and belief emerged as part of the constant comparative process in order to clearly point to what it is that distinguishes such a school. Throughout these steps I frequently referred to my own cultural and professional positionality and how it affected this study.

This necessitated the use of the basic principles of autoethnography as I considered how to approach this study. Early in my time at Peachtown I become very aware of my many years of teaching and the beliefs I have adopted operating as the prism through which my observations would be made. Instead of attempting to somehow isolate or confine what I have come to believe as a teacher, I have made the decision to intentionally use these experiences as a part of my methodology. In doing so I used some of the basic principles of autoethnography, including personal experience, insider knowledge, and cultural knowledge (Ellis & Adams, 2014).

In the next section I will identify the conceptual framework for this study. It is a contemporary piece on progressive schools that attempts to describe the prominent features that characterize these learning settings. It contains the perspective that I used to analyze what I experienced during my time at this school.

Conceptual Framework

Although progressive schools, philosophy, and practices have been a part of the learning environment for over a century, “Progressive education has no fixed creed, it has no constant and unchanging body of knowledge to impart it, and it has no one method that is always applied.” (Washburne, 1952, p. 122) This creates a challenge for any researcher looking to fit their work into a framework for progressive education overall. However, there is a contemporary piece on progressive education which has achieved significant acceptance and recognition for its delineating the principles of contemporary progressive schools.

Alfie Kohn’s 2005 article, “Progressive Education: Why It’s Hard To Beat, But Also Hard to Find,” has been cited in dissertations as a piece discussed within progressive school faculties as they reflect on their practices what they do (Read, 2014, Gambone, 2017). It has been referenced in over 100 published works on contemporary education. Originally published by “Independent School” journal, it was included in the Bank Street College of Education’s “Progressive Education in Context’s Centennial Collection.”

In this piece, Kohn writes, “There are enough elements on which most of us agree that a common core of progressive education emerges…schools can be characterized according to how closely they reflect a commitment to values such as these…” (p. 2) He goes on to formulate what I see as a contemporary conceptualization of progressive schooling that includes “Attending to the Whole Child, Community, Collaboration, Social justice, Intrinsic motivation, Deep

understanding, Active learning, and Taking kids seriously," (p. 2-4) These are the principles which I used to consider the school in this study. My focus in this work was to examine whether their philosophy, practices, and outcomes were consistent with these precepts and what such a congruence indicates about their conceptualization of their students as learners. For each of these areas, I have identified elements that I looked for to indicate Peachtown's active commitment to each of Kohn's characteristics.

Attending to the Whole Child

I was interested in seeing the Peachtown pedagogy in practice, specifically the ways in which the teachers there engage with their students as capable natural learners, extending beyond their role as students. My attention was not only on defined instructional time, but the manner in which they treated them during less-defined times as well. What is it that Peachtown does that is distinct from traditional conceptualizations and limitations of students? I wanted to see how the lofty characterizations of Peachtown's Mission Statement were accomplished in the daily practices and approaches of the adults there.

Collaboration

I wanted to see the ways in which all members of the Peachtown community interacted with each other as a group, regardless of their designated roles. Given the school's strong commitment to mixed-age group learning, I looked for specific repeated practices that involved collaboration between students of different ability levels. Having access to the teachers

through their planning meetings, I was also curious to see in the ways in which they interacted for instruction and assessment. In a larger sense, how does this group of adults and children collaborate together to advance the learning of the community as a whole?

Community

Independent private schools often are communities constructed in ways significantly different from TPS. I looked for ways that Peachtown selects its students and teachers that signify how it sees itself and its mission. During my many observations there I was looking for those pervasive practices that reflected Kohn's description of this facet of progressive education, one that de-emphasized competition in order to more effectively allow the group to grow as a whole. What is distinctive about the Peachtown community that has permitted it over its three decades to be seen by many of its alumni as a setting that taught them so much about getting along with others?

Social Justice

As a K-8 school, I was interested in discovering how Peachtown introduced and explained basic concepts of Social Justice to its students. There is a relatively limited amount of scholarship on rural school leadership and social justice (Maxwell Locke, & Scheurich, 2014), to guide their work in this area. How does this school, professing commitment to traditional progressive values, guide its students in regards to social justice concerns? I was particularly interested in how Peachtown's practices aligned with those highlighted in Angell (1991)'s work on educating for democracy.

Intrinsic Motivation

With the freedom that is allotted to learning environments that choose to operate outside of the public school system, schools like Peachtown have an opportunity to construct settings that reconfigure the learning dynamic. In my observations, I closely looked for those practices and choices that were used to increase student's desire to learn, apart from an interest in standard measures of success. Without the requirement to administer standardized tests, what did the school do to motivate its students to pursue their areas of interest? In particular, I was interested in seeing the degree of choice afforded to students and how that affected their enthusiasm for their work.

Deep Understanding

Kohn asserted that progressive education centered around, "problems, projects, and questions." During my observations I watched how the dynamics between teachers and students and among the students themselves yielded a recognizable depth of knowledge. How did the problems presented to students during instructional times affect opportunities to take learning and study to a place surprising for students at this age? I wanted to learn how the project process worked here, including the areas of choice that were given to students and how their work was evaluated.

Active Learning

Kohn's description of this attribute focuses on the creation of knowledge in place of passive reception and absorption of a set of facts. At a basic level, I wanted to see what learning

at Peachtown looked like: what were students encouraged and permitted to do at various points in the learning process. I also was interested in how much input they had on the direction that their learning took, including what was being discovered and how they would know they had been successful. I had a particular interest, given my teaching background, how teacher-student interaction affected these areas.

Taking Kids Seriously

If Peachtown truly is student-centered and has faith in each of its students to contribute to the learning of the group, then I should be able to see the ways in which that is enacted. I looked for the details of adult-child interaction, trying to discern specific practices that revealed how seriously each student was taken as a learner. I wanted to see how the children reacted to each other in learning situations and what degree of respect and consideration was present. Overall, what goes on here each day that signifies Peachtown's trust in their students' capacity to engage with serious academic content?

In the following section I will be discussing why Qualitative Research is the most appropriate approach for my study. I will also show why I have chosen the case study approach as one of the methods for this work. This section will also include explanations of my positionality and the trustworthiness of this study.

Qualitative Research

The study of phenomenology can be traced back to philosophical viewpoints (Creswell, 2003). "Phenomenology "refers to a person's perception of the meaning of an event,

so a phenomenological study attempts to understand people's perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of a particular situation (Leedy & Ormond, 2005). Phenomenology can be used to gain a better understanding of the experiences of others by looking at a variety of perspectives on a single situation (Leedy & Ormond, 2005). The main goal of a phenomenological study can be seen as an effort to, "reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence." (Creswell, 2009, p. 1670) The study of teachers and their work in schools can be seen as phenomenological because of teachers lived experiences and conceptual worlds (Bogdan & Biklen,1982).

Qualitative research is the appropriate methodology when hypotheses are to be generated rather than tested (Patton, 2002). Similarly, since relatively little attention has been paid to the work of contemporary progressive schools, qualitative research is appropriate, since it explores little-known phenomena and does not make generalizations that can necessarily be applied to a particular population (Creswell, 2008). It explores "substantive areas about which little is known or about which much is known to gain novel understanding." (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 11). "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences," so they are often concerned with the lived experiences and the social interactions of people." (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). In addition to being phenomenological, my research is qualitative for three reasons.

My study put progressive school teachers and their actions at the center of the data that I gathered. It examined the specific practices of an independent progressive school. Such a basic interpretive qualitative study is appropriate when researchers are attempting to understand how participants construct meaning and interpret their experiences (Merriam, 2002). Qualitative

research “typically involves highly detailed rich descriptions of human behaviors and opinions. The perspective is that humans construct their own reality, and an understanding of what they do may be based on why they believe they do it.” (Savenye &Robinson, 1996, p. 1172) It has traditionally been about, “understanding the meanings individuals construct in order to participate in their social lives” (Hatch, 2002, p. 9)

My study concerns a phenomenon that occurs in a specific social environment: schools. Qualitative research is most appropriate here as it examines and considers the context in which the phenomena are taking place (Merriam, 2002). No teacher does their work alone and qualitative research accommodates consideration of the context, intentionality, and implications of its findings (Krippendorff, 2004). Schools can be complicated, difficult places to understand and qualitative researchers, “use complex reasoning that is multifaceted and iterative and methods that are interactive and humanistic.” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 43) Qualitative methodology is also suited to the description of intricate situated dilemmas (Lincoln &Guba, 1985).

In undertaking this research, I have considered my role and the experiences that I bring to this work. I did not come to this study with predetermined scales of value and categories, for in qualitative study, the researcher is the instrument (Patton, 2002), where ,“A qualitative design needs to remain open and flexible to permit exploration of whatever the study offers for inquiry.” (p. 255) Having worked as a classroom teacher, similar to my subjects, for over 30 years, I could not avoid using a constructivist perspective as I spent extensive time at this school, considering the variety of perspectives that the teachers expressed, attempting to do this work with a sensitivity to nuance and detail (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Neuman, 2011).

Qualitative research is best fitted to this study, where I acknowledge how my belief system affects my perspective (Lincoln et al., 2011) As an experienced teacher I am likely to be able to describe what I observe from the point of view of my subjects (Creswell, 2007). I agree with Denizen and Lincoln who see the qualitative researcher as, "bricoleur…the person who pieces together a close knit set of practices that provide solutions to a problem in a concrete situation."(Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, p. 3) In this section, I have described why qualitative research is appropriate for this work. In the next section I will describe why a case study is one of the appropriate forms of qualitative research that I have used for this work.

Case Study

Before documenting how the case study method has been defined, it is appropriate to show how the phenomenon of "case" itself has been described. Case has been defined as**,** "a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context." (Yin. 2002, p. 13) Stake (1995) has defined case as, "a specific, a complex, functioning thing, an integrated system that has a boundary and working parts, while being purposive...a bounded system that should be inquired into it "as an object rather than a process" (p. 2). Merriam sees "the case as a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries." (Merriam, 1998, p. 27) Miles and Huberman's (1994) defined, "the case as a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context."

Qualitative case study research has been described as, "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or

a social unit.” (Merriam, 1998, p. xiii) Hartley has stated that case study research, "Consists of a detailed investigation, often with data collected over a period of time, of phenomena, within their context," with the aim being "to provide an analysis of the context and processes which illuminate the theoretical issues being studied." (Hartley, 2004, p.323) Yin clearly defines the difference between the value of case study research and that of more quantitative studies: “in doing a case study, your goal will be to generalize theories (analytical generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (Yin, 2003a, p.10)… The case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis". (p. 15) Other researchers have attempted to delineate the specific aspects of case study work. Stake (1995) identified the case study research as being “holistic”, “empirical”, “interpretive” and “emphatic, ”while Merriam (1998) sees its attributes as being Particularistic, Descriptive, and Heuristic.

There are significant differences of perspectives regarding how case study research should be carried out. Yin (2002) identifies five components of case study research design and advocates for a tightly structured research method. Stake (1995) suggests a more flexible model , “in order to force attention to complexity and contextuality… because issues draw us toward observing, even teasing out, the problems of the case, the conflictual outpourings, the complex backgrounds of human concern.” (pp. 16-17).Titscher et al. (2000) insisted that case study was not a research method but a strategy, agreeing with, "Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied.” Stake (2000. p.435): “A case study cannot be defined

through its research methods, but rather in terms of its theoretical orientation and interest in individual cases." (Kohlbacher, 2006, p. 5)

These understandings of case study demonstrate why case study is an effective research method to use to study an independent progressive school. Some have noted that there is still some question, "as to what a case study is and how it can be differentiated from other types of qualitative research." (Merriam, 1998, p. xi) But I see case study as allowing for the flexibility needed to pay attention to the divergent educational philosophies and practices that are present in schools such as the one in this study. This research documents one specific example of an alternative to contemporary schooling, what is done there and the enacted beliefs that make them distinct.

Much of the recent research that has been done on progressive education has concerned the specific practices of individual schools (McWilliams, 2003, Stern, 2005, Knoester, 2012, Read, 2014, Gambone, 2017). Case study was used there to point out specific examples of what it means to articulate a progressive educational vision in the contemporary landscape. These studies have both inspired and guided me to the work that I have done through their attempts to not only describe progressive schools, but also to locate them as places of hope in a society more and more characterized by conflict. They cite specific school practices that contrast with TPS that, "too often rely on a reductionist and simplistic view of children, teachers and schools, placing high value on flawed and misleading tests." (Knoester, 2012, p. 139) These works have used case study to effectively shine a light on what is done in progressive learning settings that truly places children at the center of their learning in an intentional way that, "constitutes

a realm of action that in part provides both strength and the possibility of transformative activity." (Apple & Beane, 1995, p. 70)

I see these studies of individual schools, and now my work, as using the study of single schools and their, "complex backgrounds of human concern" (Stake, 1995) to illuminate larger, more cohesive realities of what may be meant by the terms "progressive education." As I stated in my Literature Review, despite its long history, defining it has proved elusive (Stone, 1976). What am I interested in is not definition, but possible connections between similar environments that lie outside of the reach of institutional schooling. I wanted to see how accurate Russell (2012)'s identification of the three characteristics of progressive schools is in a contemporary progressive setting is. Case study allows me to focus on this "boundaried environment" (Merriam, 1998) to contribute to the scholarship on alternative learning settings and what distinguishes them from schools with more traditionally structured practices.

Narrative forms of research

The format that I have chosen to present my data in lies within the boundaries of narrative research. While I have used traditional qualitative research methods---field observations, interviews, and document analysis---and see my work at Peachtown as a case study, this project also belongs within what has recently been seen as "narrative." I am using many of the qualities of narrative forms that have developed in recent decades. In this section I will discuss the development of narrative research, its appropriateness to this study and the place

that it will play in this project. My focus is less on a comprehensive depiction of narrative research, than on identifying why I am using it with this study.

The data that I am exploring here is a recounting of my experience at this school. If we accept that narrative inquiry is the study of experience as story, then it is appropriate that I use this approach to explore the phenomenon of progressive education as expressed at Peachtown Elementary School (Clandinin, D. J. Ed., 2006). My study is consistent with the ways of gathering data common to narrative inquiry (Lieblich, Mashiach-Tuval, & Zilber, 1998). This study was largely interactive, not only in the many interviews that I conducted, but in my positionality as a classroom teacher and the ways in which I most certainly did not dispassionately sit and observe, but reacted to and talked about what I saw during this work. This too is consistent with narrative inquiry (Andrews et al., 2004; Bruner, 1986; Bury, 1982).

The development of narrative studies occurred in the period following World War Two (Reissman and Speedy, 2007). Up to that point, positivism and a confidence in the objectification of data and reliability and generalizability of its subsequent conclusions was accepted (Clifford, 1986; Geertz, 1983). This form of research relied on the acceptance of a certain static researcher-researched duality that in a sense existed outside of time considerations (Gruber & Vonèche, 1977; Slife, 1993). In this dynamic, the researcher stands apart from their subject, distanced from true connection (Smith, 1983). This approach would not be appropriate for my study, given my decades-long work and study of classroom and school dynamics. Instead, my study is relational, focusing on a type of school that I sought out for my interest in progressive educational approaches, for as with many narrative researchers I do not see the relationship between myself and my subject as objective (Slife, 1993). I am not using this study

to draw large applicable conclusions about education in general, but to document one contemporary example of progressive education and share my experience there; to use narrative inquiry to tell the story of Peachtown (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990).

It has been observed that narrative inquiry is based upon different types of experience (Squire, 2008), with some seeing it as the fundamental ontological category (Dewey 1976). "Narratives are, arguably, the most appropriate form to use when thinking about inquiry undertaken within a pragmatic framework… An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling." (Clandinin, D. J. Ed., 2006) While narratives are not defined by starting and ending points (Squire, 2008), they are enriched by the breadth of influences that contributed to their development (Martin, 1986), resulting in new, more vibrant ways to capture experience (Denzin, 2004). I was drawn to this form since it has prioritized examining the particular and the specific, an important way of understanding cultures (Geertz, 1983). This study is about one specific location, idiosyncratic in size, approach, and resources, but I believe valuable, as it has been noted that an intense examination of the particular can yield valuable insights (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993) .These observations do have a part to play in the consideration of larger settings (Hauerwas, 1995), such as the prevailing school system. Generalizable conclusions gathered from studies of the specific have increasingly come to be seen as productive (Polkinghorne, 1988; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

Narrative inquiry can be organized in a variety of ways, as it is an evolving category (Sconiers and Rosiek, 2000). Squire (2008) identifies four types of narrative inquiry, depending on their focus of study. She also notes that, "The experience-centered approach assumes four

important characteristics of narratives: Structure, content, context, and sequence. Narratives are sequential and meaningful, definitely human, re-present experience, by reconstituting it, and display transformation and change." Clandinin (2006) traces the historical development of narrative inquiry, identifying, "the four turns toward narrative. The four include: (1) a change in the relationship between the person conducting the research and the person participating as the subject (the relationship between the researcher and the researched), (2) a move from the use of number toward the use of words as data, (3) a change from a focus on the general and universal toward the local and specific, and finally (4) a widening in acceptance of alternative epistemologies or ways of knowing." Colorado State University (2018) has identified ten different types of narrative inquiry.

Using narrative

The stories that researchers tell are illustrative of the story structures within them (Bell, 2002). As a teacher, when I go into any educational setting, formal or not, my personal construction of the phenomena that I witness is significantly influenced by my having lived the life of a teacher. In telling the story of Peachtown, in order to draw upon all of my resources as an educator and a scholar it is necessary for me to recount what I experienced there in a narrative form. It has been observed that teachers' knowledge is often contained in holistic, often narrative forms (Elbaz, 1983). As a teacher I see learning in intentional schooling settings as a particular type of story, one that I have not only observed, but lived, for my entire adult life. It is inescapable, then, that I should present what I learned about this school in a narrative form.

The presentation that I will use is congruent with a conceptualization of narrative as described by Connelly and Clandinin (1999): "Narrative researchers are concerned with the representation of experience, causality, temporality and the difference between the experience of time and the telling of time, narrative form, integrity of the whole in a research document, the invitational quality of a research text." (p. 139) The data that I gathered from time at Peachtown will be presented in a series of thematically-organized vignettes that move from observations to interviews and then frequently back again. Narrative allows me this freedom to assemble this picture of Peachtown from the various experiences I had there in a form, that while not chronological, is the most descriptive way to allow the reader to have a sense of this unique place. My interest as a scholar is to present what I learned in the most vivid way, one that best captures what it was like to be at this school.

I have also used narrative inquiry because I recognize the impossibility of separating who and what I am from the work that I am doing. However, I desire to conduct this research with integrity and virtuosity. (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001) To do this honestly, I need to imbue my narrative approach with autoethnography, so that I can responsibly acknowledge and use my experiences as a classroom teacher in reacting to my experiences at Peachtown. In the next section I will further discuss why autoethnography is important to this work.

Autoethnography

To write from an autoethnographic perspective is to include the three areas suggested by the word: self, culture, and writing in composing an account of a culture that is framed by the researcher's own experiences and ideas (Colyar, 2009.) Some have described it simply as the

study of the self. (Reed-Danahay, 1997) Autoethnography has been identified as including at least 20 different forms, including some outside of the social sciences (Ellis et al. ,2011; Hughes and Willink, 2015, and Denzin 2014). It is a methodology that allows for subjectivity, emotionality, and accommodating the experience that the researcher brings to their work, recognizing that we are part of what we study (Richardson, 2000). “If our desire is to research social life, then we must embrace a research method that, to the best of its/our ability, acknowledges and accommodates mess and chaos, uncertainty and emotion.” (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p.9). Auto-ethnographers include how they have been influenced by their fieldwork (Atkinson, Coffey,& Delamont, 2003), use literary practices in telling their research stories (Paget, 1990), and include the voices of many who have traditionally not been included in academic research. (Blair, Brown, & Baxter, 1994)

The term “autoethnography” was coined by Raymond Firth in 1956 (Elder et al., 2007; Reed-Danahay, 1997). David Hayano cited Jojo Kenyatta’s book *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938) as the first published example of autoethnography (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). In 1975, Karl Heider used the term to describe accounts of a cultures written by its members (Heider, 1975). Hayano defined the term as a methodology where researchers, “conduct and write ethnographies of their own people.” (Hayano, 1979, p. 99) The use of autoethnography has grown significantly in recent decades as, “one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don’t exist.” (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 3) Auto-ethnographers study culture and social phenomenon with the intention to understand both the culture and themselves better (Denzin, 2000.) The researcher occupies a position as neither purely insider or outsider,

"tethered" to the experience, participants, and texts of the study. (Tullis, 2013, p. 244) In doing so, they are able to construct "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973, p.10) that allow the reader to reconsider the familiar in unexpected ways. For example, Pennington (2004) situates the author within the account of her school and its students and how the introduction of high-stakes testing affected both instruction and the way that the school community looked at itself.

For the purposes of my use of autoethnography, it is important to distinguish between autoethnography as a methodology, as opposed to a method. Many notable studies have centered the self as a focal point through which their findings are to be understood (Denzin, 2014; Correa & Lovegrove, 2012; DeLeon, 2010). However, some researchers, while including an autoethnographic approach to a portion of their work, structure it in a more traditional form, using a literature review, research questions, data, and findings.(Chang; 2008) Such works are intentionally and selectively using autoethnography as one of a series of methods in which to understand and present their findings (McClellan, 2012; Spenceley, 2011). This is how I have used this particular method in this study, to provide an alternative viewpoint (Carless, 2012; Fox, 2008; Jones, 2009) to the common perspectives on school.

As I have done this research I have come to see that what I understand about schools and education is undeniably affected by my 32 years as a classroom teacher. While I am not asserting that autoethnography is my methodology here, I am grateful for the opportunity to use it as one of the methods for understanding the research that I did. To leave out the work I have done as a teacher and try somehow to put it somewhere on the side would not be fair to what my life's work has brought to this project. "Autoethnography is a way of caring for the self. We often write to work something out for ourselves, and when we do, we must take into account how we

care for ourselves." (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 62) But I also believe my use of autoethnography has made this a more insightful study. By acknowledging and using the life that I have spent in the classroom, I have been able to better understand, ask about, and consider all that I saw and heard during this study.

Using autoethnography

In presenting the data that I gathered at Peachtown, I have adopted an autoethnographic perspective within my narrative approach, one that is consistent with existing traditions within that genre. It allows me to include, within the data of this study, my "personal educational experiences, core beliefs and ideologies." (Alsup, 2006, p. 127) However, while I have chosen to include some of the aspects of autoethnography in this study, I do so with a wider lens than merely comparing my teaching experience to the work being done at Peachtown. Starr (2020) noted, "the capacity of autoethnography to initiate positive change." (p. 2) While undertaking this study, I have had an opportunity to use observations, both of myself and Peachtown, to consider more widespread questions about the schooling system we currently have. In doing so, I am using the work of autoethnography, attempting to bridge the personal and the social, the theoretical and the practical (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). What do my teaching experiences and the practices of Peachtown have to say about TPS today?

The format in which my data will be presented has been designed to both include and separate the data I gathered and my own teaching experiences. Each section of my findings will include an introduction to the concept being considered, the data from Peachtown relevant to this idea, and a separate autoethnographic section relating my ideas and perceptions on the same

topic. In doing so, I am hoping that, “This kind of writing can inform, awaken, and disturb readers by illustrating their involvement in social processes about which they might not have been consciously aware. Once aware, individuals may find the consequences of their involvement (or lack of it) unacceptable and seek to change the situation.” (Sparkes, 2002, p. 221) Nearly all adults in this society were educated in TPS or settings that were structured by the TPS model. It is my hope that by presenting a truly alternative learning model coupled with the experiences of a long-time TPS teacher, that the reader may reconsider long-standing and frequently unquestioned schooling protocols.

Positionality

Positionality has been described as, “the role a scholar's background and current (socially constructed and perceived) position in the world plays in the production of academic knowledge, particularly in qualitative research in the social sciences.” (Garcia, 2014). My perspective is significantly affected by my being a white, middle-class, male who has benefitted from the advantages that someone in such a position receives in our society. My entire life, educationally and professionally, has been lived in such environments. The observations I make and conclusions that I draw cannot help but be influenced by this background. In considering school settings, which are very social environments with a number of silently accepted and unstated protocols, it is necessary to state that all of the school environments that I have been in, either as a teacher or student, have been both overwhelmingly white and middle class. My understanding and expectation of what school is has been formed in such institutions.

Professionally, my role is a complex one. On the one hand I have worked for more than thirty years as public school teacher who has been very much “inside the system”: having not only taught, but also serving as a union representative, department chair, teacher-administrator committee member, and State Education Department sub-contractor who wrote, edited, and supervised the scoring of state tests----like many long-time teachers I have worked in many roles within the public school apparatus. In looking at schools and teachers I am viewing them through the eyes of someone who has been on the inside for a long time.

On the other hand, at times, my work has been seen as divergent from the normative for classroom teachers. In many of the assignments described above, I was one of the loudest voices at the table, questioning the status quo. For many years I worked within the homeschooling community, assessing students, providing instructional guidance, and informing parents of their legal rights. Somehow, I was able to operate both within and outside of the institutional system. However, “The moment an insider steps out from the inside then she is no longer a mere insider. She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out.” (Minh-ha, 1997, p. 418) Since identities are fluid constructions (Haraway, 1998), I would have to say that over time, mine has undergone many evolutions.

I think that most public school teachers go to work every day to do good and many are heroes. Having spent decades grinding it out in a classroom, I cannot help but be sympathetic when I watch conscientious teachers practice their craft. At the same time, I am a progressive school sympathizer. I admire these schools that honor children’s ability to contribute to forming their educational path and who have had the courage to resist the obsession with testing and data

that is an accepted part of contemporary school culture. My years of observing progressive schools up close has only served to increase this admiration and I think that is reflected in my published scholarly work. However, I am not a progressive school teacher or a formal member of the school community that I am studying and my role could be described as "Outsider in collaboration with insiders." (Herr & Anderson, 2005)

It is important to address whose voices were represented in the writing of this study. (Ospina et al, 2008) While I quoted the teachers of the school frequently in this work, in the end, the perspective being represented is my own. I am inclined to support any thoughtful work being done by a teacher in a formal learning setting and I am sympathetic to progressive schools, their mission and their legacy, but it is impossible for me to separate the depictions included here from my extensive experience teaching in a TPS environment.

In this section I have considered how my positionality in the educational world may affect this study. In the next section, I will briefly discuss the how the design of this work has been created so as to increase trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness refers to, "the procedures researchers employ to ensure the quality, rigor, and credibility of a study while establishing the congruence of the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the researcher with the design, implementation, and articulations of a research study." (Frey, 2018) Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability have been established as the four central facets of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Among these, transferability refers to the ability of a

work to be generalized to a number of different contexts and the ways in which a study's findings can be applied in such circumstances. Concerns about trustworthiness can be addressed through triangulating data (Mathison, 1988) and the use of memoes by the researcher to establish relationships between data categories (Lofland & Lofland, 1995).

Credibility in research has been defined as the degree of confidence that can be placed in the findings of a study as it relates to accurately portraying the subject's actions and thoughts (Lodico, Spaulding, &Voegtle, 2010). While credibility can be displayed in multiple ways (Creswell, 2014), it has been seen as analogous to internal validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and combines with dependability and confirmability as demonstrating the trustworthiness of a study. (Patton, 2002) The research design that I used achieved credibility through the consistent recording, transcription, and analysis of all data.

Dependability requires that a researcher display accuracy in documenting the responses to the research questions and transparency in all facets of the data collection and analysis process (Creswell, 2014; Lodico et al., 2010). For a study to be deemed dependable, consistent research practices need to be established and used throughout a study (Maxwell, 2013). Dependability can be measured through the ability to replicate a study and is similar to the concept of "transferability" ("external validity" – Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or the degree to which the findings of a study can be generalized to settings not included in the study (Lincoln et al., 2011). I have attempted to be very clear in the methodology that I used to increase dependability so that my study could be repeated by others. This has been undertaken because of a lack of sufficient

recent scholarship on independent progressive schools in the hope that it will be repeated. I am confident that my work can be part of the telling of new stories of progressive schools.

In this section I have considered the appropriateness of qualitative research for this study, looking at the case study approach, my positionality, and the trustworthiness of this work. In the next section, I will more fully consider my research setting, including a discussion of the uniqueness of its physical setting and learning practices. I also examine the role that the founder has played in influencing how the school works and their ongoing financial concerns.

Physical Environments

Small, independent schools, lacking taxpayer funding, historically have had to seek out facilities that were originally intended for other uses---churches, community centers, town halls. (Miller, 2002.) Their place as an alternative learning site offering alternative methods of instruction that allow children a different role and evaluating them in different ways, may be enhanced by being in settings that are not traditionally used for education (Deal & Nolan, 1978).Environments carry messages that influence attitudes and behaviors. (Kiecolt, 1988)

The school in this study is not a "homeschool," but it is a school in a home. This is part of a legacy of progressive schools founded by women that have been conducted in homes (Stern, 2005). The former residence of the Dean of Women on a local college campus, this school has operated in this house for more than 25 years. The entrance is a back door that leads into a kitchen where students hang their coats just before leaving their lunches on the counter. The house then opens up into a dining room---used for instructing the youngest children---and a living room, where the entire school gathers each morning to begin the day. A hallway leads

towards the back of the house with bedrooms off of each side, used for educating the older students. It is difficult to escape the sense that you are in someone's house; there are no student desks, no lockers, no PA system.

One of the teachers there said, "I see this school as progressive and holistic. What we try to do is create an environment where everyone feels really comfortable. My own theory is that if they're really comfortable they'll be open to learning in natural ways. The physical space is very homey and this space tells a story." (personal interview, March 19, 2019). Small independent progressive schools like this that operate in spaces like these can be seen as deinstitutionalizing education, returning it to a less formalized, more organic model, one that is more important to seeing learning as something that can happen anywhere (Little, 2012). They occupy a place between comfortable, although possibly isolated homeschooling, (Thomas & Pattison, 2013) and a more formalized school setting that can become so devoted to its protocols that it forgets who it was created to serve (Gerstl-Pepin & Woodside-Jiron, 2005). These are unexpected learning settings for a pedagogical style that defies contemporary TPS practices. In the case of the school that is being studied here, their "Pedagogical Goals Statement" (2013) states that "each child should leave here with their own unique body of knowledge" ---identifying what they do as different, even from more programmatic TPS alternatives.

. Peachtown has three full-time teachers, including their director. They also employ a part-time Math teacher who works exclusively with their older learning group. Additionally, other staff instruct the students in Art, Music, and Foreign Language. The entire staff is white, with the exception of one Hispanic teacher. The school uses work-study students from the college whose campus they are located on to work in academic support and supervisory roles. In recent

years the school has had a student population between 20 and 25. There have been times when there have been somewhat less than 20 students and the limited size of the building prevents the school from having more than 28 students at any one time. As is detailed in the findings section, the students are mostly from a middle-class SES, with a significant number of farming and entrepreneurial families represented. The minority population of the school is roughly comparable to that of the district in which the school is located.

My inquiry has found that the school's mission and their manner of implementation is distinct from standard schooling expectations. The following sections describe what these practices are and what is notable about them. Most revealing is how the application of these methods reveals the assumptions that are made about the students there

Day-to-Day Practices

School protocols are not limited to exclusively academic purposes. The school in this study has a number of practices in place that are intended to deepen the bonds between members of the community and further a sense of connection and trust that also influences learning relationships. Both adults and children participate as equals, doing what is best for each other. It is an example of the heterarchy and informality of this school, a place of cooperation and communal values.

Each day at this school begins with the entire community, adults and children, gathered in a circle around the rug in the "living room" of the school-house. During this time, the teachers discuss the weather, what is going on in the world, what they will be doing that day, and

Other subjects that comes up in discussion. The children are given an opportunity to talk about whatever is going on in their lives. I talked to former students who recalled this as central to the building of the learning community, with every student present, supporting each other, and engaging with each other as friends more than classmates.

At the day's midpoint, the school stops for lunch. With no grade levels, faculty room or cafeteria, there are no separations here: everyone eats together in the in the dining room area of the house. Teachers, the school's director, and students from the youngest to the older are all sitting together eating and talking. By having all members of the school community together, relating to each other in this way, relationships are deepened, the school's defining characteristics of informality and heterarchy are emphasized, and a leveling of roles that will help every child see themselves as an equal in learning situations as well is presented. Once the meal is over, the children don't dash off to their next class, they "do chores," They wipe down the tables, vacuum the floor, and clean the entire area. They are learning that the school is not just a place that they come to; it is their community, and one that they have a responsibility to maintain.

Mixed-Age Learning

Small independent schools, considering a child's interests and abilities place children of different ages in learning groups together. The school in this study, covering ages that would otherwise be assigned K-8, has only two main learning groupings. A teacher there sees this alignment model as being key to their ability to best match their instruction to their students'

learning needs. “You can't lesson plan the way that a lot of places require because you don't know what the kids are going be drawn to and where you want to end up spending a little more time because they're so into it. I feel like I leaves a lot of room for the kids to help dictate what topic you spend more time on.”

I observed at this school over multiple years and the size of the learning groups varied. In general, the youngest learning cohort (4-8 years old) is somewhat larger than the older one (9-13). None of these groups ever included more than 12 students. Additionally, each group is further divided by age for literacy and Math instruction. Multi-age grouping allows for schools such as these to build true learning communities with ongoing opportunities for modeling and nurturing between students. By not being bound to established grade levels, children are able to learn with those students most similar to their ability levels, but who often have different interests and strengths. Since there are no “grade-level curriculums” at this school, everyone at the school is united, learning about a common topic at the same time. Such groupings demand teachers be able to construct learning environments that effectively include students of various age levels. I believe that using such a non-traditional method can lead to children view learning less as a competition against their peers and more in terms of enriching their learning group. The models of learning that schools choose can have both academic and developmental influences on how their students grow as people. (Kloss, 2018c)

Time, Space, and Choice

Authentic learning is made possible by the learner’s being able to control their time, space, and choice. (Revington, 2018) The Peachtown schedule is somewhat different from TPS—they operate Monday through Thursday, from 8:30 until 4:30. This arrangement is

somewhat fluid, given that many parents drop off and pick up their children and the school accommodate families' various personal situations. Morning Meeting begins the "formal day" at 9AM. Learners in any setting are most comfortable learning at a pace that they control (Lee, 1998). Small independent progressive schools, such as the one in this study, allow students the latitude to explore areas of interest.

Learning occurs throughout our lives, as we find what we want and what we love, wherever those experiences may occur (Aldrich, 2011). Schools like the one in this study believe that to confine a person's learning to a specific site is unrealistic and see themselves as being only a part of any child's learning settings. A teacher there told me, "Everybody is learning all of the time, not just at school. People learn best when they direct their own learning."

Schools like the one studied here, while having a unified curriculum, employ a different pedagogy for each student and allow them to choose how to show what they know. These include culminating projects and depictions that were developed by students to demonstrate the learning that they had done in units focused on historical and scientific "Main Lesson" topics. Choice is key to learning that is retained and can be independently applied (Yamzon, 1999). An alumnus of this school told me, "I felt like the education I was getting was super hands-on, You as a child have so much creative freedom, not only in actual artistic creativity, but creative in what you are interested in studying, projects that you do."

TPS have created environments where every student has the right to a standardized education (Gao, 2014). Small independent progressive schools do their work so every child has

the right to an individualized education. (Takaya, 2018) The school in this study has chosen to interpret the concept of “differentiated instruction” in a distinct way.

“Different people need to know different things”

When established standards are used to inform and not confine learning, and standardized testing is no longer the determinant of value, then an educational program can be truly individualized within a general curriculum. The founder told me, “Your teaching is always in every group supposed to be very differentiated, very individualized, to high standards. The brightest kids shouldn't be doing things that the other kids are doing, not necessarily. Everyone should be given a task that challenges them to their ability.” Having observed many times at the school in this study, on several occasions I have seen students in the same learning group, working on different projects connected to the same curriculum topic. Their demonstration of what they will eventually learn may also be quite different one from another. Depending on their age and interests, Peachtown students frequently have the opportunity to discuss with their teachers how they will show what they have learned. As is described in my findings for this study, these representations may be textual or graphical and on more than once occasion included students instructing their learning groups, including the teachers.

I think it is important, at a time when issues of diversity and equity are a concern, to recognize that there are schools who are treating students’ individuality as being so important that they allow them significant choice in their learning path and assessment. For these schools, success is measured in a far different way than in TPS. This study was designed to show how one independent school provides an environment for learning without standardization or testing.

Definitions of Success

This study is important for establishing that there continue to be schools that have not changed their instruction and environment to accommodate the contemporary focus on standardized assessments. I am doing this work to document what is being done at such progressive schools who measure their success in different ways. As child-centered settings, success in these independent progressive environments can be individualized towards each student, their interests and needs (Chandler, 2015). The school in this study claims to have a different pedagogy for each child, with no single standardized instrument that determines value. "Our mission is to teach every kid where they're at and give them a feeling of excitement about what it means to learn. I love that my own kids are here with the freedom from testing, the freedom from the pressures of that system, which I don't think is healthy or productive," a teacher there told me. Peachtown students do not take standardized tests of any kind and the teachers there do not devote time to preparing their students for such exams. The school's Mission Statement points to their emphasis on each child developing an individualized knowledge. This allows the teachers there to instruct without a need to focus on test preparation. The latitude that they allow their students in constructing projects of their choosing would be difficult in a more standardized environment.

In this section I have discussed the daily practices of the school and their use of mixed-age learning, considerations of time, space, and choice, differentiation, along with a view of distinctive and notable conception of school success. It has been noted that small schools like this have been frequently founded by a female with a strong sense of mission that profoundly affects the work that is done there (Semel & Sadovnik, 2008; Stern, 2005). In the case of the

school in this study, the founder began this setting for her own children, developed an innovative curricular plan that has been used for two decades, and is vigilant to ensure that the environment she created is perpetuated each day. Her story, key to understanding the school, is discussed in the next section.

The Founder

For schools operating outside of the TPS system, organizing settings for children to learn together, the resources and spaces needed may be quite limited. The nineteenth century saw many progressive schools founded and operated under very simple circumstances (Miller, 1997). The "Free Schools" of the 1960s and 1970s frequently used rented spaces, employing non-certified teachers, where, "the curriculum is real life." (Graubard, 1974) The story of independent small schools is frequently a story of a small number of people scrambling for resources and operating on a financial shoestring (McLeod, 2014; Morrison, 2007, Burton, Collaros ,& Eirich, 2013).

The school being studied here opened in 1990 after its founder and current director was dissatisfied with the educational options for her soon-to-be-school-aged daughter. The personal aspect of her founding of the school was similar to that of Sheila Sadler and her Village Community School. (Stern, 2005) For its first two years, the school operated out of a Masonic lodge in the town, beginning with only nine students and supplies contributed mostly by friends of the school. She began to put together a rotating curricular plan that all students engage in simultaneously, whose structure is more similar to an

undergraduate's four-year cycle of courses than the instruction focused on assessment seen in public schools. She says, "What we do would have been traditional 100 years ago. We are rooted in traditional education, the Socratic method, Aristotle . . . that's what we do." I see these founders of small independent schools connecting to an entrepreneurial sense of having a vision, learning as they go along, and somehow surviving in a landscape that includes corporate and well-financed institutions.

There has been relatively little organized resistance among professional educators to the implementation of learning education and assessments. I believe it is necessary to document those places that refuse to equate student growth with achievement scores. This study is important because it demonstrates how a single individual's vision and initiative can create a school that has educated children, improved lives, and stood against the narrowing of instruction in the current era. It is all the more remarkable that they do so under the pressure of continual financial uncertainty, which will be considered in the next section.

Financial Strain

In presenting the circumstances of a small independent school, it is necessary to touch on their financial situation. Unlike TPS which receive ever-increasing amounts of tax dollars, as private schools, settings like the one studied here are chiefly dependent on private giving. A small percentage of these funds may come through charitable contributions, but the vast majority of the money that keeps these schools open is from

tuition dollars. In a school with less than 50 students, that means that one or two families withdrawing their students can have a significant financial effect. Additionally, the resources that a school like this has are limited by their tight financial margins. The tuition here (about $6200) is less than a family in the same area would pay for daycare. In recent years, less than half the students have been paying the full tuition, with a large number receiving scholarship assistance. The founder once indicated that “tens of thousands of dollars” of unpaid tuition bills have had to be written off. Circumstances surrounding a small school like this are constantly changing, but the financial uncertainty is always there. “Money has always been my biggest worry. There’s time I’ve struggled to make payroll. We’re all on a shoestring here. It’s my biggest worry going forward,” the founder told me.

These financial constraints also affect the teachers. Many certified teachers do not apply for positions at these settings, since the compensation available is much less than at TPS. The average teacher salary here is significantly lower than that at TPS and health benefits are not offered. One of my interests in doing this study was to see who would be drawn to work in this environment, where there is limited pay, financial uncertainty, and a lack of the job security that frequently accompanies teaching positions. I investigated how these boundaries affected the teachers’ instruction, how the school operates, what families would choose to send their children here, and how do all of these relationships come together in a way that differs from that found in TPS. In this section I have briefly examined the founder of this school, her motivations of starting and continuing to lead it, and the financial uncertainty in which such settings operate. In the next section, I will

more fully consider my research design, including the setting, participants, and methods of data collection I am using.

Research Design

I have gathered information related to my research question, “What are the philosophies and practices of an independent progressive school in the Age of Accountability?”, in three different ways. I made 13 separate visits to the school between March 2019 and March 2020 to observe the work of each of the teachers there. I also conducted multiple interviews with each of the teachers, discussing their instructional practices and the philosophical beliefs that they bring to their instruction. I also interviewed parents, alumni, and former teachers face-to-face and on the phone. Finally, I documented artifacts present at the school that illustrate the ways in which their practices reflect their guiding philosophies. These are all important parts of the picture of this school that I have woven for the findings section. I thought that the best way to depict what it is like there was to intersperse vignettes of my observations with the words of the school community illustrating what is being described. Chief among these was students’ daily work and projects. I chose this combination of methods to effectively discover and portray the most important aspects of how what is being done there demonstrates the distinctiveness of this environment.

Fink (2013) has identified “significant learning experiences” that successful teachers provide for their students. If, “Real science is not about certainty but about uncertainty and we need flexible research designs that account for the variety and changeability of the hierarchically embedded contexts of social life,” (Erickson and Gutierrez ,2002, pp. 22-23), then we need to

broaden our perspective and be attuned to, “emerging hypotheses that might dramatically transform our thinking.” (Pressley, 2004, p. 296) Through the use of field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos (Creswell, 2003) I have documented the work of an independent progressive schools in my qualitative study. In the following sections I will describe each of these three methods and their appropriateness for this study.

Data Collection

Traditionally, qualitative research has centered around three basic methodologies: field observations, interviews, and examination of artifacts (Merriam, 2002, Creswell, 2007). “Qualitative research studies primarily have involved data that naturally occur from four sources: talk, observations, images, and documents.” (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). I will be using each of these in my work, but in discerning the practices that define this learning setting, I will be most reliant on participant observation. (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2015)

Participant observation

Participant observation is a key method of data collection in qualitative research. (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). A researcher, relying on this method, “"participates in the daily life of the people under study, observing things that happen, listening to what is said, and questioning people, over some length of time." (Becker & Geer, cited in Baker, 2006, p. 173) "The primary instrument for data collection and analysis is the researcher (who)... possesses several well know characteristics such as responsiveness, adaptability, and reflexivity that can lead to understanding behavior as it occurs in its natural settings." (Hammersley, 2006, p. 11) At

the same time, such a researcher needs to carefully balance participation in the setting being studied along with the appropriate professional distance that allows for an accurate documentation of events (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Fetterman, 1998). Becker (2006) acknowledged the need for a researcher to remain “detached enough” to analyze what they see.

Gold (1958) described the four different roles that a participant observer can take. I will use his definitions to detail the position that I will be taking in this study. The “complete participant” is in the most involved position, listening and observing without having his actual identity revealed those he is observing. There are severe limitations to the information that can be gathered in this manner (Baker, 2006). ”The complete participant simply cannot ‘be himself"; to do so would almost invariably preclude successful pretense. At the very least, attempting to ‘be himself’-that is, to achieve self-realization in pretended roles-would arouse suspicion of the kind that would lead others to remain aloof in interacting with him.” (Gold, 1958, p. 219) My presence at the school has been explained to the students there, they are used to my being there as an identified observer, having visited on many occasions. I have spoken with students, teachers, and parents. I am not working as a “complete participant.”

The “observer- as-participant” has had their role explained, but makes brief visits that allows them to maintain their professional distance and avoid emotional attachment to those he is observing. Such distance increases the likelihood of objectivity, but perhaps at the cost of insight (Adler & Adler, 1994). “An observer- as-participant is exposed to many inadequately understood universes of discourses that he cannot take time to master." (Gold, 1958, pp. 221-222) Lacking a personal connection and a level of trust with those being observed, the researcher may be limited in the depth of his understanding (Bositis, 1998). Communicating on an informal level can

increase the richness of data gathered in observations (Oyen, 1972). “Because the observer-as-participant's contact with an informant is so brief, and perhaps superficial, he is more likely than the other two to misunderstand the informant, and to be misunderstood by him. “(Gold, 1958, p.221) Having had numerous informal conversations with the members of this school community in both observations and interviews, having spent time with community members in non-academic situations, I do not see my work there as that of an “observer-as-participant.”

In the “participant-as-observer” role, “both field worker and informant are aware that theirs is a field relationship. During early stages of his stay in the community, informants may be somewhat uneasy about him in both formal and informal situations, but their uneasiness is likely to disappear when they learn to trust him and he them.” (Gold, 1958, p. 220) With this status, the researcher has established relationships within the subject of his work, allowing him to gain insights and perspectives that would not have been possible in the pretense-laden “complete participant” role or within Gold’s fourth category, “complete observer,” where, “The complete observer role entirely removes a field worker from social interaction with informants… a complete observer may feel comfortably detached, for he takes no self-risks, participates not one whit.” (p.221) It is in this role of “participant-as-observer” where I believe I made my field observations. I was neither completely absorbed into the world of the school, relying on its success, or a totally-withdrawn researcher unemotionally and antiseptically recording what goes on.

In this study I observed the school as a whole and each of the individual learning groups. I watched each teacher work as an individual and in collaboration. My observations included

non-academic times, such as meals, entire school gatherings, and extra-curricular activities. I made 13 visits to the school to observe and speak with members of the community. The students there are divided into two different learning groups, approximately based on their age. I observed the entirety of the instruction for each group (3-3 ½ hours from the beginning of the day to lunchtime) on six different occasions each. My ease of access at this setting provided me with opportunities to move throughout the school from group to group.

Interviews

My interviews were semi-structured, centered around what I saw during my observations of the individual teachers and their students. I interviewed each of the teachers about the pedagogy that they bring to their work at the schools and the practices that they use to enact these ideas. I was especially interested in the professional experiences that helped influence their teaching and how they conceptualize their students as learners. The direction that these interviews took was in large part guided by the answers that they gave to my initial questions. The questions that I used for these initial interviews are contained in Appendix A. In doing so, I believe I left adequate space for divergent ideas apart from my set questions and room for the teachers to have latitude in describing their particular individual practices. I feel that this structure allowed adequate space for the unexpected. Creswell (2009) has noted that excerpts from interviews should provide examples of their experience with the topic that result in "rich, thick descriptions" of the findings. All of my interviews were recorded, transcribed, and used to identifying patterns and themes from the responses. It has been noted that there is a documented difference between what teachers profess to do in their work and their classroom practices,

(Pajares, 1992) and one of my interests was in seeing how well the teachers' individual teaching methods resembled reach other and the school's stated purposes as articulated in their formal documents. I was looking to see how each teacher's answers fit within Kohn's progressive school values.

I began the 2019-20 Peachtown schoolyear by attended the teacher's meeting in June 2019 held to organize their work for the coming year. Once the year formally began, I interviewed each of the school's four full-time teachers separately, asking them about their practices, underlying philosophies, and how they interpret the school's mission in their own particular methods. After doing my 12 observations, I returned to the school and interviewed each teacher again. Interestingly, this last set of interviews was on March 12th, the last school day at Peachtown, before they were forced to close because of concerns about the Coronavirus. On that day I used a separate interview protocol (Appendix B), intentionally designed to reflect Kohn's values in discussing what I saw during my time with their group. I also did multiple interviews with the school's founder inquiring about the school's history, development, philosophy, and practices. I also interviewed parents of students who currently attend there and alumni

"This method assumes that an individual's attitudes and beliefs do not form in a vacuum: People often need to listen to others' opinions and understandings in order to form their own." (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, pp. 114-115) As I have described in the Positionality section,

while I am an admirer of progressive schools, I have never been a progressive school teacher. As a public school teacher, my perceptions can never duplicate those of someone inside the progressive education world.

Artifacts

Artifacts can play a key role in providing a more objectified and distanced form of data, separate from the subject's words or actions. Jong and Hodges (2015), noted that conceptions are "measurable through a combination of surveys, interviews, artifacts, and observations." (p. 408) "They (artifacts) enrich what you see and hear by supporting, expanding, and challenging your portrayals and perceptions. Your understanding of the phenomenon in question grows as you make use of the documents and artifacts that are a part of people's lives." (Glesne, 2011, p. 89) Teachers and the environments in which they work provide a unique opportunity for artifact examination as part of the data collection and analysis process. Unlike many professionals, teachers play a key role in constructing the environment in which they work with their students. Generally, a teacher is able to decide how their room will be physically structured, what will be on display and what learning tools will be available to work with each day in these settings. Additionally, teachers are constantly deciding whether to display their students' work and how their class's efforts will be represented. Previous studies have indicated the relevance of how a teacher constructs the physical arrangement of their room (Ashbridge, & Josephidou, 2018).

I also used the school's formal documents, including the Mission Statement and a description of the leadership structure, written for an eventual transition in leadership from the original founder. I had access to the school's digital presence, including its Facebook

and Twitter accounts. Finally, the school itself served as an artifact that provides information about the education that occurs there. Built to serve as a home, the physical environment is intentionally non-institutional, warm, and informal --- terms that could also be used to describe the manner of learning conducted there. Teaching and responses to it are influenced by environments (Moos, 1979) and the similarity between what the school's goals are and the physical surroundings that support it are documented here., "The setting tells the story," one of the teachers said to me.

The Setting and the Mission

To enter the school is to feel like you are slipping through the backdoor into someone's house. The "main entrance" leads into the kitchen where the staff and students hang their coats on hooks and leave their lunches on the kitchen counter. Walking into what would have been the living room, you are in the space used in the morning to instruct the youngest students and later in the day for lunch for the entire school. On the far wall are bookcases above the rug that is used each morning to begin the day with a whole school gathering. Walking in the opposite direction down the main hallway of the house off to the left are what could have been a den and a bedroom that are now used to educate the older students.

The school's mission statement declares that, "its mission is to educate elementary-age children in the arts and sciences through structured experiential, differentiated, cooperative and interdisciplinary learning techniques." (School Mission Statement, 1995, p. 1) It promises a supportive, nurturing environment to help each child reach their own potential, promoting, "learning in-depth, self-reliance, creativity, intrinsic motivation, and civic and individual

responsibility." (p. 1) In their Philosophy of Education section, a key segment states some important values of this school: "No student fails to be challenged and no student is left out. The multi-age and developmental approach is key, as is the small classroom with an individualized approach."(p. 2) Their pedagogy clearly says, "Education is not about conformity. Each child should leave [the school] with their own unique body of knowledge that is shaped by their interest and research."(p. 1) The importance that they place in balancing individual needs and the health of the community is also clearly articulated here: "Individual goals for students must be balanced with the need for group dynamic and harmony…Students should be allowed the freedom to move and express themselves and their differences to the extent that they do not impinge on the ability of others to do so." (p. 2)

The school is overseen by a board of trustees who meet throughout the calendar year. The day-to-day operations of the school come under the authority of a director. The original director of the school founded Peachtown Elementary School 28 years ago. In a document prepared in 2005, she explained, "The operation of the school works within two different, and often overlapping, modes…The first more traditional hierarchical mode is reserved for primarily administrative functions…The second mode of operation is far more egalitarian in structure and is employed for all aspects of academic planning and performance in the classroom." (School's Description of Leadership, 2005) The director makes all staffing decisions, creates the budget, and is primarily responsible for obtaining the financial resources needed to fund the school. The school employs four teachers, whose duties are differentiated by the age of the students they teach. The school also employs part-time teachers to instruct Math (for the oldest cohort), Foreign Language, Art, and Music. The school day runs from about 8:30 until 4:30, with the

formal academic day going from 9AM-4PM. The school operates during the same weeks as the district it is located in, although it is open Monday through Thursday.

It is important to note two physical aspects of this setting that place it in contrast with contemporary TPS. First, while the school has WiFi, there is little technology used here. The age of the building precludes some of the necessary infrastructure that would be required for Smart Boards or widespread use of individual devices by students. There is some use of tablets by the older students, but this school is additionally alternative in its limited reliance on learning through the viewing of digital screens. Secondly, although related, there is a widespread use of dated learning resources in this school. Chalkboards, pencils, worksheets, and lessons drawn from decades-old texts are frequently used. Especially among the younger children, much of the source material used for research and discussion is from resources that many in TPS might see as outdated. This is a school that operates as progressive, yet educates its students with materials that many public schools would have stopped relying on many years ago.

Set in a modestly-sized house, there are limitations on how many students could be educated here. Over the past decade, the school's population has generally been between 22 and 28 students. Located in a small town adjacent to one of The Finger Lakes, the majority of its students come from rural locations, a smaller number live in a small nearby city, with a growing number coming from a suburban area. The percentage of minority students slightly exceeds that of the district in which the school is located. The school identifies itself as "K-8" although there are no grade levels used to identify students, who are divided into two main learning groups, based mostly on their age. There is some fluidity to these groups, depending on the population of the school from year to year. In the current year, the groups roughly correspond to K-2, 3rd

Grade, and 4-8, each of which meets in a separate section of the house. No grades or tests are given to these students; their progress is reported to students in two narrative-style report cards, and at parent-teacher conferences. Upon leaving the school, students enter one of the nearby public or private middle or high schools. The most common point for a child to leave the school is after the equivalent of their 6th Grade year.

Peachtown is intentionally non-programmatic and somewhat fluid, its form for each year influenced by the adults and children at the school. In attempting to discern, “What are the philosophical principles and instructional practices of a school operating as an alternative to Traditional Public Schools in the Age of Accountability?” I chose to research this school for the distinct pedagogy, curricular design, and approach to differentiation used there. It is my contention that it is important to document the small independent progressive school, resilient and innovative, to more fully understand today’s educational landscape.

I conducted a pilot study at this school, initially as part of my research on the characteristics of the contemporary progressive school. For that work I primarily interviewed the founder and teachers about what they did there and also did some participant observation. This work was eventually published as, “The Culture of the Independent Progressive School,” (Kloss, 2018a) in the International Journal of Progressive Education. The second facet of that pilot work concerned the effect that attendance at this school had on its alumni. I interviewed former students, asking them the advantages and disadvantages of having attended there. This work, “The Experiences of Progressive School students was published in The Journal of Unschooling & Alternative Learning.(Kloss, 2018c)

For this study I have detailed what makes an environment like this different from the rest of the contemporary educational landscape. Previously, I focused primarily on the words of teachers and students to explain progressive settings. For this work I was more interested in the practices, what is it that is done there, that makes this distinct, not only from TPS, but from other progressive settings. I spent considerable time at the school with each teacher and their students, watching and documenting what they did during the school day. As a 32-year TPS teacher I believe that I bring an informed perspective to classroom practice, one that has enabled me to discern what is done differently at this school. I used interviews for this work, but primarily to inform what I observed being done in the school that is distinct and distinguishing.

Participants

The primary participants for this work were the teachers and founder of the school. The philosophy of the school has been set out in its mission statement, but my interest is in the way that these beliefs are lived out each day. I interviewed each of these adults to construct a common set of beliefs that they share that serves as the school's enacted philosophy. However, I am much more interested in the practices that each of them used to make these concepts come alive with their students. I want to build on Read (2014)'s *Remember Childhood: Stories From a Progressive School,* where she asked, "What is progressive education---what does it look like---and why does it matter today?" (p. 4) The only way for me to do this was to spend considerable time at the school, observing what the teachers there do and how their practices contrast with those of TPS teachers. Again, I am expanding on Read's work and her assertion that, "I believe that we can learn something important from teachers at a self-identified progressive school: how they confront some of the fundamental questions of education." (p. 4-5). Having conducted

research there for a full calendar year I believe I have gathered sufficient data to address this question.

One of the four teachers is a member of a racial minority group (Hispanic). Three of them have worked as certified public school teachers, prior to teaching here. Two of them have worked in more programmatic progressive environments (Montessori, Waldorf). A table has been included at the conclusion of this study with student and staff demographic information.

Central to all of this are the practices and words of the school's outgoing founder. She has been at the school since its inception in 1990, always teaching and serving as the director for the past two decades. She created the school's guiding curriculum document and all of the teachers there have pointed to her ideas as creating what is unique distinctive about this school. And she can tell when her vision is being practiced there: “It's a model based on, I don't know what, I know how it looks and feels when I'm walking around the school and I know when it's not right.” It is my goal with this work to identify and explain what “it” is and what the persistence of a school like this one tells us about the educational landscape today.

Data Analyzed

I began my analysis of the data that I gathered with a number of presuppositions. I have been researching in progressive schools since October 2015 and published three articles on schools similar to the one in this study. Having previously coded data from these projects, I come to the analysis portion of this study with knowledge of codes that I have previously employed. These include: Autonomy, Freedom. Informality, Heterarchy, Choice/Time/Space, Teachers and Students as Co-Learners, and Projects as Assessments. While I cannot forget that knowledge,

analysis of this project was conducted in such a way to make it independent of my previous work.

As I have stated previously in this chapter, the framework that I am using is Kohn's eight values of progressive schools (2008). I examined the data that I gathered through these principles, seeing how what is said and done at this school aligns with Kohn's assertions. His original work that outlined these values includes an explication of each one that provides details that characterize each principle and I have used these "definitions" to see how what goes on at this school is consistent with what Kohn asserts. I was looking for ideas and practices here that align with Kohn's statement in the same article that, "what distinguishes progressive education is that students must construct their own understanding of ideas." (p. 3) Through coding and generation of themes I considered how much of this "student idea construction" is a part of the education there.

Given that my Conceptual Framework was Kohn's 2008 writing identifying the eight characteristics of a contemporary progressive education, that set of concepts was key to the initial analysis that I did. As I reviewed fieldnotes and interview transcripts, I organized what I had experienced into each of these categories, while also creating separate categories for information---which was abundant---that did not fall into these areas. I saw much at Peachtown that, while congruent with Kohn's structure, needed to be identified in a different way, rather than simply be seen as an affirmation or contradiction of his assertions. As I worked through my data, I coded it not only for Kohn's categories, but also for other aspects of the Peachtown education. This resulted in my identifying several themes that I then was able to coalesce into the

three categories that became my data chapters. The relationship between my data and Kohn's structure is considered in the Discussion chapter.

My analysis for this project included examining and organizing my data, coding, and searching for patterns in my categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). After having had my interviews transcribed, I categorized the responses I received by carefully coding them (Glaser & Straus, 1967). I did the same with my fieldnotes and memos, using these memos considerably as a way of conducting analysis as my observations and interviews developed, along with writing to connect the research to larger categories as I saw them begin to emerge (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) . Each was coded for summary descriptions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in a descriptive stage of coding (Saldana, 2009) The codes that I used were then merged with coding that I did for the artifacts to create a comprehensive document identifying the many aspects of the information that I gathered for the three methods that I used.

I then created a visual representation to better conceptualize what I learned during my research at this school and the frequency with which certain methods and philosophies were articulated or practiced. I used this chart to create the major categories which I found within my data to form my data chapters, always being attentive to both the unique voices and relationships that I found at this school and the "aesthetic whole" of this unique learning setting (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). "The ultimate goal is to preserve an idiosyncratic account of experience or seek shared cultural narratives or powerful metaphors and language that define experience(literary)." (Chadwick, 2017, p. 14).

The account that I ultimately produced was enabled by the significant access that the Peachtown leadership and staff allowed me at nearly all points of my research there. I had nearly unfettered ability to move and observe all members of the community throughout the day in addition to being present at school-related meetings and activities outside of the facility itself. This resulted in an accumulation of data and experiences that provided me a significant amount of material from which to draw to assemble my themes. Initially, this meant that I identified a large number of themes, many related to my perspective as a classroom teacher, all of which were relevant to what I had seen at Peachtown, especially in the light of my own professional work. However, my commitment to have this work best reflect what goes on at Peachtown among members of the community, rather than serve as a comparison to TPS practices, caused me to reconsider my process in identifying the most significant themes of the work.

I was guided in this work both by Kohn's set of progressive school descriptors and a commitment to providing the "aesthetic whole" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997) of what goes on at Peachtown. While my use of autoethnography has been acknowledged in this section, I believed it to be paramount that in organizing what I learned there to always be committed to presenting what Peachtown is, on its own, as a unique setting, not in comparison to the current educational landscape or my experience. This was a thought that I returned to again and again and while I felt that examples related to Assessment, Management, and Concepts of Student were important to what I saw there, ultimately they and others were found to be less significant than my final themes of Community, Learning, and Time. Many of the initial ideas that I identified have been subsumed into three larger concepts.

Limitations

This is a study of a single independent, progressive school in rural Upstate New York. In many ways it is significantly different from most schools today. With only 25 students, four teachers, and located in a non-institutional setting, giving no tests, with no grade levels and very little homework, in many ways it stands starkly outside the current schooling paradigm, Much that goes on there is dramatically different from most children's schooling experiences today.

Progressive education has been described as, "an umbrella term for a number of competing and co-existing social language discourses." (Kliebard, 1995). What I am presenting here is a single example of what progressive education looks like today. It is an attempt to contribute to a discussion, not present a definition for others to live up to. What goes on at this school may not be possible or even desirable in other settings.

Finally, as a researcher I am limited by the circumstances of my life. I have conducted this research while also simultaneously working as a full-time public-school teacher. As much as I would have liked to have my full-time attention focused on this learning community, I found it necessary to balance this research with other career responsibilities. Schools like this deserve to have a full-time "complete-participant" researcher to best depict their story as a true alternative to the "education business." I am sure that there are elements to what they do that I missed by being able to only make periodic visits.

In the chapters that follow, I consider what I see as the three most essential aspects of the Peachtown education: Time, Learning in a Progressive Settings, and Community. Kohn's set of characteristics was very useful to me as a starting point, but the considerable time I was able to

spend at Peachtown revealed these three areas as what is most distinctive about what they do there. A hope that I have for this study is that it shows, in an age of conformity, that there are alternative forms of intentional learning communities that continue to thrive. I have used a narrative approach to depict what is most noteworthy about Peachtown in a way that allows me to integrate observations, interviews, and my sense of this school as a longtime classroom teacher. This is done through the use of an autoethnographic perspective to each of the sections, not only in my descriptions of Peachtown, but also through the inclusion of my reflecting on each topic as it relates to my teaching experience. My data chapters are organized so that I can use these narrative and autoethnographic tools to effectively tell both the story of Peachtown and myself as relevant voices in today’s educational landscape.

Chapter 4

PROLOGUE

"The one thing that I think makes it so different is love. And I feel that the teachers and the leadership truly love that place. That's what comes through. I love Peachtown, I love my students, I love the people I work with, I love everything that Peachtown stands for and the opportunities it gives to kids. You can't quantify and or qualify love. So how do you write a study about that?"

Peachtown teacher

The School in a Home

Peachtown Elementary School is a comfortable place. It is located in a small rural town in the Finger Lakes region of Upstate New York. It doesn't take long to drive through the town, but as you leave, there is a small college on a hill to the left. It would be easy to miss the main entrance, but if you're observant enough to make the turn as you begin to head up the hill, in the foreground of a typical small college landscape, you see a small, dated one-floor house. Partially brick, as you head up the hill you can see a back porch filled with stacks of a sundry outdoor items. Every time I have driven past the house, the same piles appear to be there, unmoved. After a single turn, you see the school on the left, and start to wonder where it's ok to park. Being on a college campus, you're sure there's some sort of permit system and don't want to be ticketed, so parking on the road behind the school doesn't seem like a great idea. Directly behind there is a small semi-circle with a tree on a grassy section in its center. There is no posted sign about parking, no parking spaces marked; in fact, there is no sign on the building that identifies this as a school or anything else. It looks like a home that perhaps the college was built around. So you

park on the side of the circle, kind of on the grass, and follow the stone steps laid into the lawn to the back door. If there is a main entrance to Peachtown this is it: a screen door on the back of an aging ranch home that seems to be permanently open. There is no sense that you are about to enter a school, one that has been operating for nearly 30 years, successfully sending students on to other schools and ultimately colleges. There are no institutional clues to evoke "school images" as you open the backdoor/main entrance. Stepping inside, you find yourself standing in what appears to be a 1950s kitchen, with a bathroom to one side and a cluttered kitchen space that includes hooks for all of the students' coats and room for their boots and shoes. No one at Peachtown wears shoes inside the school; adults and children all come prepared with slippers.

On the kitchen counter is a stand with metal cups, each with a student's name written on it with a black marker. A perpendicular counter is filled with the students' lunches, all brought from home; while you are standing in a "kitchen," no lunches are prepared here. Leaving the kitchen, you are entering what probably was at one time the "living room" area, with a sitting room to the left, and the largest single room in the house open in front of you. While you can now see that you are in a dedicated learning setting by the posters, collections of books, and student projects on the wall, it looks like a residence where a couple has decided to homeschool their children and are turning their living room into what they think it should look like if their kids are going to learn there. I have tried to describe this school to other educators and tell them that while it is not a "homeschool," it is, "a school in a home." The current director, Alyssa, once told me, "The place tells the story."

There are no desks for students in this building---so you won't find any kids sitting there waiting for the day to begin or at their lockers putting their things away---this is not a place that

will affirm the imagery you have for “school”. Instead it is a setting, beginning with its appearance and continuing with its philosophy and practices, that is rather antithetical to what you would expect from a school. Students at Peachtown begin their day by mingling, dawdling, playing, reading, talking to each other, talking to the adults there; it is all quite undirected, and just seems quite natural for a small group of children who are beginning their day together. To understand what is distinctive about this place, it is useful to be there before the formal day begins. Having hung up their coats and set their lunches on the counter, the children spread out through the small home in small groups. I have seen this scene unfold at least ten times and have been struck by at least three consistent facts about this child-led landing time. First, I have never seen any children on their own; without direction by adults, they organize themselves into small groups by what they feel like doing with this time. This often includes a group settled on the window seat looking out the side of the house just talking. But no one is alone. Secondly, while whatever the children do is not being immediately supervised, you don’t hear raised voices, things being damaged, or any other indications that adults need to intervene. The teachers and director are nearby, but rarely need to jump in to correct a situation. Finally, this time of the day, with people just getting used to being with each other for another day, seems to have an effect on what is to follows. It helps to establish an atmosphere of a day that is unfolding, rather than a schedule being followed. For the children coming here, not rushing is key to the way that the learning is approached. There isn’t any need to rush; no bells indicating when you have to move elsewhere, no PA system sending out announcements that need to be attended to, no worries about being late in a learning setting where the entire community gathers just before 9:00 to talk

about whatever is important that morning. The adults gather the children together just before then and eventually, slowly, they all move to the old rug adjacent to that window seat. This sense that there is no good reason to be in a hurry pervades the learning that starts with this Morning Meeting.

Mary Ann, who teaches the older students at the school said, “Morning Meeting is the center of what goes on here. If you think about today and the struggles we’re having, what is missing is a sense of community. When I see a multi-age group, as young as 4, learning together and helping each other, what I’ve seen is the way the youngest children ask questions, they’re really thinking through, using critical thinking, in multi-age groups.” Peachtown’s non-institutional status allows it the luxury of conceiving time in a different manner than other contemporary learning settings. It has established practices that contribute to a relaxed learning environment, with less concern for how long it takes to complete a task. Among them is a self-created schoolwide curriculum that alternates Historical and Scientific topics; there are no texts or curriculum packages used here---the school’s learning schedule is of their own making. There are no tests at the conclusion of their learning units, so there is no rush to be done with a course of study to meet assessment requirements. Peachtown considers the individuality of each of their students to be of primary importance and allows its teachers to bring them along at a pace that is appropriate, one that may not duplicate the work of another child in their learning group. There is no pressure to meet benchmarks or arbitrary levels of achievement, for there are no grade levels. The school uses multi-age learning groups so it is common for there to be a variety of ability levels within the set of children that learns together each day, so there is no expectation of mastery before the group can move on.

There is an intentional informality between adults and children here and that is observable in the way that they interact, with a great deal of personal sharing by the teachers as they speak with the students. Again and again, I saw the adults at this school share stories of their own lives and engage in conversations with their students that were not designed for some instructional goal, but were simply examples of people communicating with each other. This is a demonstration of the environment present at this school, where children are able to start conversations that adults will frequently join in on and use to deepen their connection to their students and contribute to an atmosphere lacking in pressure to hurriedly address a task.

This school instructs as if even the youngest children can attend to learning for extended periods of time. The director told me," Children of all ages are intrigued by complex concepts." By employing a schoolwide curriculum, the leadership demonstrates this belief that guides their students' work there. Their relaxed, unrushed atmosphere allows for the teachers of the youngest students to use all the time that is necessary to advance their learning on these topics. In this particular lesson---and this was repeated in other work that I saw there---students as young as 5 years old were able to engage on a single topic for up to 90 minutes. As a teacher there once told me, "We fit the curriculum around the students here."

Peachtown is able to instruct its students relationally, nurturing connections between all members of its community. Here, teachers don't seem to view conversations among children as something to be stifled, but use them as an opportunity to grow closer to their students and incorporate their interests into their learning By using, "a nurturing environment embodied in a non-institutional setting in a group of children that resembles a familial configuration," their

teachers are free to become, “relatable compatriots in learning.” (Mission Statement, 1995, p. 1). This is made possible by their relaxed notion of the relationship between time and learning and the willingness to prioritize the development of personal connections as much as formal instructional time.

Interestingly, this is able to be accomplished while maintaining high academic standards and exposing even the youngest children to challenging historical and scientific concepts. Peachtown does not allow their concern for each child as an individual to decrease what is expected of them as a learner. The self-created Schoolwide Curriculum contains topics that many of these children would not have heard about at their age in more conventional learning settings. The school’s founder, Barbara, once told me, “I want five and six year olds to learn real history. The idea of creating a kindergarten-appropriate curriculum is so stultifying, it’s so dumb. When you raise your children and they ask questions and you answer them in full, intelligent sentences, they will have better vocabulary and be articulate. That’s what I mean by setting the standard high.” This is done in an environment with no written tests, no grades, no written homework, and significant student input on the course of their learning. “If a kid is excited, that’s a success. Excited about what they’ve mastered, excited to share it with someone else,” Alyssa said.

Autoethnography: Using My Teaching Life to Understand Peachtown

I have been a public school teacher for nearly 33 years. During that time, I often have felt that I had the best job possible. For 14 years I moved back and forth between 4th, 5th, and 6th grades and for the last 19 years I have taught First Grade. The experiences I have had with students and their families have been overwhelmingly positive and have gifted me with

rewarding memories I will hold on to forever. I have worked with so many wonderfully talented and hard-working teachers who have changed the lives of their students. I have come to believe that teachers come to work every day to do good in the world. I would like to think that I could be included in that group.

Entering the profession in 1988, my entire career has taken place during the Age of Accountability. Teaching has changed in an unbelievable number of ways since I began. Many of those involve specific traumatic events or trends: Columbine, 9/11, the bomb threats of the 1990s, active shooter drills, the current Coronavirus school closings. But as far as the day-to-day realities of working in a classroom, nothing has affected what we do in school more than the changes that have come about in the wake of *A Nation at Risk,* and its call to arms that was codified in *No Child Left Behind.* While schools have frequently been accused of being a "one-size-fits-all" model, as someone who was educated in the 1960s and 70s, the acquiescence to the testing culture and the ways in which that has affected classroom instruction, definitions of student achievement, and conceptions of success for students, teachers and schools, has been both remarkable and discouraging. Perhaps schools have always about conformity, compliance, and control: in this Age of Accountability it is difficult to deny that this now is the case.

As an educator, I have found myself drawn to alternative educational models. While I believe that the existing public education system is filled with well-intentioned people who do great work every day, it would be a mistake to not acknowledge that it is only one model of learning and that that to assume it would be the best situation for all children is unlikely to be true. For the past three-plus decades, I have lived a type of double life. I have had a successful career as a public school teacher, where I not only instructed, but also served as a subject area

chair, union representative, on curriculum committees, and did work with the State Department of Education on the development and refinement of a state test. But I also have homeschooled my three children, devoted considerable time in assisting other homeschooling families, published articles critical of mandatory testing, and observed in private school environments. During my PhD work I have studied “unschooling” and done considerable research and investigation into progressive schools, publishing three articles on the work done there.

While I am sympathetic to all of these educational alternatives, I am not pointing to one as “the model” that I would endorse. To do that would be to repeat public education’s error in promoting the idea that what is done within their institution is the one path to follow and to operate outside of its requirements and prescriptions is ultimately harmful to children. My interest is to demonstrate what these educational alternatives consist of, what makes them distinct from Traditional Public Schools (TPS), and what they may be doing that institutional schools could consider in planning their path forward. Currently, the conversation between these learning settings flows one way, with TPS dictating what these other environments need to do and paying inadequate attention to the practices of these alternatives that might be beneficial to TPS students. This attitude is so pervasive that for many, traditional schooling is synonymous with learning. My intention is that this study play a part, allowing educators, no matter where they are working with students, to see an alternate articulation of the school experience, one that is centered around students, complex academic concepts, and the strength of a community based on learning and heterarchy.

While I understand that qualitative research and reporting can include several forms, I agree that, “What happens inside classrooms remains largely beneath the notice of education

policymakers." (Pondiscio, 2019, p. 9-10) As someone who has been responsible for the planning and delivery of instruction to groups of children for many years, I am drawn to what goes on between teachers and students in learning settings. As this has been my life for decades, I am aware that the relationships and outcomes in a classroom are often a product of the philosophies, practices, and intentions of the school. In depicting what goes on in this particular school. I hope, "to try to open hearts and minds through stories," (Ellis, 2001, p. 374) and provide one teacher's perspective on what I see that makes this particular setting noteworthy and remarkable, elements that are too often ignored in educational design today.

In order to do so, I will be using the tools of narrative ethnography to tell the story of Peachtown Elementary School. For this project I was a participant observer at the school on more than thirteen occasions. I watched all of the learner groups, interviewed every teacher, the director and the founder, ate lunch with the school community, observed them on the playground, was at play rehearsals, attended the teacher planning session for the year, ate snack with the community, talked with the students about their work, watched the founder and director speak at a conference, interviewed parents and alumni, attended Morning Meeting---I saw them in a wide variety of contexts at different points in their day and schoolyear. I was inside this school in so many ways that they got inside me as well. I have spoken about Peachtown to all of my children, my wife, my colleagues at school, and many of my fellow PhD students. I believe that I have witnessed enough to enable me to take an autoethnographic approach to this school. "This research tradition does more than just tell stories. It provides reports that are scholarly and justifiable interpretations . . . that do not consist solely of the researcher's opinions." (Duncan, 2005, p.4) As a form of autoethnography, narrative ethnography will allow me to both tell what

I have seen and heard during this study, while accommodating my need to acknowledge and include my own experiences as a teacher, in providing my view of the place that Peachtown occupies in today's educational landscape.

I have chosen autoethnography because in the observations that I have made and questions I have asked, it is impossible for me to put aside my work as a "teacher," which influences so much that I see in life, especially in schools. Any writings that I do concerning schools then can only hope to be, "highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding." (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21) I believe that this will be the best match for the data I have gathered for this project for, "In the case of a dissertation, it appears that the form can be very fluid and evolving, and include personal stories and excerpts from interviews, possibly accompanied by other more standard components of this type of research presentation. "(Wall, 2006, p. 5) The path that this writing will take is also appropriate for autoethnography in its non-linear nature (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), inclusion of conversation and critique (Burdell & Swadener, 1999), and the balance that I hope to attain between my observations, interactions with the community, and my own place in this process. (Ellis et al., 2011)

Narrative ethnography is appropriate for this work because while I acknowledge my history and role in the creation of my data, the focus of this study is on telling the story of this remarkable school and its people, with an emphasis on the intentionality of their philosophy and practices and how that affects what is done there each day. Narrative ethnography has been described as, "Texts presented in the form of stories that incorporate the ethnographer's experiences into the ethnographic descriptions and analysis of others. Here the emphasis is on

the ethnographic study of others, which is accomplished partly by attending to encounters between the narrator and members of the groups being studied." (Tedlock, 1991) I have taken the time to do this study because I believe there is a paucity of recent scholarship on self-identified progressive education environments and, "narratives can be used to help us understand and make sense of cultural phenomenon and our personal lived experiences." (Boylorn, 2015, p. 14). I am also using this particular form of autoethnography as it allows space not only for what I saw as a participant observer, but accommodates my prioritizing the words of the teachers of Peachtown in telling us about what their work and what this place is (Goodall, 2002). Finally, narrative ethnography allows me to include my own perspectives as a teacher in a much different environment, to speak to what I saw at Peachtown. "It is through narratives - embedded within other narratives - that individuals story their lived experiences and make sense of themselves and their surroundings." (Herrmann, 2011, p. 248)

My Data Chapters: A Personal Story of My Peachtown Experience

In the three chapters that follow I consider what I believe to be three key elements of what goes on at Peachtown: Community, Learning, and Time. I have attempted to weave an account of what I was a part of there, combining what I observed, with the words of the teachers, and my experience of the place and its people. To each of these things I bring both my past experiences as a teacher in a much more conventional environment and my current teaching life, as at the time I am still working as a classroom teacher. Following my description of Peachtown in each of the sections of these chapters, I stop and offer an expression of my teaching life as concerns that particular topic. I could not help but experience Peachtown as a public school

teacher, disappointed by what my profession and schools have become in this “Age of Accountability.”

I think about school all of the time, possibly too much. Not just my own class and students, but schools in general. I see kids walking to school, backpacks over their coats, and I wonder what they will be doing while at school that day. I drive by a school and wonder what it’s like in there and what they do and how does all that compare with what I’ve done in three-plus decades as a teacher. I talk with teachers who’ve retired and moved on to a new chapter in their lives, far from the concerns of the classroom, and ask them how they cannot think about and miss what they did for so many years. They usually just stare at me. Teaching has been my identity and, apart from my family and faith, the biggest piece of my life for a long time. So it is in that spirit, as a an un-reformable classroom teacher that I offer the following study of what I will always see as a very special school.

Chapter 5

TIME

"In this place children can still be children, learn at their own pace, not only what we want them to learn, but they can learn from each other. In Public School, everything is so rushed with a set curriculum. Here we can take our time, kids don't have to feel, "we've got get this done in 10 minutes and we've got to do this and got to do this, we've only got a set time, and we're not doing this tomorrow and we're not moving on. We're at a very reasonable pace here. Kids just don't feel pressure, like there is 'out there.'"

Peachtown teacher

"Freedom to learn at their own pace."- Peachtown

Schooling can be characterized by the way it structures learning through the use of time and content divisions. Curriculum is commonly divided into discrete units that are slotted into defined segments of time through the use of pacing guides. Once teachers and students are "on the clock" in this manner, instruction, learning, and teacher-student engagement cannot help but be narrowed so as to ensure that the learning fits the time allotted. Peachtown Elementary School intentionally refuses to follow such a paradigm, instead choosing to operate with a more fluid sense of time, expanding both the space allowed for learning and altering the dynamic between all members in their learning setting. In doing so, they help to expand the shared, collective knowledge of the community.

Compatriots in Learning

"To think that everybody's learning has to coalesce around these miniscule little pieces of knowledge and then we get set them down and move on to another one is just not right. They're so focused on meeting the state standards and there's such a push to meet the exact standards. To go from that to here. how are you meeting what every kid needs?" Alyssa, the current director of Peachtown told me this one day, discussing how time is considered in a different manner at this school. This section discusses how Peachtown uses a totally different conception of time. Contrary to the description above, Peachtown has no grade levels, no tests, no written homework, no benchmarks to meet, and prides itself on having a more flexible relationship with time in terms of its students' learning. This less rigid concept of how a student's day can be structured is one of six specific elements of time to be discussed in this section. A teacher here told me, "Students can move at their own pace and learn what they're interested in. Students here get to learn a subject until they feel they've reached that competency level. They're given much more freedom to learn at their own pace. It's more of an intrinsic motivation to learn about what you love. We let them delve into subjects deeply."

There are two learning groups at Peachtown. The youngest of them includes pre-K through Second Grade students and is taught by Michelle, a veteran teacher who has worked in several different learning settings, including public schools and Montessori programs. One morning I saw her working with her group as part of the school's Westward Expansion unit. Her group convenes once the Morning Meeting is over, in the same rugged area in the main room. The nine students, ranging from five to eight-year-olds gather in front of her, sitting, kneeling; in varying postures of repose. As she reviews what they learned yesterday, there is frequent

moving, sometimes even crawling. She makes frequent directions to be a good listener, requests to, "show me 5" (attentive sitting), but for the most part does not stop what she is saying or the path of the lesson. The expectation here is not that quiet, focused, directed attention is required for learning to occur and there is a great deal of tolerance for developmentally-expected movement and noise. Michelle avoids moments of confrontation, correcting in a very positive way, but moving on with her learning plan for the group. In doing this, momentary misbehaviors do not become an object of attention and in a short time they fade, and all the while she has the majority of her group with her, focused on what she is doing, and answering the questions she asks. "I have a plan for what I want to do and don't get distracted by what are really just kids looking to gain some attention. It's a schoolwide belief in understanding this is just the way they are, without stopping the learning. They're just children," she told me. The fact that the time schedule is elastic, with nowhere else to go, nothing else that can't be moved until their lunch at about 12:30, allows for a patient approach to managing the learning group.

This morning, that included continuing the Westward Expansion unit with a picture book on traveling in a covered wagon. As Michelle reads through the book, the distractions decrease, as she asks questions related to previous learning they have done in the unit. Most of the answers---all shouted out, little hand raising here---are correct and relevant. It is the practice of this learning group to follow these "Main Lessons" of sitting and listening with a hands-on activity connected to the content just covered. Today they are making covered wagons from a variety of common materials. The children are divided among three tables and for the next half hour Michelle, accompanied by a college work study worker, moves back and forth between the groups helping with the gluing, cutting. folding, and making. By the time this concludes, this

group of children has reviewed previous learning, heard a relevant piece of literature for the unit, and made an object related to this learning, without interruption.

This is an important conceptualization of time and learning here: Without being bound by many of typical school limitations, Peachtown is able to instruct its students relationally, nurturing connections between all members of its community, rather than transactionally where time is parceled out to achieve efficiency. At Peachtown, teachers don't seem to view conversations among children as something to be stifled, but use them as an opportunity to grow closer to their students and incorporate their interests into their learning By bending conventional school conceptions of teacher-student interactions and replacing management with, "a nurturing environment embodied in a non-institutional setting in a group of children that resembles a familial configuration," their teachers are free to become, "relatable compatriots in learning." (Mission Statement, 1995, p. 1). This is made possible by their relaxed notion of the relationship between time and learning and the willingness to prioritize the development of personal connections as much as relying on a formalized instructional time.

A people's attitude towards time may be reflected in their moment-to-moment use of it with each other. Freed from test preparation and scope and sequence calendars, Peachtown's teachers are able to use their time with students in a way so as to best strengthen relationships and promote ambitious learning. As a very small community, the teachers here have the luxury of getting to know their students so well that they can reasonably extend time limits to accommodate a student's interest and self-chosen projects. This freedom to take longer with a topic has implications for the type of learning done here. Alyssa said," The fun here is the depth of the learning. For 6 or 7 weeks you're learning about one thing. You get a deep

understanding.” The school’s founder, Barbara, linked the relaxed time to the school’s wider philosophical approach:

> “Education is not a finite set of knowledge and skills. It’s a growth model; you perceive things, you get an idea, and you pursue it. It’s the Mark Twain thing about not letting your schooling get in the way of your education. If everyone knew the same thing, they haven’t pursued their own interests. That’s where growth occurs.”

Learning at a Staccato Pace- Autoethnography

My public-school classroom instruction is structured by age segregation and curricular atomization. My first-grade classroom is an age-defined group--- most of the children in my class this year were 6 when they began the year and will turn 7 before the year’s end. We have New York State Standards and both state and district mandated assessments that define achievement for my first graders. This means I place greater emphasis on particular skills and content that are dictated by standards and the mandated assessment. While this has become more pronounced in recent years, it has always been expected of me that I divide knowledge into subject areas for the convenience of evaluation. While-we have always been expected to establish and follow a defined schedule for different subject areas, as test scores and the skills that are perceived to lead to success in producing them have become prioritized, there has been increased attention put upon how closely we stick to our schedules. Having dedicated time for certain areas is not difficult, it is in confining learning topics to the space that curricular plans allow for them that makes learning take on a staccato pace that can sometime seem too discrete from what comes before and after. In recent years there has been some discussion about the

importance of “constructivist education,” but any program that has workbooks and pacing guides is not seriously interested in allowing students to create anything that is truly theirs.

I’m expected to follow an established curricular calendar for the major subjects we are responsible for. I have observed that administrators in my district are almost exclusively concerned with ELA and Math instruction, because it’s the state tests in those areas that get the headlines. So, they provide my colleagues and me with packaged curriculums designed to most efficiently split the concepts assigned to each year into what will be covered each day, week, and unit. Units are followed up with summary tests aligned with state standards to see how well my students are learning those skills likely to turn into future test success. A great deal of deliberation and money is spent on curriculums judged to have been written most effectively to match national initiatives, the Common Core and end-of-year state assessments. What I am supposed to have my students do each day is largely determined by the topics set out in these curricular plans, not their interests, strengths, or weaknesses as individuals. Lucky for me and my class that the administrators of my district rarely show up in my room anymore and my frequent deviations from the plan into areas that I have decided are more vital are not witnessed in person. I’ve been told that they’re aware that I frequently depart from the plan, but somehow my classes end up doing quite well on assessments and I guess that’s what they care about.

The way that this affects instruction and teacher-student interactions is a function of time, and although I do all I can to ignore it, I can’t help but be affected by the narrowing paradigm anyway. I do have a responsibility to make sure that my class covers the same material as the other classes in my grade level. If the calendar says we are talking about place value on Monday and by Wednesday we are on to something else, unfortunately I need to shoe-horn all that my

students need to know into that short window, whether that is the best way to instruct, is developmentally appropriate, or is what my kids most need. There are plenty of times where I spend extra time on a tricky concept or a skill that requires more practice. But too often my students have too small an amount of time to grasp the new material, practice it, and find some way to retain the information quickly, because the calendar tied to the curriculum tied to the assessment demands it. I'm comfortable with departing from the plan, but practically, I can't get too far behind. Unfortunately, if you're not a student who learns well with this kind of pace or if this particular piece of content was more challenging, that's unfortunate, because it's time to move on. Among the people I work with, it's not unusual to offer extra help and do our best to help struggling students, but these things build on one another and once you fall behind, it can be challenging to catch up.

With these models, how do we prevent students from feeling they are being processed? Year after year they are put on the curricular clock and calendar and receive an education that is more standardized than individualized. While I take pride in being known as a teacher that at times goes his own way if he thinks that's what best for my class, there are times when I run my students through shallow exposure to a topic just to get it out of the way and check a box. None of us who do this feel good about it. We know it's not what each student most needs and could think of many better ways to use that instructional time so as to create a depth to more developmentally appropriate activities. However, at times it seems that we are bound to a survey mentality of learning that covers only the easiest to reach parts of vast areas

"We don’t feel the pressure to teach everything in a given year. It allows us to create connections within a topic without having to know if they’ll need it for a test,” Alyssa told me. As public-school teachers, often we don’t have that option.

Morning Meeting

Schools use the time at the beginning of the day to remind their students of their expectations and routines while they are there. Bells, morning announcements, tightly planned schedules all have students in precise places for precise reasons at precise times. In this section I will discuss how the learning community at Peachtown starts their day. For many years the entire school has gathered to begin their time together in a very unformal manner. I then will discuss the use of informal, sharing times in my own classroom.

“Just community and family”- Peachtown

At Peachtown, every morning, a bit before 9 o’clock---the time always seemed a bit fluid---the teacher gather up the children from the corners of the building and bring them onto the rug to begin the school day. What follows is less a meeting than a casually-led conversation about what seems important that day. It might be a poem, a song, a discussion about muddy snow pants, too-rough play during recess, or a student’s pet that died last night. The intention rarely seems to be academic, but instead, focuses on what is most essential that day. It is never skipped, but the commitment to holding the meeting does not lead to a formality: there is no “Morning Meeting” agenda; no template---and I have probably seen at least 15 of these gatherings---no strict routine that is followed, and quite often it seemed like an assembling of

non-morning people, most of whom still seemed to be waking up. But it would be a mistake to assume that this is a time without purpose or value.

Learning at Peachtown is a product of the relationships built there. The Morning Meeting is an example of a number of important distinguishing practices of this school. Everyone in this meeting is treated as an equal; with four-year-olds and thirteen-year olds all gathered together, in a small space, being spoken to in the same way, whether they are singing a song about Harriet Tubman or talking about rough play during recess. When a student has something to say on the topic that is being discussed, they get called on. In a recent meeting, one of the teachers said, as the group discussed cleaning to prevent spread of the coronavirus,“ **“**If you have any ideas, we’re all open to your ideas.” These daily meetings communicate to the children not only that they will be heard, but that what they have to say is worth listening to and will be taken seriously by the adults in the community.

By holding these “what’s important here today” meetings, the leaders of Peachtown are also conveying that the primary business here is what is most important to the community at that moment. This is another facet of this relational community: its top priority is its people and their concerns: some days that is what the community is studying----a “schoolwide curriculum” is used here, so that everyone is studying the same topic at the same time---some days it’s a social issue within the school, and at times it’s what’s going on in the larger world. What is practiced here is the belief that the most important way to start the day is with the community together discussing what is of concern to their collective well-being. Schoolwide Morning Meetings can be used for many purposes, but at Peachtown, when they sit down around the rug at 8:50, the focus is always on the people there and what they need.

These meetings, as with much done here, are conducted in an informal manner, with few stated rules and instead rely on the trust that extends between all members of the community. The informality that is used here is indicative of and directly connected to the school's confidence in the natural abilities of all children. The hierarchical markers of dress, address, and conversational exclusion are not used to separate the people of this community into distinctive groups with different expectations. Instead, there are shared, relaxed interpersonal norms here with the understanding that all community members will treat each other with respect and patience. Students here are less managed than they are included within a set of mature norms for how to conduct yourself. Alyssa told me, "Children of all ages are intrigued by complex concepts." This setting forgoes much of the traditional school formality and its tendency towards conformity and compliance in favor of allowing latitude for individuality within expectations of respectful behavior.

This Spring morning the meeting is centered around being happy even when the circumstances of your day aren't great. The children are seated on and around the rug. As the director speaks to the children, the younger ones are spilled on the floor in front of her, some sitting, some on their knees, some in a stance where they could begin to crawl. The older students are seated on and in front of a window seat, directly across from the teachers, who sit with their coffees at the tables in the instructional area. It's an overcast day, one of those March days when Winter has faded, but Spring has yet to make its claim. Alyssa, in a very muted tone, asks what makes them happy. The younger children shout out foods and places that would make any child overjoyed. The older students smirk and one calls out, "Sleep," making the others laugh. "Is it happy outside today?" she asks. Lots of "nos" and lots of noise; little effort is made

to curb the sound. Asking an open-ended question of a group of students was bound to elicit a cacophony and she isn't upset by the noise, just letting it subside to a level where she can be heard. "What makes it so sad?" she asks and the scene repeats. Lots of answers, plenty of noise that subsides in short order, and their time together moves on: a little learning community where adults ask questions and children react as children and the adults, recognizing the energy and enthusiasm of growing learners, boundary without managing, for they are a part of the community themselves. I see it all as large, fragile bubble, held together by the commitment of all there. Not all who try it here are meant for this circle of trust, assuming that everyone with you here means their best.

Eventually, Alyssa reads a William Carlos Williams poem about the joy to be found in unexpected places. The group, the four-year olds , the thirteen-year olds, and everyone in between, listen quietly. They may not comprehend every exact point, but they seem to understand they are hearing something important and are attentive to the famous words. Barbara, in speaking about her community, said," It has to be fun; it has to be collegial, the children all have to be operating with the same feeling. It has to be about caring, community, and fun." The poem ends, Alyssa dismisses them, and they head off to their learning groups.

It doesn't always end in a poem and they don't always listen that well. At times I saw their Morning Meeting fall short and fail to cohere so that the intention of the meeting wasn't able to be accomplished and, on those occasions, it was just quickly ended. Conducting these times with groups that include preschoolers and adolescents at times proved to be challenging. Obviously, the experience of the youngest and oldest children at these meetings can be quite

different and is worth considering. The salient point here is that the school daily chooses to devote time to these morning sessions, with all of the potential disorder and inefficiency.

Peachtown's youngest learning group---generally 4-8-year olds---usually react to whatever is being discussed with enthusiasm and interest. Their lack of self-control and tendency to shout out whatever they are thinking about what is being said can be one of the more distracting elements. However, their being included in a discussion about the concerns of the community legitimizes their importance to the group, not only to themselves, but to the older students as well. One alumnus remembers, "We all were in community classes together with a lot of the little kids. It really teaches you to kind of just like love everybody, just take care of each other." In a relational learning setting, to be cared for by not only the adults of the community, but by students you look up to, inculcates the values of the school, establishing a modeling dynamic that has academic consequences, and serves to perpetuate the prioritizing of people over measures of achievement. The youngest students, by being included with the oldest, have opportunities to gain knowledge that may not exist if they were learning in an age-segregated institutional school setting. During my observations I heard their contributions to Morning Meeting discussions mature and grow in accuracy.

The older students, on the other end of this social equation, while regularly displaying some of the expected cynicism of adolescence, are aware of their role in influencing and affecting the younger children. They are able to grow in empathy and responsibility through their regular and direct relationships with the younger children. A former student remembered, "You were kind of forced to care about everyone because you were around them every day in small groups." Additionally, the oldest students here take advantage of a safe social group to regularly

share aspects of their emotional lives. At a time when these students are trying to make sense of their lives, they can speak during the Morning Meeting with an expectation that what they revealed will be received sympathetically. In speaking with former students, many of them had specific recollections of the daily Morning Meetings, most of which included memories of the non-judgmental emotional support that they consistently received at trying moments of their lives.

The intimate nature of the way that these Morning Meetings are conducted allows for an informal, non-academic, personal time of engagement to start the day. Seeing the school community, gathered around the rug in what used to be someone's living room, is a good representation at the beginning of each school day, of this close-knit community. While my observations and sense of this time is that it is primarily socially affirming, before I move on to the Multi-Age Learning Groups, a few words on the connection between the Morning Meeting and those learning configurations.

A parent of an Peachtown student told me, ""The relationships are easier in a small school. I'm thankful they can go somewhere where they are nurtured. Because it is so small it's easier to help a child, no matter where they are in their life and be seen as individuals. A big part of it is the intimacy they get is in the relationship with a teacher. The relationships with older kids that they wouldn't normally get. They mesh together." The intimacy of the Morning Meeting is indicative of the type of education that a child participates in here. The assumption that underlies the inclusiveness and trust of the Morning Meeting, that children at very different stages of development can discuss involved topics that affect themselves and the world at large, this ambitiousness and faith in the capacities of students, is also present in the way that the

teachers at the schools conduct the groups of students that work together. To say that this school is less concerned with contemporary visions of “student outcomes” (test scores) and is more concerned with processes is to define learning processes in a deeper way. The “learning processes” at Peachtown extend throughout the day and begin with the way that they treat the youngest of students from the moment that they enter the school. Its “Philosophy of Education” in the school’s Mission Statement states, “A sense of family, camaraderie, and community is essential to a healthy learning environment.” (p. 1) A community that is a family might be an apt description of the interaction that goes on in these daily Morning Meetings. They begin the day and contribute to the transition to the school’s distinctive Multi-Age Learning groups and that is where we shall go next.

At Peachtown, learning is paramount. Alyssa told me, ““It doesn’t feel like a more [than public schools] academically serious place, but I think they may be, because we’ve learned what kids can absorb. It helps foster the sense that learning is cool and it’s something we all do.” However, they do not believe being serious about learning means having to control every little piece of a student’s time, from the moment they enter the building. Their commitment to these informal morning meetings that serve many purposes, all of which build relationships that ultimately positively affect learning, is indicative of their alternative vision of the amount of input a child should have on their day at school. The decisions that school leaders make as to how their students should start their days says much about how they view those students.

Getting "Off the Clock" - Autoethnography

Working in a public school, we are always "on the clock." I hear a lot of conversation among my colleagues and administrators about "fitting it all in." Chiefly that means the instruction in skills and curricular pieces that we have planned for that day, but for students who receive pull-out special services, that can mean just having them present for enough moments in the classroom so they can be exposed to some minimal level of instruction. Once my class arrives, there are days when the Pledge of Allegiance is barely over before children are being taken to another room to work with another teacher on some area of documented deficit. Meanwhile my other students have begun the day's work, following the schedule that our administrators have demanded of us and have stopped in to make sure that we are following, so we "can get it all in."

Somewhere on that schedule I've labeled something that sounds vaguely curricular or instructional, but that in actuality is really just a time for the group of us, my class and I, to get to look at each other. After you've been teaching for a while, administrators more or less leave you alone and so no one's ever seriously questioned what I do during this time. Long ago, I was very affected by a quote from Emily, a character *i*n *Our Town, who* says, "Let's really look at one another!...It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another. I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed... Wait!" Someplace in my head, I decided that as often as I could, my classes I and I were going to have a time during the day when we were just going to be with each other. When I taught Sixth Grade, "Do you have any questions?" (about your work)

turned into questions about anything in life and my class would go back and forth just asking each other light-hearted questions for a short time. I'm convinced it improved the mood in the room and made the work that followed go better. As a First-Grade teacher we have a "Sharing Time" around the rug. Most of the time, my students don't share a tangible object, but stand up and talk about some aspect of their lives.

During this time of schools being shut due to the fear of the coronavirus, I think many people have had a chance to consider the part that school plays in our society and in the lives of the children. As a teacher I know that we play many non-academic roles, but I think people outside of schools needed to experience the complications that our being closed has caused in people's lives to start to realize all that we do. It is unfortunate that while our success is primarily measured in ELA and Math test scores, the most crucial role that we play may be as much social as academic. I have often found it unsettling that while there are State standards that I am supposed to be driving my instruction faithfully towards, the most important things I do with the young children in my room may have little to do with those or anything that can be quantifiably accounted for. It is sometimes frightening for me to think about how much I can influence my students' attitude towards school for years to come with what I do during my ten months with them. I once received a note back from a family, at report card time. You might expect that it might ask about a grade or a comment on their daughter's report card, especially since the mother was a teacher. But all it said was, "Thank you for taking care of our little girl." That's what we do, I thought; we take care of little boys and little girls. Part of that is teaching them reading and writing skills and Math and about the history and science of their world, but there's a lot more to it, as many are discovering while we are closed.

I would like to suggest that a valuable part of that could be to take a few moments, as Emily in *Our Town* suggests, to just look at one another and consider how precious our time together is. I think my "Sharing time" each morning is one of the most affirming, community-building, caring times of the day and I'm convinced it helps us with the more challenging moments that follow. I understand why Peachtown holds those Morning Meetings.

Multi-Age Learning Groups

Institutionalized education has traditionally configured student learning groups by age. Rather than having their students work solely with children of a similar age, at Peachtown there has long been a commitment to the use of multi-age learning groups. Alyssa said, "The fact that we're multiage is a huge differentiator. Kids are working alongside peers that are a couple of years older or younger than they are." In the following section I show how Peachtown's using the time in this way creates opportunities for both building the learning community and for students seeing each other, no matter their age, as people they can learn from. I then discuss the implications of TPS grade level divisions for my classroom work.

"The fact that we're multi-age is a huge differentiator"- Peachtown

For as long as I have been observing at Peachtown, the students there have been organized into two learning groups, older and younger. Depending on the ages of the students at the school in a given year, the number of children in each of these groups varies. During the year that this study was carried out, there were slightly more children in the younger group. I observed all grouping configurations on numerous occasions doing work in Science, History, Math, and Language Arts. The groups were set up on a PreK-2nd Grade and 3rd -8th

Grade basis. The younger group generally was focused on beginning literacy and fundamental Math concepts, while the older group worked with more advanced reading and writing expectations and the Mathematical elaborations commonly expected of upper elementary and middle school students today. As will be described in the next section, each group also did daily work in the schoolwide curriculum, a series of Science and Social Studies concepts taught in each day's "Main Lesson."

These two main groups were each further divided, at times, into two smaller sections to allow for more developmentally appropriate skills instruction in Language Arts and Math. The younger group was organized into "The Kittens" (4- to 6-year-olds at the beginning of the year) and "The Owls" (7-8-year-olds). The older students were divided into A (upper elementary students) and B (middle-schoolers) groups. In both cases, the "Main Lesson" was taught to the entire group, while they were split into their subsections for Language Arts and Math. In the case of all four of these designations, instructional groups are not the equivalent of grade levels or tracked ability groups. Within each group are students with a variety of academic abilities and interpersonal skills who have been placed with each other for reasons that at times are fluid.

While all of the instructors at this school described their setting as "progressive," they defined this term in different ways, from , "We mean 'student-centered,' 'child-centered' learning," to, ""Progressive means that we work through the Socratic method that allows children to not just be dictated to, but to have input in their learning. "In this sense, this school is very traditional; a number of members of this community invoked Socrates in describing what they do. The founder told me, "Because we're true to the progressive movement, we are what was traditional to the Progressive Education movement of 100 years ago. We are rooted in

traditional education. We are rooted in the Socratic Method, Aristotle…that's what we do." However, it would be a mistake to equate this invocation of "progressive" with the use of contemporary technology. In observing the instruction here, it is impossible not to become aware of the fact that many of the resources are very much "pencil-to-paper"; the sort of activities that may have been common in most public schools 20 years ago. There is more time spent with crayons and pencils than pointing and clicking here.

Additionally, it is necessary to distinguish between the types of materials used for different areas of instruction in the school. For the younger group, while the instruction is certainly child-centered, allowing considerable latitude for personal choice and latitude, there is considerable reliance on worksheets, scissors, and glue sticks. A small whiteboard and markers may be used to help guide students through a fill-in-the-blanks worksheet. This is especially true in Language Arts instruction where students regularly write the week's Spelling words multiple times, complete cloze activities, and write sentences that include the words for the week. Early literacy activities frequently include tracing, coloring, and drawing, much as might have been seen decades ago in mainstream public schools. This environment is progressive in many ways, but its progressivity is not necessarily to be found in the materials that they use.

I observed a lesson on Fractions that was done with both of the younger groups. After asking, "What is a fraction…When do I use fractions?" the instructor illustrated a pizza metaphor by speaking on how fractions are about being fair and had the girls she was instructing cut evenly sized pieces on a whiteboard. "These are like pies," one of them said. Alyssa then had them look at differently divided circles on the board and identify the ones that had been divided into fourths. After reviewing what they had discussed at the whiteboard, she then had them move

towards the work tables. The students read the directions to her and began coloring fractional pieces on a shapes worksheet page, with varying levels of neatness. Alyssa carefully went over each child's fraction work; "No one's falling through the cracks," she told me. As that group went back to Michelle for their literacy instruction, "The Owls" came over for the fractions work.

Alyssa started with a variety of manipulatives that this older group split into sixths and matched with their fractions, The group then read the fractions and moved the pieces on the whiteboard to write 2 equivalent fractions. One boy says, "Why do we have to learn about fractions?" "Recipes," Alyssa answers and she has each child go up individually to form an equivalent fraction. She gives each one her total attention when it is their turn and operates with the assumption that others in the group will behave. This group is eager and wants to go to the worksheet on fractional wholes, insisting that they're ready. At the worktables, she splits her students into two groups and lets the kids figure out the direction on their own. They begin coloring fractional pieces of shapes, but need redirection. Alyssa has them read the directions aloud and once they're done, re-read them to check their work. There is a second fractions worksheet; some confusion about fractions; lots of off-task, but healthy, civil conversations about many topics. Alyssa bounces back and forth between the two groups, providing lots of direction and instruction.

And this is pretty much how it goes here: traditional, mostly paper materials, little technology, lots of individual attention, time for kids to move, have conversations, but still learn. There is not much apparent management being done by the teachers here and few "best practices." My notes from this day read, "This is a is a lot to take in since there is so much that really does not conform to usual school expectations; very fluid environment. I really don't see stressed children

here. Everyone seems very comfortable. A long time for the Math/ELA block; def. not too much being asked; "un-busy lessons"; lots of coercion; little demanding."

The older group, approximately 9 -14 year olds, does their work in a format that represents a transition from the more traditional resources used in the younger group to a manner that allows for individuality and personal choice to play a larger part in each student's learning. The School Mission Statement, in its section on, "Pedagogical Goals, states that, "Each child should leave Peachtown with their own unique body and knowledge that is shaped by their interest and research." Alyssa told me, **"**We always try to work with what kids are already interested in and when we can apply that to the learning. That's how kids get hooked…See what they're into and allow that to guide the learning." This is enabled among the older students here through the use of sketchbooks, which children use to complete drawings, writings, reflections, and other manners of expression towards their ELA and Main Lesson work. In my many observations there I have never seen a worksheet or programmed curriculum resource used with this group. There is a definite distinction between what is done with the younger group and the way work is done in the older section. Mary Ann, who instructs this group told me, "To me, success is completion of work with pride in what they made and later to recapitulate what they've learned. They're happy about it." She explained her use of sketchbooks this way:

> "Traditionally this is used in Waldorf schools as a way for each student to make their own textbook. Younger students learn to read from their own written work taking pride in their newfound ability to read. Students have such joy at the end of the year to review and recall each block, a great way to review your entire school year socially and artistically. Beautiful memories are created during this end of the school year review leading into summer. Students are sad to leave friends behind but have a heart filled with lovely memories of learning. As the students move into the upper grades this technique gives them much self-confidence and pride. Students who join later struggle immensely with the artistic component but their new classmates jump at helping them out, and in the end those that join us later had social issues and struggles so the extra attention by their helpful peers is quite healing!"

It has long been Peachtown's intention to accommodate forms that allow its students to have greater latitude in how they demonstrate their learning; the sketchbook is just the latest iteration of this philosophy. A former student, long since moved on, told me, "You just have so much creative freedom, not only in actual artistic creativity, but creative in what you are interested in studying, projects that you do with the freedom to excel to whatever level we were capable of, and pushed to do so."

Such freedom and latitude in learning cannot be contained within a defined moment-to-moment time schedule. Peachtown's flexibility with time can be seen in the multiple days that they will allot to a task that allows their students the freedom to take a piece of work as far as they care to go with it. There are no grades here or graded report cards to put them on, the students' work is defined by what they choose to do with it. I observed this when I saw them finishing up their Human Body unit. They were using their sketchbooks to represent how their diets for the week lined up with the established food groups. As Mary Ann circulated through the room, she conversed with each of the students in both Groups A and B, commenting on what they had done, focusing them back on the given task, and making suggestions for further improvements. Students had chosen to depict their eating history in ways that included a pie chart, essays, labeled drawings of the organs of the body, lists, and labeled paragraphs. There was direction to the students on the form they had chosen, but no demand that their chosen mode of representation fulfill defined requirements as might be spelled out in a rubric. Yet, nearly all of the students had both written and visual aspects to their work.

Mary Ann told me, "I don't assign work like this as an assessment piece. These projects are practice for the work they will do when they're in high school. A lot of different forms have

been used to show learning---- monologues, piano pieces, creation of fictional pieces; their last one this year will be a Power Point."

When asked about the importance of multi-age learning groups at Peachtown, Alyssa told me, "The fact that we're multiage is a huge differentiator. Kids are working alongside peers that are a couple of years older or younger than they are. We have a supportive, familial culture." The school's intentionality in creating an environment that mixes students for both academic and social activities enables students to learn how to take care of each other, find models to imitate, and value cooperation over competition. The lack of critical comments by students toward their classmate's work is striking for someone who has been in schools for over 30 years. An environment that prioritizes being a supportive and participating member of a community not only makes learning more likely to occur, but teaches larger lessons, as a student remembered:

> Learning with people of different age groups is absolutely beneficial for your overall development because you have to be patient with people who are younger and you have to be humble with people who are older, that are going to do things quicker than you and so you're challenged. You're also kind of reminded that people have varying abilities ... and interests. And there's a very safe environment, just a really open environment and a patient environment. You were really just all together and took care of each other.

The use of multi-aged learning groups makes possible perhaps the most unique aspect of Peachtown, their Schoolwide Curriculum, taught to each learning group during their daily "Main Lesson," that allows every child in the school to be studying the same scientific and historical concept simultaneously, creating a setting-wide common learning environment.

Peachtown's sense of community is built through their commitment to having children of different ages spending time learning with each other. In emphasizing the value to be found in

multi-age groups and the opportunities for children to learn from those older and younger than each other they are breaking down one of the most entrenched schooling practices: establishing hierarches by age. “The multiage model accomplishes things that you cannot do with anything else. The collaboration here is a cluster. It’s a circle where the lines cross. It’s like a net. You can’t build a community without the circle thing,” Barbara told me. “A circle thing” that is comfortable with children of different ages at different spots on the circumference, each trusted to be holding a part of a net: that is what the time for learning at Peachtown is.

The Hierarchy of Age- Autoethnography

All of my classroom teaching has been done with a group of students grouped together, based on their age. Over the course of my career, we have learned a lot more about developmental stages and learning styles but there is still an expectation on teachers to continue to design children’s instruction around their age. I’m surprised that this practice has proved immune from change for the most part in TPS, given the ability we have now to understand the differences in student learning in different subject areas. I have had many conversations with parents of children with Fall and early Winter birthdates struggling with the decision whether to send them to school or not; whether “they were ready,” although that can mean an infinite number of things. It’s such a strange question to answer: Do I think your child will fit in alright with a group of somewhat similarly-aged children who don’t necessarily have much else in common, especially as affects their ability to learn. Why we continue to predominantly use age-homogeneous learning groups confuses me.

Cassie was a first grader that I had in my class about a decade ago. She wasn't any older than her classmates, physically she might have been a little smaller, but academically she was way ahead of everyone else. In all my years of teaching I can only think of one other child who was so far advanced in comparison with her classmates. I ended up meeting with the parents throughout the school year; they seemed to be burdened with concern about what to do about their daughter being so much more academically capable at such a young age. She wasn't withdrawn or shy, nor was she arrogant about her intelligence. The only difference with Cassie was that she was extremely smart---a great reader with a developmentally unusual ability to comprehend and see connections between different ideas and concepts. She knew she was that bright too and while she was quite compliant and cooperative, she frequently had this smile on her face that seemed to let you know that she knew she was above all this.

Another year and from the first day of school, I could tell that Emily was just a bit behind the others, at least at first. I went and looked at her folder and saw that she was actually a little younger, had struggled last year, but retaining any student in today's schools is an extremely hard case to make and my attitude has always been that now you're a part of our class, even if it's mostly because you have a birthdate proximate to your classmates. As the year began, she seemed a bit less confident, then less knowledgeable, but it was hard to tell because she didn't contribute a lot to classroom discussions. As September went on, her being "a bit behind" became more noticeable. One afternoon I was giving a Spelling test---another school anachronism--- and she just dropped her pencil and started to cry. I got over to her desk and tried to console her and most of the other kids just stared at the two of us. She was in the same grade as her classmates, but in so many ways was over her head and even though she's a young

student, she knew she wasn't where her friends were with their work. The next day my TA told me that Emily told her that she thinks she's "dumb." One of the things I am most proud of from that year is the way that so many adults who worked with Emily came together to collectively do everything we could for her and she grew, but I'm not sure she ever got over the feeling that something was wrong with her.

In both of these cases, I have to wonder what kind of year these girls might have had if they could have been placed in a multi-age group, with children they could nurture and others they could be mentored by. By using a grade level system, we set up an expectation that everyone is starting from the same place----they're all ____ graders after all---and create a hierarchical system of ranking and competition. Kids figure out quickly where they stand in that race and quickly school becomes about your place (grades), rather than the learning and what you as an individual need. I'd like to see us consider configuring our learning groups in different ways.

Schoolwide Curriculum ("Common" Main Lesson)

It has been accepted practice in TPS for curriculum to be divided and assigned among the 13 years of the K-12 sequence. This atomization of knowledge, while arguably done to increase efficiency of instruction, can at the same time be intellectually limiting and a less attentive use of time that could be devoted to engaging student interest. Perhaps the most unique aspect of learning at Peachtown is the use of a "schoolwide curriculum." Barbara personally developed this curriculum, decades ago, in an effort to identify a sequence of essential academic topics which should be a part of every young child's education. In the following section I describe what

I observed about the use of this alternative approach, how Peachtown's flexible time concept accommodates it, and the place that it occupies in the school's overall approach. The final part of this section discusses the way that assigned curriculum and how the time it demands affects the work in my own classroom.

"We're all learning the same thing at the same time" - Peachtown

Peachtown is very intentional with how they use their instructional time. Barbara told me, "Academically, it has to have rigor. It has to have a certain level of expectation. No student should be bored ever and everyone should be challenged. I want to honor our historical knowledge." During my time there I saw very little time devoted to anything that was not academic. When the teachers gather their children together, the students are doing something that is related to the topic that the entire school is currently learning about. I witnessed several conversations about academic topics during social situations (lunch, playground). Time here is used for learning above all else.

The center point of Peachtown's academic day is the "Main Lesson." It is the common area of instruction that ties the learning of each child in the school together, enables their growth as a community, and frequently leads to discussions about academic learning at non-instructional times. This Schoolwide Curriculum is a four-year cycle of Science and Social Studies topics, created in the early days of the school by Barbara who remembered, "I started the school because I wanted a better school for my children." Her schoolwide curriculum was an attempt to ensure that each child was exposed to what she saw as essential concepts twice, once at the elementary levels and a second time as older students. Its importance is referenced in the school's 2019

statement on its Academic Program: “Rather than a graded curriculum, Main Lesson topics are taught in 3-4 year rotations. In this manner, learning emphasizes in- depth analysis of material and the sharing of knowledge, materials, and experiences among children of all ages. Topics selected in a given year are adapted to the specific composition and experience of that particular student body.” (p. 2) This is not a standards-driven approach using a programmatic curriculum project; it is sensitive to interests of the students in the school.

Before turning to consider how the use of this schoolwide curriculum is demonstrative of this school’s conception of time, it is worthwhile to note the school’s attention to who their students are and their willingness to alter what and how they instruct based on their students’ needs. As mentioned earlier, this is a school that, “fits its curriculum around the students.” At an organizational meeting that I attended in June of 2019, I heard the director and teachers make adjustments to the sequence for the coming year, based on the students they anticipated having in the Fall. At this same meeting, as teachers discussed the resources that would work best with these units, discussions included considerations of the particular students that would be in each learning group.

The time frame for study of these topics is flexible. While they generally follow a 4-to-7-week time frame, the parameters are flexible, as the final projects can take a variety of forms, and may lead to an expansion of the time originally allotted for the work. Since there are no grades and no rubric to be evaluated on, these projects allow for extensive student choice and an opportunity for each student to use the work to follow an area of their own interest, including expanding into other subject areas. “Main Lesson and the interdisciplinary studies it generates is the primary vehicle for teaching students how to work in groups, research in depth, write reports,

and develop presentations that are rich in content, oral presentation, visual presentation, and mixed media.” (Peachtown Elementary Academic Program, 2019, p. 2)

I observed a presentation by two middle school-age boys on the basics of Physics, where they taught their entire learning group, teacher included, about the fundamental concepts. they had discovered, including demonstrations. Aside from the learning opportunity that this represented, the lessons that it taught these students in efficacy and self-direction were valuable. On a separate occasion, I watched culminating projects for a Science unit that included presentations on Refraction and the Vestibulum System, that included both verbal and graphic components. Additionally, a third student spoke to her group about the cell and DNA with a detailed explanation of the double helix sequence. In all of these, students were allowed considerable choice in the path that their research would take. Time is liberally allotted for both preparation and classroom presentations. This is possible in an environment where both teachers and students are not being pressured to meet deadlines tied to testing schedules.

Such accommodation is intentional in both the school’s philosophy and practices and was mentioned prominently in my conversations with the teachers there. Alyssa told me, “We don’t feel that pressure [of time] so we can take these units and make them deep and meaningful and use them as a way to practice critical thinking. It’s less about the memorization of facts and details and more about the process of learning. We don’t have to know about all the sciences, right now for example, we’re just working with this one. It allows us to create connections within a topic without having to know if they’ll need it for a test.” She identified a key distinction between the work done at Peachtown and the prevailing standards-based educational culture. “We’re never teaching towards a document, we’re always teaching towards a set of skills or

understandings we expect our kids to have. It's less about the product and more about the process that way. Not that the product doesn't matter, but that's if it is an authentic product and I don't feel that tests are an authentic product of life." Most relevant to this section, Alyssa remarked on a benefit of Peachtown' s different attitude towards time: "We don't feel the pressure to teach everything in a given year. Teachers can feel the pressure to teach if they have some test at the end of the year you feel this intense pressure to teach all the topics, so the students will remember just enough of everything so they can take this test." With this less rushed sense of time, Peachtown can run at a pace more synchronized with their students natural learning abilities. Not only does this deepen their learning, it helps to build their community: "Because we're all learning the same thing at the same time it gets kids talking about academic things outside of the classroom. Kids are re-enacting things on the playground, they're having discussion at lunch. They're comparing what's happening in different classrooms. There's this whole other topic to talk about that they have in common."

Schools that are so "on the clock" cannot help but be competitive, affecting the collaboration needed to maintain a true learning community. In the process, they produce "winners" and "losers, " as judged by the clock. Peachtown has a different goal for its students, one that is made possible by being less time-conscious and more congruent with the innate curiosity and inquisitiveness of young learners. Michelle, who teaches the youngest students here, said, ""When kids leave here, most importantly, they should be able to relate with others. Be a kind person, a productive member of society. Those are our aspirations here. The rest will come." She affirmed Alyssa's recognition of the distinctiveness of this school's environment, pointing to what is done there as sheltering their students from some of the demands imposed on

many other young learners: “In this place children can still be children, learn at their own pace, not only what we want them to learn, but they can learn from each other. In Public School, everything is so rushed with a set curriculum. Here we can take our time, kids don’t have to feel, ‘we’ve got get this done in 10 minutes and we’ve got to do this and got to do this, we’ve only got a set time, and we’re not doing this tomorrow and we’re not moving on.’ We’re at a very reasonable pace here. Kids just don’t feel pressure, like there is ‘out there.’ Social anxiety and the pressure that is put on them by teachers from the state.” Michelle also believes that the Whole School Curriculum, put forward in the daily Main Lesson, is key to building the kind of learning community that Peachtown aims to be. The Mission Statement says that, “A nurturing environment is embodied in a non-institutional setting in a group of children that resembles a family configuration.” (p. 1) A multi-age configuration with a whole school curriculum is a defining piece of this. Or as one of the teachers put it: “The whole school curriculum is important because we’re a big family here and the kids talk to each other about what they’re learning outside of structured learning times. We’ll go outside for recess and when you hear them talking to each other about what they’re learning it makes your heart swell.”

The belief in the teachers and students and their ability to successfully study what some would see as advanced topics for young students reveals much about the Peachtown perspective on what the members of their community are capable of. In the current school year, the Main Lesson Units have been Physics, The Human Body, The Harlem Renaissance, and Geology---all studied simultaneously by the youngest to the oldest students. It is assumed that students here are interested in engaging with whatever topic the teachers bring forward. Since they are

frequently welcoming new learners from different educational environments, the use of a unique curricular approach places a great confidence in both the strength of this culture to assimilate new members and the potential of new students to engage in a way they may not have been asked to before.

A parent who sends her children to Peachtown talked about the differences that she has found there through the use of the schoolwide curriculum. “My child wasn’t being seen as an individual at his old school, he was just being managed. The teachers and students didn’t really get to interact. My kids love to go to school here, they get to spend a long time on one topic and absorb it. They delve into one thing for a long time. That’s another kind of intimacy.”

Time as intimacy. Since there is not a dutiful adherence to a daily schedule, time here is used in a different way, perhaps one that might be seen as less-efficiency oriented. Peachtown does not use its curricular choices to manage its students, instead choosing to prioritize the interaction she felt was missing in her child’s previous school. In doing so they have created and sustained a different sort of learning community.

That Mom senses it and I think Amelia does too. New to Peachtown this year, she was a part of a Main Lesson on I saw in the Human Body unit. Michelle was trying to connect a previous discussion she had with her students on the human heart and circulation. Her group of nine students, were pressed up close to her in something resembling half an oval, as young students frequently do. I noticed that Amelia was a bit removed from the rest, in the back on her knees. It had seemed to me that whenever I had seen her, she was at the back of the group, slightly bouncing on her knees, just a bit removed from what was going on. As Michelle engaged

the others, Amelia was following, but not participating, still bouncing. When Michelle asked, “What do you remember about the heart and circulation?”, she got a cacophony of responses. As the noise momentarily subsided, Amelia yelled out, “If it breaks you will die!” Michelle asked back, “But why Amelia?” And everything seemed to pause for a moment. Maybe because Amelia didn’t speak much, maybe because no one else knew. The young girl paused, with the strangest look on her face, as if no one had ever asked her such a thing in such a place as this.

“Because blood carries air,” she said in the now unusually quiet primary grade room. Michelle loved it and soon the noise started again and it was on to oxygen and the lungs and it seemed to me that Amelia was quite pleased with herself.

A relaxed sense of time and trusting that all learners can engage on even complex topics does create a sense of intimacy expressed in a community of closeness. Teaching is largely verbal and the environment you create is very affected by how you speak with your students. This intimacy through a thoughtful use of time is possible at Peachtown due to a prevalent, I believe intentional, manner of managing teacher-student talk in the learning groups that builds community, capacity, and independence.

Peachtown values academic learning above all else and holds to a rather traditional form of knowledge which they are serious about devoting their community time to. ”We don’t teach Social Studies; we teach History. It’s fact-based. We’re not taking time out leading up to St. Patricks Day to make leprechauns as a craft, we’re talking about abolition and suffrage,” Alyssa said. To look over the topics that are covered in the Main Lesson over the course of a child’s Peachtown career is to see that they are exposed to many ambitious concepts and ideas. They have always aimed high here; remember Barbara founded Peachtown because she wanted better

schools for her children. “I’ve always seen Peachtown as a little college model, where the learning is 75% dialogue. This is learning by sharing knowledge,” she said.

Teaching Beyond the Curriculum- Autoethnography

Once you define something you both limit it and re-enforce the value of conforming to that definition. There has always been curriculum that teachers were obligated to cover and I suppose in theory that was the picture of instruction that went on in classrooms. I can tell you, as someone who taught well before the NCLB days, that an awful lot was taught, discussed, and learned in classrooms that was not prescribed in curriculum for the grade level or subject area. This is not to say that the curriculum wasn’t covered, just that teachers felt free to venture beyond those parameters. My own classroom experiences in the 1960s and 70s was quite wide-ranging and certainly the first half of my teaching experience was spent learning from teachers who felt comfortable adding to and enriching their students’ learning. T.S, Eliot wrote that, “Between the idea and the reality falls the shadow.” For many years that “teaching shadow” included learning experiences that were not prescribed, but that teachers felt were important for their students to know about, and I believe that teachers and students were both better for it.

Most of the people I teach with now are a product of the “testing culture” They were educated in classrooms where achievement meant test success and an effective learning experience was one that yielded good test scores. The space necessary for all members of a classroom to be comfortable in approaching new concepts and trying out your reaction to them and each other, a hallmark of my education and the era in which I learned to teach, were in diminishing supply in the settings where they learned. Once state standards and an onerous

teacher evaluation system were adopted, the courage to use your own judgement and intuition in deciding what your classroom is going to look like today became less trusted. Newer teachers seem constantly concerned with “meeting the standards” and very reluctant to include their own ideas and self-generated activities in their students’ experiences. It has all led to a significant increase in conformity and compliance with what has been dictated to classroom teachers. Suggest to them that they should put more of themselves and their beliefs into their teaching and you hear crickets chirp.

I am a conscientious teacher, committed to doing what is best for my students more than I feel obligated to following every dictate of a bureaucracy. I always cover the curriculum, but usually go way beyond that, in many subject areas. My classes write on topics that are not prescribed, learn through activities that are not included in my neat little curricular boxes, and every day we sing and make things. We do these things because it is good for all of us and when I decide how to use the six and a half hours I have with them every day, I choose to spend that time on what is best for them and not be limited by standards or other dictates. I am not concerned about whether that falls within the curriculum or without. Later in this chapter, I will discuss the value of performing, which my class has done in shows presented for an entire school for about 25 years. I’m not sure that there’s anything I have done in my career that has been more valuable for my students than the time we spent on those productions. I didn’t bother to see where they fell on the State Standards or curriculum sequence. And I’m sure I’m not the only teacher who does this. To a certain degree, many experienced teachers, as at Peachtown, use creativity in the curriculum that is actually taught in their classrooms. TPS do not exercise the same freedom with curricular choices that Peachtown does. Responsible for the education of

about 25 children, they have the ability to individualize learning and select topics that will best match their group's interests and motivations. Schools that are educating a larger number of students would be hard-pressed to do the same. Local districts are under pressure to both educate to the standards the state has provided and prepare their students to perform adequately on state exams. Peachtown does not participate in state testing and is not terribly concerned about day-to-day allegiance to state standards. Telling me that they are informed, not imprisoned by the standards, Barbara said, "The standards aren't a problem for us." Conversely, public schools seem to be obsessed with "meeting the standards," purchasing curricula that identify the standard that each lesson addresses, frequently asking teachers to identify the standards they are teaching to that day, and constantly worrying about the latest updates to these all-powerful standards.

Conversation and teacher-student hierarchy

In public schools the lines between instructor and learner are clearly identified and established, defining their time together. Interaction between members of a school community are strongly influenced by the roles that teachers and students are allowed to play. In this section I discuss how Peachtown's informality and view of students as learning equals affects their conversations with each other. These differences are important in understanding the nature of a day at Peachtown, I conclude this section with a reflection upon my own interactions with students in my classroom.

"It Takes Time"- Peachtown

Peachtown has implemented a series of practices and expectations that affect the time that their teachers and students are with each other. It is necessary to note that the teachers and

students are with each for most of the day---they eat snack and lunch together and the teachers run their class's physical education. Hierarches are more difficult to maintain the more time people spend with each other. A management model that emphasizes control would not work in such a setting. Instead, the time that the community spends together is infused with the belief that everyone, as a natural learner, has value, and is deserving to be heard and capable of contributing positively to the community. Mary Ann said, "It's very informal, the students follow along. They do things out of respect for me that they've been asked to do. It's less directed."

Peachtown describes itself as promoting, "learning in depth, self-reliance, creativity, intrinsic motivation, and individual and civic responsibility." (Mission Statement, p. 1) .These are social pursuits and Peachtown encourages its students to have opinions and be expressive, as was demonstrated in the projects cited in the last section . Conversation is frequent and encouraged as part of the school's intention to foster creativity and engagement. "Students should be allowed freedom to move and express themselves." (Mission Statement, p. 2)

One of the most noticeable characteristics of this school is how the teachers choose to interact with their students that both allows for the organization needed and the space required for self-expression. It is an environment with no grades or tests, where, "What we're really trying to do here is raise kind, ethical, good, moral people who are critical thinkers, and don't want to live in a sound byte,." (Post interview, 2019) The set of assumptions that is present, demands a noteworthy interpersonal practice between adults and students. This mode of engagement, which I have seen all teachers there practice, replaces confrontation between two competing agendas (teacher and student), with the teacher taking their place within the student conversation, participating, and teaching from that point. They are all within the student bubble.

On this Tuesday morning in February, the Human Body unit is continuing with a discussion on the effect of exercise on your heart. MaryAnn is working with a group of 8-11 year olds, mostly boys, it is just before lunch, and attention is a dwindling resource. She is trying to encourage them to draw and write about themselves engaged in a vigorous outdoor activity. ”Something where your heart’s really beating and you’re moving, at full capacity, but that’s not dangerous,” she says. The students have their sketchbooks out and look like they intend to start working, but there is a lot of off-the-topic conversation, that Mary Ann doesn’t try to stop. It’s as if their talking with each other, at least for a time, is creating a comfortable setting in which they can approach the task she has asked of them.

Mary Anne has suggestions for every child in the room, geared personally to what she knows are their own interests. She knows each one very well, quite possibly because of the time she has spent listening to them just talk. Even now, she is listening as much as she is directing, and when she does speak, Mary Ann sounds notably “unteacherly,”. She doesn’t find the need to invoke the teacher -student hierarchy; it’s more like she and the boys are just people talking with each other. They are beginning to work on what she has asked of them, but the conversation about whatever (I heard “cinder blocks”, “her horses”, and “hot tubs” as part of this) carries on without being a distraction from what they are doing. At this level their developmental need to talk is not squashed, it is more than tolerated.

Mary Anne talks about being in an accident when she was their age and she has all of them fully with her now; they’re working and listening. She doesn’t have to worry about managing a class of 25 students with a “Best Practice” strategy, but she has even the most distractible student totally with her. Some of the pictures and accompanying writing is

progressing very well during this time; the casual conversation makes the worktime more palatable. She has lots of suggestions for individual kids, but I notice that MaryAnn seamlessly participates in kids' conversations. She doesn't necessarily try to stop them because they work at the task while this going on. They always stop talking when she relates her personal experiences, which she is somehow able to do while frequently giving out specific directions to each student. "Heather, look how much you've accomplished," she says to one particularly problematic student.

Teacher-student interactions can frequently involve conflict and at times confrontation between a teacher attempting to ensure that the student is following their instructions and students behaving in ways that are acceptable to them. What I see at Peachtown are not two oppositional bubbles colliding, but teachers and students within the same sphere, where teachers are not threatened by what students have to say, and choose to be "in", not "in opposition" to the conversation.

Could this be a totally different management style?---personal connection in sharing about themselves, not necessarily connected to work, but as a key element in strengthening the school community so that at times of more formal instruction, greater learning is possible through deepened relationships. It occurred to me at that point that what I'd been watching was a true shared learning community, with both of those pieces equally needed. One that was strengthened by physical proximity---I think about how often at Peachtown I see small groups of children gathered around their teacher. Most importantly, by setting herself together with, not in opposition to, her students, MaryAnn was able to engage this group of different students who are

in different places as learners; some drawing, some writing, some being instructed; all the while speaking with them in an informal, casual manner that made learning comfortable.

It was a Thursday afternoon and Michelle wasn't feeling well. She had been to the dentist the day before and was still feeling the effects of her visit. Her children were gathered over on the rug, but she was still at her table in the far corner, getting what she needed. Her students were pretty much behaving, but starting to get a little fidgety. When she got over to them, sitting on her chair beneath the calendar and schedule that they review every morning, she looked a bit worn already. Her group, which could be quite active on a predictable day, seemed to tie in to a sense that things were not going the usual way.

To be inside the "student bubble" means a different thing with primary age students. Primary teaching is not "elementary-light"; it is its own unique setting requiring a particular approach geared to the youngest students. Whereas teachers of older grades can reiterate commonly understood school hierarchies, that has little meaning to little kids. They need a teacher to relate to them as much like a person as possible. At this point, Michelle could have bulled her way forward, pretending that nothing was amiss, but instead she chose to crawl into the "student bubble" with her kids and be that person that they needed.

Leaning forward she talked about going to the dentist and showed them the x-rays of her root canal. Quickly, all of that nervous fidgetiness and distracting talk was gone and they were all quite attentive, listening carefully talking about what she had gone through and how she felt. These are all kids for whom going to the dentist is a relatively new experience and you could see that they understood. Moments later the kids were standing up, looking in each other's mouths.

Michelle brought them back, using the x-ray to show her dentist had solved a problem. Her students were totally engaged; she had taken a moment that she could have set aside to be an "authority model teacher" and instead had used it as a time to both add to her personal relationship with her students and increase their knowledge based on what had happened to her.

The Morning Meeting that day had been on heroes and Michelle then connected her root canal to being able to see her dentist as a hero. This invited her students to give examples of who their heroes were and why. There were lots of personal stories, but not being tied to the clock, Michelle was able to indulge them, devoting time to further building community, allowing her students to be heard, showing great respect for their personal experiences---all possible because of Peachtown's flexible consideration of time. Their Main Lesson that day was on digestion and Michelle connected what they had been discussing to the role that the mouth plays in digestion and they were off---engaged and ready for more.

The teachers here are, in a sense, of a previous time, before teaching was professionalized and subject to a defined set of expectations and practices. At times, it occurs to me that their teaching is more like that of a parent. Each teacher here is both experienced and credentialed, so I am not speaking of their formal preparation to instruct. However, it may follow that in a place that honors children's natural abilities as learners, one that does not evaluate them through the forms of contemporary standardization, teachers would be led to instruct in a way that is outside the confines of current prescribed teaching practices. For instruction, as well as learning, has become narrowed during this Age of Accountability, now defined by "Best Practices." A place that sees learning as universal, may also see teaching as encompassing a wider breadth of practices than is contained in "Classroom Management."

"Why is money a part of Math?" Alyssa asked one morning, beginning her Math lessons for the day. "Because we use it to buy stuff," a student responded. Over the next hour she would teach both the Owls and the Kittens about coins and different combinations. This was their first lesson in the unit and there was a lot of ambient conversation that she accepted as part of the excitement that comes with starting something new. She used both real coins and plastic models, generating lots of interest from her students that of course meant lots of extra talk and she was patient with every bit of it. As she passed them out, she referred back to her fractions lesson and the importance of sharing equally. "I'm trusting everybody is making sure they have just enough for themselves." The extra talk died down here as they discussed the differences and similarities between the models and real coins and raised hands were used instead of just shouting out. Alyssa does not parcel out the coins by type; instead she gives them a group of all four types and they all look in, hanging over the table to see similarities and differences, working together to find matches. "If anything, I err on the side of too much and then I pull it back. I'd rather throw a lot at them at once." she tells me later. It works pretty well until excitement leads to disorder; Alyssa sits them on a rug for a, "quick little meetup"; They listen quietly, as she wraps her redirection up with," I'm counting on you." And with a little more time for comparing coins, the lesson wraps up pretty smoothly.

This doesn't so much remind me of other classrooms I've been in as it does homeschooling. A female surrounded by young children on the floor and table of a living room indulgently and patiently teaching them using somewhat dated non-digital materials, putting up with extraneous conversation and movement because that's what you have to do with your own children. It is very unlike the standard expectations for classroom behavior for both teachers and

students. All of the teachers here seem to regard conversation with children with the same attitude. Is it Inclusion? Acceptance? Lack of a need to manage? It is kinder than tolerance; is it ok to say that it's love? That these teachers are guided by love?

Michelle once told me, "The kids learn from each other when they see how we respond to each other. There's a lot of modeling and we all here are very loving, patient, and understanding. Kids need to see that and that no matter what, we still love them. It helps with their learning and it takes time." And there it is again: time. Again and again, as I spoke with parents and teachers and former students of Peachtown, unprompted by me, they would mention that time was important to what is done here. There is an elasticity to what is done in this setting, a stretching of what it means to be a student, to be a teacher, to be a learner due to the way that time is viewed. Mary Anne said, "Academically, they've been given the opportunity to work at their own pace." This is made possible because Peachtown has intentionally chosen to stand outside the time-intensive demands of contemporary schooling.

This section has focused on what is distinctive about the teaching approach at Peachtown, especially as concerns the way in which they engage with their students. The founder told me, "All the people who work here are invested, making as little as they do." There is a significant financial cost to working at a school outside of mainstream public education. This commitment is reflected in their consistent application of the Peachtown ethos of faith and trust in their students and their innate sensibilities, no matter how much time that might require. A graduate remembers:

> They pick a subject, like the Middle Ages or something, and everything that we did was about that subject. We were reading books about the Middle Ages, and we would do ... I remember we did like a little pageant, and we all dressed up as kings and queens, and did the whole thing because that's what we were studying, the Middle Ages. We built castles in science class, and everything that we did revolved around that one subject. We were completely immersed into it. At Peachtown they encompassed it all. You really got the whole feel for it.

While this obviously is a testament to this graduate's recollection of Peachtown' s willingness to commit to their student's learning, no matter the time-frame, it is no less impressive than the patience and consideration that I saw in observing the teachers there for this project. I believe that the rationale for this is no more complicated than what Genelle told me, "We all here are very loving, very understanding and patient. No matter what we still love them."

Hierarchies demand an acceptance of roles and at Peachtown, as Michelle told me, "We blur the edges." To a certain degree, that changes with age and maturity, however everyone is considered as a both teacher and a learner, which defines the time that they spend with each other. While many of the sections in this chapter center around what is done with the day at Peachtown, this one has been more concerned with how moment-to-moment time is spent there, more precisely, how the community members react to each other. The assumption, on the part of the teachers, is that all the students want to learn more, that they can't help but do that, given their makeup. Alyssa said, "I was drawn to a school like this that just makes more sense [than TPS]. Being a mother it gives me a different perspective. With my own kids I can see how learning is so innate." The teachers at Peachtown assume children come to school, more than anything else, wanting to learn.

Windows of Time to be "Just People"- Autoethnography

We get a lot of mixed messages as teachers. I'm told that my class should be constructing knowledge and be actively learning, yet there still exists an equivalence in many minds between a teacher's being able to control their class's movements and speech and their competence as an instructor. For many, it is nearly an educational archetype that a class that is silently sitting in place, attentive to the teacher's every move is a class that is ready to learn. On the other hand, walk by a class that has noisy kids, moving around, and many will assume that worse than no learning is going on and that the teacher has "management issues." I believe that one of the unfortunate effects of "best practices" has been to suggest that a uniformity of classroom management is desirable, no matter the makeup of my class that year.

I can't tell you what my classroom management style will be next year, it depends on who's in my class, and what they need. What I can tell you is that I have always tried to talk to the kids in my class like they are people first and students second. One of the best compliments I ever received was from a TA who told me, "You talk to all of your kids like you assume they want to learn." I don't look at their cumulative folders sent on to me by their kindergarten teachers and, other than my conversations with parents about their children before school begins, try to not clutter my mind with other people's judgements about who my students are before school begins. There is plenty of time in the long school year for meetings to review scores and there's lots of time for me to be the authority figure making demands about what needs to be done. I just like to allow windows of time, at the beginning of the year and throughout our months together, for my student and I to just talk like we're people.

This isn't to say that I don't have high expectations and academically challenge my students, but somewhere in there, with our concern about "rigor," I think it's good to remember we work with very fragile people who are more than "data points." Every day I try to sit with my kids and talk about their lives with them, apart from what's going on in school. Most of my colleagues do as well. I can't imagine teaching First Grade without having been a parent. I use many of the same skills of patience, empathy, and understanding that I called on with my own children. This may not necessarily be the most instructionally efficient way to use my classroom time with my students and I'm not sure where it lies on the "best practices" spectrum. It has been my experience that taking time to treat your students like people first and allowing them the same latitude you would someone you know outside of school has both academic and social benefits. I don't think I'm unusual in this way, this is just what primary grade teachers do.

Communal Non-Academic Times of Sharing

Another type of division established in public schools is the separation of teachers and students from each other during certain times of the day. The contemporary TPS, although it ,may like to represent itself as a "family" or a "community," primarily is neither; it is an institutional arrangement, with school participants regularly divided by their schedules. Peachtown has no such divisions and its members are together throughout the day, due in part to the small facility and population. The following describes some of these non-academic times and the part that they play in this learning community. The final piece of the discussion is my reflection on less-formal times with my students.

"Here we can't get away from each other"- Peachtown

In school, we sometimes talk about how our students behave during "unstructured time." When roles are less defined, issues of self-control and direction can sometimes emerge. At Peachtown, as Mary Anne told me, "Here, you really have to know yourself to know how to self-regulate." Without a facility that allows for divisions during certain times of the day, interpersonal relations between adults and children and between children of different ages become more visible. Many communities like to refer to themselves as families, but it is in these less formal times that the accuracy of such claims can be assessed. In settings where lines of authority are less clear, the strength of relational bonds become clear.

The Peachtown community is close together throughout their school week. Their facility is a small ranch-style home and all instruction takes place in groups. There are no grade levels, formal classrooms, long school corridors, or expansive rooms such as cafeterias or Gyms in which people can spread out: the students and their teachers are always together. For a learning community whose use of more formal instructional time has been described as "intimate" and "trusting," this constant proximity allows for an even further transference and sharing of that community's culture. Many of the descriptions of the school's Morning Meeting and "Main Lesson" also apply to the more informal times that the members of this community share.

In the same way that younger and older children start the day and learn together, they also mix during these times of physical activity and eating. A teacher at the school told me that, "We try to stay away from hierarches and the problems that they cause," and this can be seen even in these less formal points of the day. This is a further expression of the school's lateral

model of interaction and their embrace of informality between all community members. As a private school, which regularly has students leave and others enter, this allows for an indoctrination into the Peachtown culture for new members.

The most noticeable example of this is the nearly constant teacher-student interaction. From the moment the students arrive in the morning to the time that they leave they are with their teachers, including lunch, Physical Education, and learning groups. The opportunity for teachers to have an influence on their students as people, outside of times specifically devoted to formal learning, is significant here. They relate to each other in a non-institutional way, outside of their roles as teachers and students.

A former student said, “I think that one of the things that Peachtown really taught me was about community They helped me so much, and I still think about it all the time. I do. The people who work there, they still inspire me today. The people that they are, and the things that they taught me. They just equipped me.. So Peachtown really allowed me to grow in that, and figure out who I wanted to be, and what was important to me at that age.” (Kloss, 2018c, p. 19)

The teachers of the upper and lower sections are each responsible for their children’s physical education for the day. Many times this takes place in the grassy area surrounding the school, either on the playground or a space nearby. In addition to further building the group of students and their teacher as a community, this time has been known to yield discussions of the schoolwide learning units that are taking place. Alyssa told me, “Because we’re all learning the same thing at the same time it gets kids talking about academic things outside of the classroom. Kids are re-enacting things on the playground, they’re having discussion at lunch. They’re

comparing what's happening in different classrooms. There's this whole other topic to talk about that they have in common." I have heard discussions of the Middle Ages, the Human Body, and poverty in early 20th century America all take place during Physical Education times. Having such a small population, the social aspects of this school are limited, there are no sports teams, so what these children largely have in common is what they learn during the day. It is in these conversations that you see the stated belief of the current leadership that, "Children of all ages are intrigued by complex concepts," illustrated. Not as a requirement for a grade, not to answer a teacher's question; just because they're interested in it. While all schools are social settings, there is ample evidence that this one is centered around academic learning.

Located on the campus of a small private co-educational college, Peachtown is able to take advantage of many of the college's resources and facilities. This allows their children to regularly take swimming classes using the college's pool. Michelle recalled a conversation some of her students had while the school was studying Sound: "We were up swimming and a few of them had gotten ready. These five-year olds hit on the pipes and said, 'Did you hear that? It's the sound waves.' I thought, I love my job. We have those learning moments often here. They talk about it outside the school. They take it home and do experiments there. We don't need a test to see that they're learning."

There is no cafeteria at Peachtown. The children arrive in the morning and put their lunches on a kitchen counter next to a dated rounded refrigerator. Directly off of the kitchen is what I imagine at one point was a living room area. The far side of it is separated off by waist-high bookshelves perpendicular to the rugged area where the Morning Meeting takes place. The nearer section includes three round tables that the younger students use for their morning

learning. This is also the area where the entire school will eat together at about 12:30 each day. No lunches are prepared here, they're all just taken out of the refrigerator, and the entire community has lunch, mixed together, around those three tables. This is consistent with the school's philosophy of grouping students of different ages together in a variety of contexts, trusting that the older ones are responsibly modeling for the younger students. Again, what is most noticeable about this situation is the teachers eating with students every day and conversing with them like they are peers. The usual signs of supervision and correction that may sometimes be seen with adults who are among children, are not common at these times. They talk to kids in a non-condescending way and the kids respond appropriately. This is another sign of the way in which this is a true community of individuals with few hierarchies.

As with the physical education time, children take advantage of this more social time to discuss their perceptions of what they've learned with those around them. I recall a conversation, in the midst of a unit on Ancient Civilizations, where I heard a girl, from the younger learning group, talk with the director about how some words in the ancient world had different meanings from those in contemporary societies. She concluded her talk with a rather physical explanation of the difference between wrestling in Ancient Greece and contemporary popular wrestling, much to the amusement of those around her. Such expressions are significant for two reasons. First, they show a retention of, interest in, and desire to retell what has been learned. Secondly, it is reflective of an environment where such things are valued enough so that they are frequently the topic of conversation among young people.

As interesting as the way lunch takes place here is, I never failed to be more impressed by what immediately follows. Once they finish their lunch, the Peachtown students do not rush

outside to the playground or sit around and talk among themselves. Instead, they do chores. In an organized way that obviously includes specific duties for different children, the students, with very little adult involvement, grab brooms, vacuums, dust cloths and more and spend 10-15 minutes cleaning the school. I never witnessed complaining about this or students refusing to do their part. The lunch tables are wiped down and any food that may have fallen is vacuumed up. But the rooms in which they learn were also dusted and vacuumed and the kitchen was attended to as well. This is a daily practice with a rotation of children doing things to take care of their learning setting and the activities for the afternoon never start before it is completed.

Every time I see this unfold, I am impressed. Part of that is just the efficiency of what is going on---the fact that the students know what to do, get to their task, and complete it competently with little adult input is impressive. But more than that, to see students taking care of their learning setting is almost touching to me. During this "chore time," students are willingly---and I have to confess, at times, enthusiastically--- cleaning the place that they come to 4 days a week, to be a part of a learning community. To watch the entire student community willingly work to maintain their space is noteworthy. The lessons in responsibility and maturity that it teaches are valuable and, in a way, subversive to the established adult-child relationship in school, where students come to expect that the adults in their school will provide everything that is necessary to learn, including maintaining the space in which this work is done. Peachtown, with its lateral treatment of students as seen in personal interactions and their learning dynamic, also includes them in a portion of the work needed to make this school possible.

In concluding this section on how this little school uses time during its school day, I turn to an annual event that Peachtown devotes weeks and weeks to each Spring. The Spring Play

has been going on for over a decade and involves all of the members of the school community. Among the shows that have been performed are*, The Princess Bride, As You Like It, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Charlie, and The Tempest*. The teacher with the most extensive theater background directs the show, with the others working with their students in the preparation and eventual staging of the show. The school is able to use the auditorium of the college as part of its ongoing relationship with the college that allows Peachtown students access to a variety of resources.

Peachtown's commitment to this annual performance is congruent with their expansive view of what an education should be. The Mission Statement commits the school to, "Creative writing, fine art, drama, and music allowing for expression of individuality,' (p. 2) and the Academic Program Statement states that, "Through years of experience and increasingly large roles, students learn to project their voices, move with poise, and perform for a large audience with confidence." For this project, I was able to watch rehearsals for an upcoming show. All students were involved in the play, with each one appearing on stage, learning lines, and engaging with the show's stage production. This show represents an annual maturing experience that allows the community to grow in collaboration. By giving each child a chance to perform in public they are allowing for personal growth among its students who may find academic work challenging. The Spring play is an example of Peachtown's commitment to using significant amounts of time on activities that respects their student's capacities and the benefits that come from their community working together.

Alyssa was once talking to me about talking through an issue between two students. "If this was a bigger school, I could have had him just go play with somebody else. Instead we had a

90-minute therapy session in my office, because here we can't get away from each other." Time at Peachtown is experienced in a different way than many contemporary learning settings. While there is a consistent schedule, there are few strict time delineations that require everything to be dropped so the students and adults can get somewhere else. They truly are all together all day long, with each other, and they have to work things out. As with their financial limitations that have led to a creativity and had a positive impact on their students, I believe that being with each other all day, combined with Peachtown's commitment to respect for its students, makes this a stronger, more bonded community.

Seeing my Students for Who They Truly Are- Autoethnography

It is possible to forget that students are people. In school, I increasingly use my time to meet standards, teach skills that I'm told will be necessary for future success, and coerce children to conform to the schooling model. In the most energetic years of their lives, I make students sit passively for large pieces of the day, listening to me speak, and then reward them for accuracy in repeating back to me what they heard. It is not much solace to know that traditionally this is how children have spent their time in most schools. At times I can't escape the thought that we are so busy molding them into "successful students," that we don't have much time left to get to know them as people. At the younger grades we have some opportunity to just spend time with our students, building our relationships, but with increasing monitoring of our "efficiency," even that is being reduced. But this is not the only choice that we have.

> "I would say it was almost family-like. I think in Peachtown, it wasn't just the older kids teaching the younger kids, but it was really an exchange, and I think it kind of allowed me to have respect for people that weren't just my age and to be really willing to learn from them and listen to them and be friends with them. Just purely making friends with kids that were multiple years, younger or older than me. That was really special."

I feel that so much of what we do in school is for something that is not happening yet--- a skill or competency that will be needed for a test or an expectation in a future grade level. We tell them, "I know that this won't make sense, but you're going to need to know this in _______ grade." I understand the need to introduce concepts that will be mastered later, but, particularly, for young students, the level of abstraction can make how we spend our time with them seem disconnected. More and more it seems that we are not fully with them, as they are in front of us, in the moments that we spend with our students. When you're always working towards something else it's difficult to truly see what's going on as you do it. And when those moments accumulate, that's when it's harder to truly see your student for the people that they are.

Every Spring, my class and a Thjrd Grade class in my school, put on a short musical for the rest of the school. It's a pretty involved process that takes almost two months from start to finish. We've done it for 15 years and have seen so many good things come from these productions. We frequently hear things like: "How do you have time for this and still get everything done?" and, "I could never do a play. I'd never get to my reading groups." The most valuable thing that I will take from the rehearsing and performing for these shows is watching my students out of the classroom, away from their desks and their books; to just be able to clearly see them as children, not as students and all that role includes, but just as people. To watch them moving and singing and working together with each other and the older class is

always very moving for me. The self-control and responsibility and non-academic learning that is involved in being part of a production is something that those who have never done it can't understand. I know why we have to do what we do in school and it's with good intentions, but I can't help but think that there ought to be a little more time and space for things like our show, what my class learns by doing it, and how it builds what my students are individually and together. When you're performing, you have to be fully present with what you're doing or it will be a disaster. I wish, somehow our moments at school could include more of them.

Connecting Peachtown to My Experience

I can't tell you how many times during the school day I look at the clock in my room, just as I can't adequately explain how difficult it is to find any clocks at Peachtown. My own class has its day chopped into pieces so that we either can finish one thing to get to the next one or because we have to be somewhere else in the building for another strictly defined segment of time. I only have so long to explain things and my kids only have so long to do them and we may be at a great point talking about why anyone ever thought slavery was an ok thing to do, but I'm always aware we've got to get to the next piece of the lesson or another subject or Lunch. Very little feels concluded or completed; we just run out of time.

So in this first chapter of findings, on Time, I find it necessary to say that one of the most appealing aspects of Peachtown to me is that it is a place, removed from time. While there is a schedule that is followed, the importance of being right on time to get to somewhere else is not as prevalent as in my teaching environment. Conversations seem to take longer, discussions seem to twist and turn to accommodate comments from anyone who wants to contribute, and

while the teachers there masterfully always get their students to where they need to be, it is without the hard left turns that I have to make in my room that sometimes jar my students into place. It is a much more gentle place than I sense public school has become in recent years. A significant element in that is a confidence and trust that the community members have in each other that they are working together. We do a lot of obvious directing and controlling in TPS that is less apparent there.

In a different way, though, Peachtown is a place outside of" this time," the time that we're in now, one of instructional efficiency, focused on measurable outcomes. They don't worry about outcomes. Alyssa said to me, ""It's a very open and accepting place. This place is a better practice for life than the public-school model." I think that's true because, while the kids in my class have always walked away with a lot of knowledge, the learning done at Peachtown is closer to the learning that all of us do in our lives outside of the classroom. Schooling is an construct, a manufactured form of learning. The learning you do outside of school is a more natural thing. It's more driven by interests, a learning that doesn't conclude with a test or when the clock says so and it's advanced by working with, not competing against, the people around you. Somehow there, they are able to encourage natural learning in a dedicated setting.

This chapter has discussed the ways in which Peachtown Elementary School conceives of time and the approaches that they have developed to implement their vision. Their significant faith in all of their students to have an interest and willingness to learn about complex subjects is manifested in their multi-age learning groups and schoolwide curriculum. Additionally, the daily

schedule accommodates continued discussion of the day's learning between children of different ages. Most essentially, the manner in which the school's teachers address their students reduces confrontation and helps to form a true community of learning for all of its members. Next, I will turn to the learning that is done at Peachtown and five of its significant aspects.

Chapter 6

LEARNING IN A PROGRESSIVE SETTING

"I think the education system is running along 50 paces behind and we're trying to fix something that's already gone ahead of us and we're looking back."

Barbara Post

Introduction

- This data chapter will discuss five factors that specifically influence what makes the learning experience at Peachtown distinctive. Briefly, Peachtown assumes that all of its students are capable and interested in learning about the things of the world. It recognizes that they are learners every moment of their lives and what they bring to school may be just as important as what they gain there. There are intentional philosophies and practices that recognize that children can play a part in directing portions of their education and that true learning can be displayed in many ways. Perhaps the animating theme that runs through this chapter is the school's faith that all members of a learning community have within them much that can improve the lives of both the community and its members. Their practices display that it is the job of the school to refine and develop those gifts so that they can be brought forth for the benefit of all.

Peachtown's Belief That Everyone is a Natural Learner

Institutional schooling manages and controls students in an effort to curb and restrict their behaviors so as to best fit the TPS model of learning. Through these practices, a long-standing conceptualization of children as being inadequate to significantly influence their learning is revealed. Peachtown places a great deal of trust in their students' capacities and natural abilities. This section documents the ways in which these beliefs are stated and enacted in the school's

instruction. Following that description, I reflect upon the place that autodidaxy plays in my classroom.

Making the Curriculum Fit the Students - Peachtown

The Peachtown Mission Statement uses language that indicates their belief in each child's innate learning capacities. In stating that, "Each child should leave Peachtown…with their own unique body of knowledge that is shaped by their interest and research," (p. 1) the school assumes that all of their students have the capability and initiative needed to pursue such a reflective project. Rather than seeing students as in need of management, the instruction that occurs here happens in a context of faith that the children want to know more and will do what they need to gain that knowledge. This requires an adaptation on the part of the teacher as they approach their work each day. Alyssa told me, "You can't lesson plan here the way that a lot of places require because you don't know what the kids are going to be drawn to and where you want to end up spending a little more time because they're so into it. I feel like I leave a lot of room for the kids to help dictate what topic you spend more time on." It is noteworthy that the instruction here needs to have a certain amount of plasticity, space within, to accommodate the additional amount of choice available to these students. There also needs to be a tolerance for the processing conversations that young learners engage in with each other during their learning times, "When you do a group activity, there can be a lot of peer noise. But in a group activity, you discover things. And the kids feed off of each other so much," the school's founder once told me. In the same conversation, she also referenced the need to teach in such a way that it is possible to be continually discovering more about your students.

My observation of the developmental path at Peachtown is that the instruction provided to the younger group plays a crucial role in planting within their students the sense that they are capable of learning any concepts that the teachers bring forward. My mind goes back to a lesson I saw on "The Westward Expansion." On this particular morning, Michelle was discussing the modes of transportation used for settlers traveling west during this era. Setting aside the ambitiousness of engaging children as young as four on this topic, the lesson was filled with historical facts and details, that would be notable for any elementary grade. Recent scholarship has pointed to the trend towards a paucity in historical detail in K-12 Social Studies (George, 2019), yet here in this little under-funded progressive school, children, some of whom have yet to learn to tie their shoes, were considering the challenges to 19th century settlers in uprooting their homes. Michelle was working out the school's promise of its Mission Statement that, "All students will have full access to the whole curriculum." (p. 2)

After a brief discussion, where the students recalled previous learning, she used a read-aloud to frame their work for the morning. Their focus for that day was to decide what would be the best way for settlers to cross the Great Plains of the United States. Children used drawings that were then shared to produce a list of things that such a transport would need, including "wheels," "something to keep off the sun," and "someplace to sleep." Some worked individually, most were in pairs; nearly all seemed engaged. I don't recall anyone giving up because it was too hard or getting overly frustrated at the task they were confronting. In the end, it was a short transition from the young children's ideas to the covered wagon technology that Michelle unveiled to them as the choice that was used. And so they were off, clapping for, crawling on the rug---they are young children after all. But more importantly, somewhere inside of them I

suppose that something was planted or nurtured that allowed these young students to access the sense that they are capable.

After the lesson, I talked with Michelle about her belief in her students' innate ability to comprehend, no matter what the topic is. "It's part of being a Progressive School. Progressive means to me children are learning without them knowing they're learning through activity. Our curriculum is also progressive the way we intermingle Science and History. They get a taste of everything, the kids get exposed to so many different things. They get a taste of it, they get it in their schemata and then they get it again to build upon." She shares the belief that Peachtown has implemented since its inception that all children are capable of understanding the full range of human knowledge and using what is within them to grow. The school's founder explained., "We are what was traditional to the Progressive Education movement of 100 years ago. We are rooted in traditional education. We are rooted in the Socratic Method, Aristotle…that's what we do. "

Like all schools, Peachtown is legally bound to ensure that its children are educated in the areas defined by the New York State Standards. However, remembering that a teacher here told me, "We don't fit the student into the curriculum, we fit the curriculum around our students," Peachtown has in place a set of philosophies and practices that intentionally allow for a manner of instruction that always considers what the child brings to their learning each day. Many of these were described in the previous chapter. It is important to recognize that such an approach presupposes that every child has within them both what they need to grow and an interest in doing so. It is a bold thing to attempt to teach physics, immigration, and the theory of sound to

young children and more than a little subversive to the prevailing view of students that they need to be managed and coerced in order to learn the things that they will need. If it is true that, "There are two reasons to learn something: either because you need it or because you love it," (Aldrich, 2011) then it is possible that our contemporary conceptualization of children and their disposition towards learning has overemphasized the first half of that equation, while minimizing the latter.

Peachtown is counter-cultural in its conceptualization of children as naturally capable and interested learners. Barbara said, "We've[education] lost our mission of holistic raising of great kids to be independent thinkers. Everything is conformity and testing standards. We've [Peachtown] stayed where we were and everyone has moved away from a humane center." It is somewhat sad to consider that this place is a haven of sorts, a safe environment for all of its members. For adults, this is a place where they are, in an educational landscape forever demanding more and more data, safe to believe that children want to do their best. "Children can still be children here and learn at their own pace, including learning from each other," a teacher told me. Children are safe here, protected from narrowed curriculum and instruction and the demands of standardization, given the time and space to find out who they are as learners. A former student remembered, "They were great. The school really allowed me to learn in my own way, and grow in that, and really worked to understand me as a child and how I can best learn."

Peachtown's population regularly increases during the schoolyear as parents discover that the rigor and strong emphasis on state standards over individual needs that is so valued in public

education is making school problematic for their child. I had numerous conversations during my time there with the leadership about new children who would be entering because parents had come to believe that their TPS was not working for them. It was not unusual for this to occur every few weeks, once the school year was a at least quarter over. Interestingly, a number of these students had parents who held positions in the education field. One nearby local district contacted Peachtown to see if they would be able to take students who "are not thriving" in their schools. For these children, Peachtown has become a welcoming environment whose flexibility and accommodation of their individuality has improved their learning situation.

Which brings me to "Heather". She is a young lady who had academic and behavioral difficulties while attending the public school in the district that Peachtown is located in with. One day I heard her say, "At [her former district], I had to beat people up if I didn't want a black eye." I saw her be combative and argumentative, I saw her absorbed and consumed by her work. I saw her advance discussions. I saw her distract the entire room. Heather was a complicated student, but I never saw any of her teachers condescend to her or change their expectation that she could achieve with her classmates. While Heather, with her own particular set of strengths and limitations, may not have been a good fit for her TPS, at Peachtown, I frequently heard her praised for her creativity and effort. I specifically recall a day from the Human Body unit that I mentioned in Chapter 4. Heather had a noticeably difficult time settling on an idea that she felt good about to depict the way the different parts of her body worked with each other. Most of

those around her were using pictures for their work. It was obvious that Heather was frustrated, not knowing what to do.

Mary Anne, who always seemed to have a good understanding where all of her students were at with their work, sat down with Heather, ignored some of her adolescent histrionics, and talked her through Heather's feeling lost by the assignment. Eventually, after some insightful questioning by Mary Anne, the two of them arrived at the notion that Heather would write about her recent doctor appointments. By investing her time in Heather, allowing her to take a different path, listening to what mattered most to her student, Heather was pointed in a direction that allowed her to use the form best suited for what she wanted to express. There was no attempt to dictate to or require that the student go a certain way with this project. Instead, the teacher showed great faith in this girl's ability to be the best judge of how she wanted this work to look.

While Peachtown gets a number of students trying to escape bullying in the public schools, there are also a number of children there who had difficulty achieving in the classrooms of those schools. Invariably, there is an adjustment period as new students enter the school, but within a relatively short period, many of these students have become acculturated, chiefly due to the behaviors of their peers. New students need to adjust from a more directed learning environment to one where more choice and trust are available to students. Mary Anne described the adjustment to Peachtown as, "You really have to know yourself to know how to self-regulate. Also, taking the initiative to ask yourself, 'What's being asked of me? What do I need to do?' It's less directed."

Students who have struggled in more restrictive settings can benefit from Peachtown' s belief in the natural learning abilities of every child. With no grades to assign, teachers have the latitude to consider the different strengths that a child may have that fall outside standard expectations. The founder recalled such a child, remembering, "There were things that hadn't been discovered. I always felt bad for that one student I know I told you about, who was a weak student in every regard. He had mental acuity, but he was just not very sharp and his reading and writing was not good and we worried a lot about him. He was different. And then we discovered that he was a poet. He thought metaphorically." Their concept of children as naturally capable, combined with a flexibility in instruction and curriculum that allowed this student to find his path: "He wrote music lyrics and poetry. And it was like, I don't think I ever would have discovered that if I had been shaping a program for him." Or if they had been determining competence through the use of a written test. In an environment such as this, assessment of progress is also approached in an alternative manner.

Surviving as an Individual in a Conformist Institution - Autoethnography

The evolution in my thinking about children and learning during the course of my career has been substantial. I began my work as a teacher firmly committed to the idea that what I did in school was essential to my students' development as learners. Partially due to my work as a teacher, but perhaps more connected to my observations as a parent, I have come to believe that children do not need school to learn. While we can focus and facilitate, pointing towards skills and knowledge that a child will need as a citizen in a democracy, I have been disappointed at

times, with my school's emphasis on conformity and compliance and how that can negatively impact a student's intellectual growth and development of thinking skills. I have also seen schools as dangerous places socially and emotionally for many children, environments that process rather than nurture.

So, interestingly, I find myself having devoted my career to an institution that, at times, I think children need to be protected from. At this point, influenced by the research that I have done in homeschooling, democratic schools, and progressive schooling, and what I have seen in my students, I am convinced that we all are natural learners, learning things every day of our lives and that schools need to recognize that reality and focus their efforts towards taking advantage of these innate capacities. Unfortunately, too often my students' days have included practices that do not further these natural abilities and curiosities and instead turn learning into a job that invariably becomes a series of duties. My teaching and PhD research have led me to believe that a learner's control over time, space, and choice are needed for authentic learning.

How then have I managed to survive in such a restrictive setting while holding these beliefs? Why would I stay if I think there are some essential structural issues in how schooling is conducted for many children in the system? My simple answer to that is I'm a teacher and schools are our setting. There are things that I have not been able to isolate my students from---atomized curriculum, standardized assessments, age-segregation. But, I've found that there is a space that you can operate in where you provide the bureaucracy with enough that lets them check the box on your class so that they then leave you alone. Then, I have been able to allow all

sorts of student choice and autonomy, respecting them as individuals and giving them a year where they are asked what they think and are given opportunities for self-expression that they may never have again. This may be through performances. student-driven discussions, or following curricular paths that interest my class and perhaps lie outside of the standards, but feed their curiosity.

So I have allowed students to apply their innate abilities and to follow their interests to a significant degree by meeting the letter of the law without succumbing to its spirit. The system can make my students take assessments, but it can't practically monitor my daily instruction in those areas being measured. My commitment is to what's best for my students and that includes allowing them to use their natural abilities and if that means skirting some policies and dictates, that's what I've done. In the process, I've heard from many former students that they never had another year like the one they spent in my class. They just needed some space left for them to be people before students.

Performance as Assessment

Assessment of academic progress continues to be an area of great attention in both policy and scholarship. In this data-driven educational era, student achievement on standardized measures has come to be accepted by nearly all parties as comparable with test success. Peachtown's manner of assessing their students' growth is quite different from that of mainstream schooling, looking at a student's direct application of the knowledge they have gained in a form of their choosing. This section examines how they use performance to measure

their students' progress. In the last portion, I consider how I have used performance in my classroom with my students' work.

"We don't need a test to tell us what they can do." – Peachtown

I will consider assessment twice in my findings on Peachtown Elementary School; first here, in my chapter on Learning, but also in the next chapter, looking at how the approaches to considering student progress there contribute to their sense of community. While growth for a student in school can take many forms, in the contemporary educational landscape, "student achievement" is synonymous with test results. Since defining a student's growth by their success on end-of-the-year standardized measures in Math and Language Arts is now accepted, a significant amount of classroom time is devoted to creating the conditions for test achievement, in place of other manners of learning, affecting both teaching and learning. At Peachtown, there are no written tests; I don't mean that there are no standardized tests, there are no tests at all: no Friday Spelling tests, no Unit tests, no Math quizzes. The school sees an education worth having as encompassing a much wider circumference. Peachtown's founder told me, "We need to stop fixating on testing standards. We're trying to do the right thing. Schools are using tests to fix a problem and they don't even see that things have moved 50 miles down the road."

The behaviors that are nurtured in students at Peachtown are of a different sphere than that of the "testing world." The Mission Statement speaks of students having, "the opportunity to question and comment respectfully on all topics" and teaching that, "should emphasize dialogue [and] elicit thought and commentary as well as critical and creative thinking." (p. 2) Not

surprisingly, there is little enthusiasm at Peachtown for reducing any measurement of student success to a simple test score. Alyssa tried to explain the difference in focus, saying, "We're never teaching towards a document, we're always teaching towards a set of skills or understandings we expect our kids to have. It's less about the product and more about the process that way. Not that the product doesn't matter, but that's if it is an authentic product and I don't feel that tests are an authentic product of life."

An excellent example of a documentation of the learning process at Peachtown is in MaryAnn's use of the sketchbook in her work with the older students. As previously mentioned, these are large artist-style books that are used throughout an individual schoolyear to capture a student's work and will include drawings, assigned writing, personal reflections, and projects of the student's own choosing Their spaciousness allows the students the room to include mixed formats in completing an assignment. These are key elements in the way that Mary Anne measures their learning. "Their books are their assessments. The lack of [formal] assessments doesn't change how I teach." In place of a test-based system of assessment, Peachtown places emphasis on what a student personally produces, which allows them to both focus the work on a significant area and allow the students the space to express their learning in the way that they choose. "We know that learning is done through demonstration of knowledge, their observations, what they write down. By what they produce," Mary Ann said.

As a student-centered environment in the Progressive tradition, significant attention is paid to how a student shows what they have learned. The sketchbook entries that I observed in

the Human Geography unit were maps that each had created of their own lives. Using accepted map creation skills, they had produced personalized, yet competent and detailed maps that revealed significant investment in the work they had done. These included maps of their towns, homes, and local area. "Their creations (projects, books) are an authentic assessment of what they've learned," Mary Ann noted. These expressions of academic progress are congruent with Peachtown's faith in their children's abilities to learn in a personal, not standardized way.

Alyssa again pointed out what how using this student-centered approach as opposed to a data-centered one, allows them freedom. "We can take these units and make them deep and meaningful and use them as a way to practice critical thinking. It's less about the memorization of facts and details and more about the process of learning." In the midst of a data-driven era that has been fully embraced by the educational system, we see here another example of Peachtown's counter-cultural nature. "I don't know when teaching everything, beginning with Aristotle and Socrates became 'counter-culture,'" the founder once told me. "I think what we're doing was 'culture' 40, 50 years ago, I guess now, that's counter-cultural." Rather than being bound by state standards and prescribed curricula, the key elements of Peachtown's work come together to produce an education that allows a student the pace to discover how they as an individual learn. An alumnus told me, "Being in Peachtown there is no pressure about what you say, if you are saying the wrong thing. I don't have a fear of messing up as much… really just educating in an environment where there is no pressure. No need to succeed to a certain standard, but the only

standard they ever wanted, was for you to do your best, which I think all education should be like." (Kloss, 2014c)

In coming to learn about this place, one thing I discovered is the importance placed on reading here. Former students recalled the freedom they were given to choose what they wanted to read from a very young age and how those choices resulted in their enjoying reading much more than they would of if they had been dictated to Alyssa told me, "This is a culture of reading here. Every here loves to read. New kids pick that up quickly from the other kids here and they just become part of it."

So how does that a school with an established reading culture, whose alumni fondly recall the positive reading encouragement they received there, whose older students have exhibited enthusiasm for a wide collection of contemporary fiction (Kloss, 2018b), measure the progress its youngest readers make? During this project, I did six separate observations of the younger group and I don't recall ever seeing any sort of formal reading assessment or evaluation being done. I saw lots of kids reading books at different times, but I never saw a "Running Record" or similar type of accounting of reading skills. What I did see were a lot of groups of three and four young children sitting with Michelle in a little alcove, separating the kitchen from the living room, around a round table, reading together. I heard lots of patience and correction; just a small group of people working through another book. Just after snack, first she would meet with the Owls (2nd and 3rd Grade aged) and the Kittens (the youngest group) and they would read together.

"We know kids have learned by doing. They perform and just do it. I don't need a standardized test to know that they can do it. I watch them and write down what they do," Michelle told me. At Peachtown, the performance is the assessment. When Alyssa stated, "I don't feel that tests are an authentic product of life," she was suggesting that at Peachtown authenticity lies elsewhere. In their 2018 *Academic Program* statement their assessment model is more clearly laid out, clearly stating, "Assessment of student progress is based upon a paradigm developed through observations and in working with the individual student." (p. 2) This section goes on to depict a process that includes establishing academic and personal goals for each student and assessing their work, "in accordance with their personal capability," and including, "personal initiative, responsibility, and the ability to work with others," when considering their progress. I was most drawn to this statement in that section: "Attributes of generosity and compassion are valued as highly as academic and artistic achievement."

The resilience of the Peachtown model is dependent upon the perpetuation of its unique set of community values. The degree to which the entire community is successful in practicing their principles will determine whether this type of learning setting will survive as a true alternative to the existing TPS model. New students and their parents are attracted to this school and ultimately learn "The Peachtown Way" by the actions of those already there. A parent who eventually removed her children from public school and enrolled them here told them that she could discern a notable difference. "Your child will get a chance to grow and be seen as an individual. If your child is very bright, they will be able to stretch and grow. If your child is more

withdrawn, they will also find their place here and fit in in their time and have their needs met." It is understandable, then, why, in assessing their students, the school would take elements such as "generosity" and "compassion" into consideration.

I once asked Alyssa how she would answer someone who questioned how she knew that Peachtown students could read or write without test results. "We know because we watch them doing it. We know that they can read because they read to us. We know they can write because we read what they've written. We don't need a test to tell us what they can do." Assessment at Peachtown is about everyday performance, whether that is how you treat your classmates, your personal reading or writing, or the projects that you do. There is no special day that is set aside to have an inordinate amount of weight in producing "evidence" that defines your growth. A former student recalled, "We always had, reading or writing, but it was pretty loose, it was always organic in that way." So, there is no programmatic assessment at Peachtown; your progress is about the accumulation of what you do there, day-to-day.

Consider two visual forms: a photograph and a painting. A photo captures a single moment in time and if done very well can provide a valuable single image that provides significant detail about a scene. But no matter how well planned or considered there are definite limitations---chiefly its strong dependence on the instrument, the camera--- to what even the best photograph can provide. A painting is a different form entirely and is defined, not by its in-depth securing the details of a single moment, but by the way in which it presents itself, not as the product of a single effort, but as unfolding in layers. A painter is able to reveal depths to a scene,

as he adds to and alters his previous work, with each successive layer changing the one that came before, ultimately revealing the artist has revealed to be seen.

Perhaps we can see accepted forms of student achievement as photographs: single shots of a moment in time, largely dependent on their instrument (the standardized test), very defendable as reliable representations, but lacking in depth. Peachtown, through its combination of community interdependence, choice, relaxed time considerations and performance is looking at a student more like the way in which an artist would approach a painting. Not attempting to produce an exact accounting of how that student has grown and not willing to undertake the reductionism that such an effort would require. Instead, students here are seen for what they are each day. Instead of trying to plot them on rubrics, the leaders there simply look at them as people in the same way that all of us look at each other, asking: what do you do and how do you treat others? “The culture here is family, we’re like a big family here, adults and kids, with a respect for each other. That’s a big thing we teach here. Respect yourself and respect others,” Michelle told me. These less-than-formal assessments again are consistent with the other aspects of this very informal learning setting. I previously have written about informality as a key signifier in progressive learning environments (Kloss, 2018a) and in the next section turn to that aspect of this school.

Tests Can’t Show How You’ve Grown - Autoethnography

I think we spend way too much time fixated on the metrics we use in public school and at times forget why we are using them. Unfortunately, grades and scores can overshadow learning

and too often I focus on having my students "hit the mark," rather than consider what this short-term goal is doing to them as emerging learners. The learning, the growing as a person ought to be the thing that I am encouraging in my students, not the "4" or the "E" or whatever designation I put on their paper or report card. If I am just trying to get my students, people I spend 10 months of the year with, to cross an arbitrarily-established line, instead of progressing as people, then I shouldn't be doing this work.

I have to go back to my own experiences in my class and a student I had who struggled from the first day. When I tested her at the beginning of the year, she had no discernible reading level, with almost no sight word knowledge. Meeting with our specialists, I heard about test after test where she was one of the bottom readers in the grade level. After a while all of those numbers run together and throughout the year, I would get updates and honestly, they were not guiding my instruction. I decided early on that I would have two goals for her---that she not give up and that by the year's end she would begin to believe that she was a reader. A lot of these measures are timed, but I wasn't looking for her to read quickly, I just wanted her to see herself as a reader and was confident that after that important growth would occur.

Those of us who worked with her put everything we had into this girl and there were lots of weeks where we thought things were at a standstill and several times we had to regroup and change our plan. There were a lot of hurdles that had nothing to do with reading, In the end, she made progress, became a better reader, and I think on her better days started to think of herself as a capable reader. A lot of what we did we just sit with her and listen to read, jumping in when we

could to help her along. We had data galore, but what drove our work with her was her reading; simply that. I think in school I can complicate things when I pay too much attention to the numbers my students compile and not enough to the people who are growing in front of me.

A culture of informality

Institutions can be characterized by the forms they operate in. The common archetype of public schooling that lives in many of our minds includes defined spaces, appearances, and protocols for the school and its participants. Peachtown intentionally does not use many of these forms, which is noticeable in the ordering of its day and the dynamic between its members. This section details how these repeated practices affect the learning that is done there and the relationships between teachers and students. Finally, I reflect upon the part that transcending accepted school forms plays in my own work with my students.

"We call each other by our first names.": The Informal Learning Environment - Peachtown

The informality here begins before you walk into the school. When you come to Peachtown, there are no spaces for buses or a parking lot. There's a small circle with a tree in the middle that curls around in front of this dated ranch home. There might be space for 4 cars around this circle, I usually park on the grass; school buses don't even attempt the circle. You walk on inset flagstones up to the back door of the home which is the "main entrance" to the school. You walk into this very dated residence, whose walls it appears haven't been painted in decades and there's a lot of items in a small space, in the kitchen, the first room you enter. Coats and boots on the wall, backpacks nearby, lunches on the counter, it has the look of a place that a lot of children have come home to. I have already described the way that the kitchen opens up to

an alcove on the left and on the right, the largest room of the house where the younger kids work and the Morning Meeting is held. It looks like a house that someone has repurposed as a learning center, but it does not match the mental imagery that many of us associate with school.

But how does this setting affect the learning that is done here? The current director once told me, "The place tells the story." But what is that story? Children who travel from their homes to an institutionalized place behave in an unnatural, non-innate artificial way that most institutions want. The engagement that occurs between individuals in public settings is expected to be different than the way that people interact with each other at home, if only because the latitude for behavior between members of families differs from those engaging in institutions which assigns and defines roles, creating walls and parameters that those meeting in the institution tacitly agree to follow. To engage in an institution is to consciously limit the ways in which you share and express yourself.

Except for standards of safety and recognition of the authority needed for it, Peachtown does not ask for or want these things. Referring again to the school's written documents, the Mission Statement declares that here, "A nurturing environment is embodied in a non-institutional setting in a group of children that resembles a family configuration. A sense of family, camaraderie, and community is essential to a healthy learning environment." (p.1) The statement on the Academic Program uses phrases such as, "an intimate home-like environment," "a close-knit familial atmosphere," "non-hierarchical nature of Peachtown." Peachtown is intentionally not institutional and has in place policies and philosophies that are definitely non-institutional, ones that foster relationships and that lead to student work at home that is, "student-generated and of personal value." Instead, Peachtown is a heterarchy, a place where student input

and leadership, at times, is valued as much as the work planned for the day. Alyssa told me, “We don't do testing, but we're constantly observing and you're always modifying based on what you see and what you observe and what the kids light up at. And so even when you think you've got a plan in place, you can really only make an outline. The art of teaching here is not in the plans.”

This informality is signaled by the way that the members of the community look. There is, with some allowance for maturity, a similarity in how the adults and children appear. It is worth noting, this “Saturday morning” appearance of everyone equally involved, as a non-hierarchal, non-signifier of different roles within the community. If one person in a room is dressed in a more formal, work-like manner, they instantly are perceived as occupying a different place in the interpersonal dynamic. If we look like each other, then on some level, we both assume that we share some identification and empathy as well. A teacher here once laughed and told me, “I don’t think that my students would respect me any more if I brushed my hair and put on a dress. They’d probably laugh.” So to begin to answer the question, “What is the story of here?” this is a place where the appearances do not divide people, as would fit a heterarchical co-learning environment.

Everyone uses first names when speaking at Peachtown. I never heard the words Mr. or Mrs. ever there, even with visitors like me. This similarity and appearance and informal way to address each other are only notable because they are at one with all of the other elements that I have discussed, as signs of a reciprocal trust and faith among all members of the community. “We have a supportive, familial culture,” Alyssa told me. Michelle said, “The kids know that we have a respect for them. There are many teachers in public school that don’t like kids. I love my

kids and I love teaching here. We're pretty equal here. We look at the kids as equals and the kids feel that. That's why we call each other by our first names."

Informality is only possible where everyone involved trusts that the others there have accepted and can be counted on to follow the unspoken rules of the community. In this environment everyone can address the others in a friendly fashion, because the assumption is that they can be trusted. The children trust the adults that they will be listened to as equals and allowed some degree of choice in their learning. The adults trust the that the children will be interested in and put forth their best effort, no matter how complex the topic for the day. They all trust each other to contribute to the formation of a safe environment where everyone can learn together; not just physically safe, but a place that is intellectually safe enough for everyone to acknowledge what they don't know. Alyssa once told me that she frequently would tell the students when starting a new unit with them that she didn't know much about this subject and looked forward to learning more with them.

One of the healthiest products of Peachtown's commitment to informality is this co-learning among teachers and students. While there is no doubt that the adults of the school set the direction for the day's learning, within those plans is enough space for topics to arise that the groups can learn about together. More significantly, and I think more reflective of the effects that informality can have, each person in the community acts in a way that indicates their confidence in being both a learner and a teacher, depending on the situation. By not strictly limiting roles, Peachtown doesn't confine the contributions that each person makes to the community. I rarely saw a teacher there speak as if they were an unchallenged authority on an issue. The way that the teachers talk with their students indicates the respect that Michelle spoke of and a certain sense

of humility that they have towards their place in the community. Genelle echoed Michelle stating, "We look at the kids as equals."

At Peachtown, informality has led to a designed form of heterarchy, where students are so listened to and respected, that at times they may play a significant role in the learning for the day. I specifically recall a lesson near the end of a unit that discussed working conditions in the United States in the early twentieth century. Mary Ann's group had been discussing how there had been few laws in place protecting children from working long hours in dangerous conditions and had written on the subject. Their writings were genuine and sincere and Mary Ann, as always, was ready with suggestions, but also allowed them the space to write in their own voices in their sketchbooks. As you would expect, in writing about work, they had focused on chores they did at home or the work that their parents did, defining "work" in terms that were very much bound by their experience.

On this particular day, Mary Ann had found a short historical video, consisting of black and white still photographs from the first decade of the 20th century. In these pictures, young children, some it seemed under the age of 10, were pictured in a variety of industrial settings, their smallness and frailty contrasting with the large equipment and harsh environments they seemed to be swallowed up in. In all of the photos, the children gazed without expression into the camera, some had the grime of work on their bodies, all looked fatigued.

In displaying these photos, Mary Ann had connected her own laptop to a projector and was displaying the images on the class's blackboard (Peachtown has very limited technology and no Smart Boards). The lights were out and shades were drawn, which only increased the stark

effect of the haunting photographs. All of the children in her group were gathered close around Mary Ann at the far table; they were all seated there, as equals. MaryAnn did not stand up and frame what they were about to see, no question sheet had been passed, no "Best Practice" was being followed. They were just people looking at some photographs.

This scene is still pretty vivid in my head and I recall the noticeable silence as the video started. Kids watching videos in school can often produce all kinds of random remarks of minimal value, but through the first four or five shots, there was nothing to be heard. This was including Mary Ann's voice, as there was no attempt on her part to point her children in a specific direction in engaging with these photos. They were just having this experience together as learners. At a certain point someone spoke up and asked, "How could they do this everyday?" , followed by a, "They needed the money," and at least one, "I don't care. I would quit." But mostly it stayed quiet, throughout the presentation. Eventually Mary Ann asked, "Well, what could they have done?" which led to a longer discussion about the development of child labor laws and unions and a number of other things, all of which increased the students' investment in the subject, advanced their knowledge, and set up the next day's work, but none of which are essential to my point here. In school, when people are assigned their roles of "teacher" or "student" they then respond with the expected behaviors, too rarely moving beyond these parameters. But when the traditional forms of "schooling" are dropped and everyone in the classroom is just a learner and the next comment from someone---teacher or student----can take the learning in a relevant direction, then intentional informality has changed what is possible in a school setting.

Even in learning families, however, disagreements are bound to occur, especially in an environment where everyone is encouraged to believe that they have something useful to contribute. But how are conflicts dealt with here? The director told me, “The authority structure is there, but it can be confusing to kids at times…it feels more like a family structure…its’s layered and it’s complex and muddied. Here it’s a lot more complex, because you have a bunch of relationships, unlike some schools where you’d have one teacher solely in charge of a bunch of kids. Five or six adults are usually around here. There’s a lot of nuance.” Again, Peachtown’s structures are cited as being closer to those by which a family operates than those typically expected of a school. As I believe this section has shown, by intentionally choosing to operate a school in an informal manner, Peachtown influences its students to behave in a way that makes formality unnecessary

Together with its Schoolwide Curriculum and Multi-Age Grouping, Peachtown’s attitude towards its students’ capabilities also profoundly affects what learning looks like here. Profound concepts are a regular part of every student’s learning here, regardless of their age, circumstances and history. We look at examples of this in the next section.

Sometimes Children Can Lead - Autoethnography

In school, not everyone gets treated the same and I think that can be a good thing. As I get to know my students I can see that different children need different things. At times that can mean that some children’s days need to be structured in fairly controlled ways, while others do better with considerable latitude for their work and behavior. As a teacher, as the school year begins, I learn about my class and make these adjustments. But at times you get a student who

comes in and whose abilities and personality demand that you treat them differently. Which brings me to perhaps my most memorable student, Chelsey.

It is an accepted and often-stated school belief that everyone gets treated the same. It is a form of teacher and student engagement aimed at some theoretical middle that I believe has encouraged a type of mediocrity that satisfies some sort of conceptual utilitarianism while overlooking the individuality of the students you are responsible for. While certain minimal levels of rights and responsibilities are due to everyone, I don't think we want to afford the same latitude and make the same demands of each child---they deserve more than that.

I was teaching Fourth Grade during my tenure year when Chelsey loudly came into my teaching world. In those early upper elementary years, it's not unusual to get students who are both full of personality and relatively unboundaried. Often, it's indicative of a general lack of self-control and maturity which frequently also expresses it in subpar academics. What was unusual about Chelsey was that she was full of expressive talent, in her conversation, her writing, and her music. Whatever was causing her personality to spill out, frequently in ways that were distracting to the other students, also fueled her tremendous creative talents. I was a pretty young teacher, but somewhere inside of me I made the decision to allow her to have expanded boundaries to accommodate her uniqueness. It seemed to be what she needed to thrive every bit as much as a struggling reader might need extra practice with their sight words or a student with anger issues might need a space to defuse; Chelsey needed space to, overflow a bit. At times this proved difficult to manage and focus and there were days when the two of us had a hard time working together.

However, over the next two years (I had her for Fourth and Fifth grades) there were a lot of great moments where she did some just phenomenal writing and artwork and helped so many kids open up and feel freer about becoming themselves. There were also frequent occasions of arguing with me and others, loud interruptions and fits. Truth be told, there were moments when I thought I was handling the whole thing incorrectly and in a way that was perhaps inappropriate for her and the rest of the class and really didn't know what I was doing. But I also saw her mature and grow in a way that it is so rewarding for any teacher at that level. I still maintain that this wouldn't have been possible without if I had attempted to apply the rules to Chelsey like I did to the others. Frequently I have done the same for other students who needed some bending of the way I did things in my room. In doing so I hope that helped all my students see that, in some important ways, they each have important individual characteristics that should be recognized and, at times, catered it.

Children of all ages are able to understand complex concepts

National curriculum initiatives and the development of state standards have led to strictly boundaried and defined areas of study for each grade level. In prescribing what is to be covered in each subject area, educational authorities have effectually limited the areas of potential student inquiry and exploration, pointing instruction towards a few testable goals. Peachtown uses a different set of assumptions in setting up its yearly curricular calendar, preferring instead to establish lofty academic areas of study. This section discusses these ideas and how they are an expression of the school's faith in their students' capacities. Following that, I reflect on my attempts to teach beyond the prescribed curriculum.

"Everything from Socrates to Aristotle": Peachtown's Most Innovative Feature

The Peachtown schoolwide curriculum was a creation of its founder, Barbara Post, in the early years of the school. While I described it in the previous chapter, it is also relevant to consider here, in examining the way in which learning is done in this setting. The idea behind scheduling these topics on a 3 to 4 year rotation is that a student who attended Peachtown K-8 would be instructed in them at both the lower and upper levels. These topics alternate between Science and History, with each of these units lasting about 6 weeks. The units are taught to each group in their "Main Lesson" for the day, which include readings, activities, and projects. The upper group records their work in their sketchbooks, while the lower group brings their work home as they complete it. The upper group may also do projects that they use to teach their classmates as a culminating activity for the unit. Neither group takes written tests to assess their progress.

This rotation of in-depth topics may be the most unique aspect of Peachtown. What I find most distinctive about this design is the ambitiousness of the topics. During my observations there, I saw lessons in units on Immigration, The Harlem Renaissance, The Human Body, The Westward Movement, Force and Energy, and the Industrial Revolution. These are all topics which New York State's Standards expects to be a part of a student's K-12 education. They are not topics that one would expect to see continually addressed in the education of students as young as those at Peachtown. The founder once told me, "Our work here is informed by the standards, not imprisoned by them." The ambitiousness of having developed and regularly followed such a plan is indicative of how the leadership at this school both sees its students' capabilities and learning overall. By instructing on these advanced topics, the adults here show

significant confidence and faith that all learners, regardless of their age or individual capacities, can learn at the highest level.

The development and implementation of this curriculum can be traced back to before the founding of the school. Barbara, when her oldest child was about to enter school, started attending Board of Education meetings to find out about what went on at the school her daughter would be attending. “All I heard was talk about budgets and state aid, but nothing about what was taught. I asked questions, I made phone calls, but everything seemed to come back to money. That didn’t satisfy me.” Frustrated by what she heard, Barbara, an administrator at the college where Peachtown is located, coming from a family of entrepreneurs, decided to start Peachtown for the simplest of reasons. “I just wanted a better school for my children.”

Starting from scratch as a school made up of children from family and friends, Peachtown initially survived on donations and discarded books from the local district. Shortly thereafter, she created a curriculum document that identified scientific and historical topics that would be taught at this school. It’s worth noting that someone with no formal education or experience in curriculum development created a scope and sequence that would be taught to children who, many in TPS would say, also lacked the knowledge and experience to understand such an esoteric array of topics. I wondered how, starting from nothing, not modeling this document after any existing packaged curriculum program, she knew what to include. “Everything from Socrates to Aristotle, she laughed. “I tried to I include everything that I thought should be included in a broad, enlightened educational program. All the things that I would want my own kids to learn about. Remember, I started a school for them. I had some

advice from people and I had read pretty widely and I just started putting it together. It's become an evolving document and changed quite a bit over time."

I was with the younger group on a March morning. Michelle was working with them on part of the Human Body Unit. Today's topic was digestion and the different ways that their bodies break down food. She tells them that digestion starts in their mouth. "With spit," one of them offers back. This doesn't throw Michelle a bit and she shares with them that there are two kinds of digestion: first, "mechanical." She tells them that means chewing and of course the 4-8 year olds all stand up and chew in a very exaggerated manner, chomping their teeth loudly, very close to each other. They are nothing if not engaged here and the ambition of talking about digestion with primary grade children doesn't seem to be a problem.

She continues asking them to think of hard or big foods. The children are totally enthralled with this, leaning forward, standing up, offering their ideas. "Where does the food go after you've chewed it?' and they all touch their throats and she tells them about the esophagus. "What foods do you need to chew really well?" The over-enthusiasm and extraneous talk from a few moments ago is gone and there are many raised hands. "Unripened pairs," someone says. "What about proteins?" Michelle asks and it's obvious that they are familiar with term, because accurate examples follow. There is a bit of ambient noise here, but mostly they wait their turn to contribute.

It seems to me that what I have observed here is some very good, invitational, developmentally appropriate teaching. In considering the ambitiousness of this topic for young children, this teacher has made it very accessible for all of her students and within their reach. In

delivering this lesson, she has a confidence that her students will be able to both grasp the content and see how it pertains to their lives. It is an example of Peachtown's commitment to multi-age learning----there was no separate lesson for youngest students on a different topic---and their belief that the concepts covered in this main lesson are of interest and understandable for everyone.

Michelle now continues, going to Chemical Digestion. She asks her kids to close their eyes and think of a food that they love. They all go along and at this point it's so quiet you can pretty much hear them all breathe. Not much above a whisper, she says, "Do you feel saliva forming in your mouth?" The kids all pause and they are all with her, some of their eyes growing larger, and lots of smiles in the room. "Your brain is talking to your salivary glands and sending out enzymes." Brain, salivary glands, enzymes": it's not much after 9 AM, these are little kids and they're totally engaged with content that many in the education world would think is far above them.

Michelle asks them what foods they like and now there is a lot of shouting. Enthusiasm is about to spill over into disorder, but she is not shaken. She has them stand up and use their energy to get some of their restlessness out. First they all do jumping jacks, then toe touches. Transitioning back to the lesson, the kids play a quick game of Simon Says, but with the names of body parts: patella, ribs, skull, femur, gluteus maximus---they know them all. This has helped them refocus a bit and Michelle leads them over to the tables for a tasting activity, an engaging, active extension of what they've just learned, that will allow the children, working with a partner, to extend their understanding of what is mechanical or chemical digestion.

When I watch these scenes---and I saw many similar ones---I did not see children being managed and controlled, I saw young learners being allowed the space to be excited and expressive about what they were hearing. "'Peachtown' education is NOT about conformity," the Mission Statement declares and I observed many ways in which this school is primarily about learning. Teachers do not get sidetracked by attempts to control a child's every movement and reaction. Instead, their commitment to each learner being able to be captivated by complex, important phenomena is what drives the teachers' instruction and their reaction to what their students do. They truly are not imprisoned by the state standards and provide an educational experience that goes far beyond what those statements dictate and over the course of many years allow students to learn about many concepts they probably would not have seen otherwise. Their vision of education includes the hopeful belief that by illuminating these many learning areas to young children, a student may find one that enraptures them and explore it further. A parent told me, "If a child wants to go far with a topic, they can go there."

In order for this environment to thrive, the way in which teachers instruct has to be adjusted to accommodate for this latitude being allowed to their students, which can be an issue for teachers trained in different methods. Barbara once told me, "I've always had this idea that if teachers are teaching the method they are most comfortable with that makes them better teachers, because they're working in their own realm. But I think here it's different with the pedagogy we use and the style of curriculum and the multi-age, that those structures working together demand a certain approach to teaching because your teaching is always in every group supposed to be very differentiated, with very individualized, high standards." Alyssa, the current director, concurs, saying, "It's too presumptuous to think that you can anticipate exactly how a child is

going to perform within a 10-week period. Or what's going to strike their fancy and interests. It's the art of teaching, not the plans you make.”

Peachtown’s longstanding philosophy and established practices are important in creating the circumstances where an elevated vision of what education can be may unfold. However, it is in the specific behaviors and approach of their teachers that such learning becomes actualized. They take their children serious enough as students, while simultaneously never forgetting what this time in a child’s life looks like developmentally and understand that self-control can be an issue. They are able to structure conversations with children in such a way that their students maintain their enthusiasm for challenging topics. During my observations at Peachtown I did not see discouraged students not participating in the activities and work. Whether it is the culture, the small population, or the gifts of the teacher who work there, the children there are all participants in the learning for each other, which fits neatly into all of the other facets of this school.

In an era when curriculum, instruction, and assessment were all narrowing, Peachtown has continued its expansive view of what a young person’s education can consist of. They have never defined “student achievement” by test scores. “We do things on purpose, in a certain way, taking our time, so no one’s falling through the cracks,” Alyssa told me. The school’s founder once said, “What we’re really trying to do here is raise kind, ethical, good, moral people who are critical thinkers.” To consider the breadth of complexity and topics that their students are instructed on in the “Main Lesson,” over the course of a year is to wonder how it is possible that this little underfunded school accomplishes what they do.

But what they do is undeniably linked to the practices in place here. Nearly all of the teachers I interviewed here saw their mission as connected to the Traditional Progressive Model. Barbara said that what they provide is a “traditional education.”; Alyssa sees that as meaning, “Student-centered,” “Child-centered,” learning while Mary Ann thinks it’s about, “Letting children ask, instead of being dictated to.” What may be most important, though, is how it affects a child’s development as a learner. Students are exposed to so many rich topics, so early that what they may consider as a path is always expanding. A former student recalls, “You just have so much creative freedom, not only in actual artistic creativity, but creative in what you are interested in studying.” That is only possible in an environment where each child has the opportunity to pursue an education that is unique to their individual circumstances.

She said, “We’re all poets!” - Autoethnography

No matter what grade I’ve taught or who you are, in my classes you learn poetry. Early on in my career, I had the good fortune to work in a building with a teacher, who over time, in the most informal of circumstances, became my teaching role model and mentor. There was much about what he did that I adopted and turned in my own way, but the most significant influence he had on my teaching was what he taught me about poetry. He has published many volumes of verse and led countless workshops and seminars, none of which I attended. But through him I became convinced of the role that poetry can play in advancing a young person’s use of descriptive language and providing a avenue for articulate self-expression.

I am sure that there are New York State standards for poetry that allot certain genres and underlying skills to specified grade levels, but I have no idea what they are---in general, I don’t

limit my teaching to the boundaries of the curriculum. I always cover what is required at my grade level, but have never seen the need to stop at the outer boundaries of what is assigned if it will benefit my class to keep going. I am not looking to fulfill requirements and then go on to the next thing. ;I want to allow my children the opportunity to continue as far as they are capable. I am more interested in growing their capacities and interest that neatly fitting what I do within the confines of the standards.

Following this approach, students in every elementary grade level I have worked with have effectively written poems. By focusing on the language that they are using, rather than any fulfilling the parameters of any particular form---often we get there eventually anyways---children can learn to see how the language that they choose can affect how people feel about what they say. I've had six year olds write lovely with wonderful descriptive language that they piece together in images that surprise their readers. My Sixth Graders did surprise "pop-up" poetry readings around the school. My kids have done poems on mud that they streaked with that substance and posted on the wall for everyone to see. We did floor poems that they taped to the floors and when people stepped on the they actually had to stop and consider a place that they take for granted which may be part of the point of poetry to begin with. They learned about haikus and cinquains and a lot of other forms, but I hope that what they mostly learned was that they have everything that they need inside of them to work with language and write effectively. And while I may not have been showing fidelity to the standards to whatever grade level, I can't see how that was ever a bad thing. But that was only possible because I believe in my students more than I believe in the parameters of the system.

It was last time I was meeting with my 6th Grade ELA group one year, fairly early in my career. Anyone who thinks they know what elementary classroom teaching is about ought to have taught a September in kindergarten and a June in 6th Grade. I was barely hanging in there with the heat, the humidity, the pre-adolescents, and everyone ready to be done. Struggling to put some sort on exclamation point on our year together, we talked about what we had done together and what they had enjoyed the most. The way my question to them came out was, “What were we in here this year?’ And one of my girls blurted out, “We were poets!”

Each child deserves an individualized education

This is a time of standardization in education, with many initiatives driven by a desire to ensure that each student receives a comparable education. Policymakers have used mandates to allow comparisons of success in this area between students, teachers, and schools. Peachtown resists standardization, both in its instruction and in the latitude it uses in approaching each student’s learning. In this section, the school’s openness towards allowing children to participate in the construction of their learning path is explored. Finally, I recount my professional struggles with balancing my professional responsibilities as a public educator with my desire to treat each child as an individual.

Peachtown’s “Mysterious Pedagogy”

As with other attributes of Peachtown, I like to look back at the formal documents of the school to see if there is an intentionality and whether that has expressed itself in the teaching and learning that I saw in my observations. The guiding document of the school, the Mission Statement, makes multiple references to its efforts to honor the need for each student to have an

education aimed at their specific needs. It speaks of their use of, "the small classroom with an individualized approach." The lead sentence in the "Pedagogical Goals" section states, "Peachtown is about inclusion and community, which by our definition means embracing individuality and differences." The section on differentiation indicates that the fine arts at Peactown, "allow for expression of individuality," and interestingly promises that, "Differentiated instruction recognizes fatigue in individuals and accommodates with games or project-oriented assignments for individuals." Additionally, the Academic Program Statement notes, "All activities should be designed to challenge the individual. Only through challenge can a true sense of accomplishment and self-esteem develop in a child" and, "The curriculum is tailored to meet individual needs…with individual projects and exploration scaled to personal levels and styles."

There has been considerable argument over whether today's schools should be providing a standardized (guaranteed) or individualized education to each child (Rose, 2016). While being guided by the educational requirements of state standards, Peachtown attempts to accommodate individual learning interests and mannerisms to a significant level. It is an environment that values creativity and individual approaches to challenges over simply accepting existing solutions. Their dedication to a schoolwide curriculum that was a creation of the school's founder is evidence of this. The teachers at this school both take the time to get to know their students and allow them a degree of choice over how to display their learning. The use of sketchbooks at the upper level here, that allow for each student to individually express their understandings, instead of packaged curricular pieces is another example of their faith in learner-driven solutions.

“Here, the curriculum is not individualized but the pedagogy is,” the founder once told me, stressing that, “The whole curriculum, all of those topics covered in ‘The Main Lesson’ are there for everyone.” This is an important point. I have observed other Progressive Schools where each child has their own program, an individualized “learning contract,” that they work through in the course of a week. Here, the school is held together by every child there being exposed to a ‘Main Lesson’, early each morning on one topic. This allows for the many positive academic and social effects that I have previously cited. What gives these students an opportunity to have a hand in the direction of their education is the school’s commitment to, “Fit the curriculum around the students.” This comes in the form of a noteworthy model of, “differentiation.”

“All of our teaching should be very differentiated. The brightest kids shouldn't be doing things that the other kids are doing, necessarily. Everyone should be given a task that challenges them to their ability…it's a creative process, it's your process to create the class that you're teaching. So you get to pick out how you want to approach a topic. It's very much choice. It's very creative. And I think that's a part of that mysterious pedagogy.” In speaking with Barbara, the school’s founder, I often came away with the same two impressions about Peachtown and the individuality of their students. First, that they were committed to honoring it and secondly, that they had a hard time defining exactly what their approach was. But to watch Mary Ann’s students work in their sketchbooks or Alyssa’s students come up with ways to show what they about fractions or Michelle’s kids take to one of their projects, maybe their covered wagons, maybe their showing how blood flows through the heart, in their own direction, is to confirm that students here frequently have choices about the direction and expression of their learning.

A parent summarized it, “This is not a place where kids are just managed and run through a checklist. A child is able to truly learn and be seen as an individual. The teachers understand what children need vs. just read a textbook and whatever. They really understand children.” Teachers here are willing to devote time to learning about students as people in less formal social times when they are all together---snack, lunch, morning meeting---and the information that they gather there can be used to better shape the work that the children do. Peachtown, with its relaxed practices, give the people of this community time to share more of themselves. I heard frequent anecdotal conversations about both children’s and adult’s lives that they often were willing to share with each other. This familiarity helps to create a relaxed learning environment that deepens a child’s curiosity and makes them more likely to feel comfortable to ask questions about new material. “They have input into their learning through their questioning,” Mary Ann told me.

Former students remember how this environment that more closely resembles a family than a school opened up possibilities for their learning. “It was definitely a place where like, the teachers that I had really were able to be flexible to students' interests, which is really important because you know, it's a small class so they really knew you and offered options of things to do. .The teachers were very willing to say, okay, like let's spend more time on this, even if it was just your own thing.” The emphasis here is not on preparing for a test or on being on lockstep with the curricular calendar; without many of the distractions of grades and assessments, the children’s learning needs are the focus of the school. Alyssa said, **“**We always try to work with what kids are already interested in and when we can apply that to the learning. That’s how kids get hooked…See what they’re into and allow that to guide the learning.”

I have a series of photographs that I took of the upper level students' work on their Human Body unit and the various modes of expression that they were permitted to use to demonstrate an area of their particular interest during this course of study. MaryAnn personally spoke with each of her students and as a result of those conversations, each student first indicated an area of interest and then began work on a representation of what they had learned. Seeing these pictures laid out, side-by-side, the ability of each one to pursue what interested them most becomes clear. This is a demonstration of Barbara's claim that, "The curriculum is not individualized but the pedagogy is." I see a mathematical expression with a pie graph, more scientific depictions with drawings, and labeling of both the DNA sequence and important human body organs. There are also different literary forms represented, as some of the students wrote narrative pieces, while others chose to use more explanatory forms. In all cases, the work was unified by the learning that was done in common from this unit. However, through Peachtown's commitment to listen to what their students say (MaryAnn's conversations) and their latitude in allowing self-chosen patterns of displaying knowledge (sketchbook work) each student here has the opportunity to individualize their learning.

Mary Ann described this way of learning. "There isn't fear-based discipline here. There is a self-directed, self-regulated model. Less directive, more reflection on what's being asked of me." This is only possible in an environment where earned trust between members of the community largely eliminates the need for many of the common management strategies of contemporary schooling. Observing the way in which teachers allow students a considerable degree of choice and freedom, I came to believe that the outcomes for an Peachtown student are distinctive. To enter an institution is to need to learn the expected behaviors. Part of what is

expected for students is to practice, “school behaviors,” many of which may be social courtesy, but the cumulative effect can result in a willingness to be managed Independent schools, by virtue of their being intentionally separated from institutional expectations, have an opportunity to prioritize maturity over management.

“What we’re really trying to do here is raise kind, ethical, good, moral people who are critical thinkers, and don’t want to live in a sound byte. Education is how you fix the problem,” Barbara told me. While it would be unfair to suggest that all schools wouldn’t welcome this result it is appropriate to ask if the practices adopted during the Age of Accountability and the increased emphasis on conformity to an ever-narrowing set of “Standards” is more likely to produce critical thinkers or supine rule followers. In considering the goals that they have for Peachtown students, Alyssa explained, “What we’re trying to do is produce Creative and Independent Thinkers, people who can think for themselves, work on their own, collaborate with others. We’re trying to create effective adults.” Peachtown‘s reliance on discussion and valuing conversation and its excesses, understanding that by allowing children the freedom to process out loud, seems consistent with their prioritizing creativity and independence. The whole school curriculum, the schoolwide Morning Meeting, and the mixed-age learning are intentional, identified in formal school documents and designed to promote collaboration. As shown in this section, there are also ample opportunities for children to experience knowledge individually and decide on their own particular form of expression.

Michelle told me, “I would hope that a child would leave here as a kind person who would be able to relate with others, and be a productive member of society.” Repeatedly, when I ask the teachers here what they would like their students to leave here with, they mention

interpersonal skills that are needed to effectively relate with others. Words like “collaborate,” “ethical,” and “society,” were common. Mary Ann said, “On the social level they leave here better equipped with the skills needed to work in a community,” indicating the importance that she places on these abilities as well. By having the entire school community together for so many activities, Peachtown demonstrates the value that they place on being part of a healthy community as a key component in a child’s education.

Going my own way: Individualizing the classroom experience. - Autoethnography

Public school teachers talk about their schedules a lot. My time with my students is limited, and it is a challenge to both complete the curricular responsibilities that I have and be responsive to what my students need as individuals. This has been difficult throughout my career, but in recent decades, with an increased focus on assessment and accountability, it has become even more problematic. I have never believed that all that we teach our students is captured in our curricula and it is possible that the most valuable things we send them on with are rarely to be found within a scope and sequence chart. At the same time, it is important that having finished a certain grade level mean something. In order for a Second-Grade teacher to begin her work in September, she should be able to count on those students I have sent to her as having certain basic competencies and skills. The struggle that my colleagues and I have is accomplishing that without making a young child’s education seem like they are being processed through the system.

I have found the most open accessible path to individualize a child’s education is through their writing. No matter their age, most students that I have worked with are interested in using

their writing as a means of self-expression. On a day filled with standards to be met and skills to be mastered, opportunities for students to share what is on their minds can still be found through their writing. I have found two ways to facilitate these possibilities. First, when I have selected the topics that we write on, I allow students to individualize them as much as possible. If we are writing about a certain category, I give them a chance to select the particulars of their topic, which both increases their interest and allows them to make a series of individual choices within their writing. Secondly, as much as possible, I allow my students to decide, within broadly-defined parameters, what to write about. While the state defines genres and skills to be considered at each grade level, I have found there are a wealth of areas that children can write on and still make progress towards satisfying grade level requirements. The key factor is that the child is able to exercise as much choice as possible in what they write about and the direction that they take.

At times this has meant departing from assignments that were part of district-approved Language Arts and Writing programs, substituting my choices for my class, in place of those indicated in the curriculum. I think it is a mistake to see schools as “top-down” organizations, with each subsequent level carrying out the dictates they are given. It is an important point that not just about me, but many elementary school teachers frequently don’t follow the program, we add things, ignore others, and modify quite a bit. Few of us are totally off on our own, but there is a lot of deciding what to include and what to skip. Having done this myself and talked to other teachers about their choices, we do this because we feel it’s best for our students as learners. The educational authorities can provide resources, training, and design neat little packages of

imagined instruction, but there is a lot more individualizing done in public school than you might think.

“Something wonderfully innate in children”: Peachtown and Public-School Teaching

As I consider the aspects of learning at Peachtown discussed in this chapter, I see much of what they do there as being about faith and trust. They have faith in their students’ interests and abilities to engage with the important academic topics that are presented. Rather than construct an environment with frequent assessment and measuring, they have faith that their children’s natural abilities and curiosities will help them assemble each day’s learning into a coherent knowledge. They also trust that all members of the community are pulling in the same direction, helping to construct the collective knowledge that they all draw from. There is great trust that conceiving of a learning setting as a collaborative effort more than a competitive place can produce positive outcomes.

Most people that I know who are primary grade teachers are doing this work because they recognize something wonderfully innate in children. Their curiosity, their capacity, their unmeasurable potentials are there, waiting to be activated by the right set of circumstances and opportunities. I think the best primary teachers I have worked with have taught in this way, knowing we have to follow the dictates of the system, but always looking to find a way to energize our students in an individual way. Over time, I think a lot of us have come to the conclusion that the less we try to dictate and demand and the more space we allow for our students to bring their own observations and questions to their learning, the more authentic growth takes place. A significant part of this is influencing our children to discover how

important it is to help each other grow, that---perhaps paradoxically--- working together, in our own individualized ways helps us all.

Two relevant points jump out at me about the symbiotic relationship between an individualized education and acquiring the skills to effectively be a community member. First, Peachtown's emphasis on both student interest and community engagement is consistent with scholarship on progressive schooling (Chernetskaya, 2013). Secondly, it is noticeably in opposition to the emphasis in contemporary K-12 education on competitiveness and individual student achievement on standardized assessments. Increasingly, since, *A Nation at Risk*, success for students, teachers, and schools has been measured in individual performances on standardized measures. Yet, in the same time period, here is a place that has intentionally, with its policies and practices, chosen to stand outside of that world, aiming to produce empathetic adults prepared to engage in the world around them. Skills that they do not plot on a graph or evaluate with a rubric. As Barbara said, "It is a mysterious pedagogy."

But one that could not have developed or been maintained without a certain kind of community, essential elements of which lie outside of academic concerns. What is prioritized in the simple human interactions between community members is what not only makes the learning here so impressive, but also that which produces the ethical, kind adults that Peachtown is hoping its students become. It is those aspects of this community that I will describe in my final data chapter.

Chapter 7

COMMUNITY

"When I walked in the door, I immediately knew this was where I wanted to work. It feels like home here. I just knew they're doing something right here."

Peachtown teacher

Introduction

While many schools refer to themselves as "communities," it is important to distinguish between TPS and more intentional learning communities. Public schools are legal entities, required by state laws, and ruled by standards and policies that emanate from a bureaucracy, with limited latitude. A school like Peachtown, while needing to abide by general state regulations, has the freedom to be intentional in the way that they instruct, educate, and assess. Through the decisions that they make, the environment they have created, and the way in which they engage with their students, Peachtown is an option for families who are searching for a particular type of education for their children. "Everything we do is one student at a time. We don't draw from a community, it's one at a time. It's word of mouth, " Alyssa told me. This section will consider the type of community that Peachtown is and its attributes. While all schools are made up of groups of people assembled to promote learning, public schools are likely to be a more representative cross-section of a community. As Peachtown's founder stated above, they do not draw from a geographically-defined community, but instead from a group of people who share something other than location. There is a particular thing that Peachtown families are seeking for

their children that makes them predisposed to making such a place work as differently as it does, no matter the circumstances under which their children enter.

This study is meant to focus on what goes on between the students and teachers at Peachtown each day. Another teacher there said, “When you set up a place like this, it can’t be replicated because so much of it is the teachers themselves and the commitment of the families.” This points to the essential elements of this true community: the people and what they do. If what Mary Ann says about Peachtown is true, that, “This school serves and educates children in a different way,” then practices and behaviors must be in place that have created that reality. However, before beginning to examine those elements, it would be useful to look at who the students of Peachtown are and how they ended up in this noteworthy place.

Peachtown students

Part of the definition of a Traditional Public School concerns the population that it serves. TPS are made up of students who live within the geographical area defined by local governmental authorities and cannot help but be significantly shaped by the characteristics of these students. Peachtown, as a private school, has no geographically-assigned students and instead needs to attract families through the distinct manner of education that they offer. In this section, I will consider who attends Peachtown and what might make them distinct from other school populations. After that I will describe the student population that I have worked with during my time as a public-school teacher.

Peachtown students come from within a 50-mile radius from the school's location in the Finger Lakes region of New York State. The largest number of them reside in the local school district. In recent years they have also had students from four counties contiguous to the school's home county. Over the last decade, the school's student population has ranged from 17-28 students. The most common age for a student to enter Peachtown is 6 years old. Approximately, 60% of Peachtown's students in the last ten years have stayed through Eighth Grade. For students who leave Peachtown early, the most common grade for them to transfer is Sixth. The founder says that the primary reason children leave are divorce, family relocation, and a desire for social and extracurricular opportunities offered by public schools.

One demographic difference between Peachtown and other districts relates to the economic class of the families. A common depiction of Progressive School students has been that they come from homes that are able to provide advantages and resources not available for many young learners. At times progressive learning has been seen as a luxury that better-off families are able to take advantage of for their children. The "class distinction" that many have assigned to progressive schools is not reflective of the families that send children to Peachtown. The current director has described many of the families who send their children here as, "lower middle class. Many of them have to make serious sacrifices to afford the tuition." This is partially due to the school's rural location. Several of these families are involved in farming and other entrepreneurial activities. Peachtown's tuition, at $6200 per year, is less than many of these families would pay for daycare. My interviews with the founder revealed that there have been many thousands of dollars in unpaid tuition bills that have been "written off." The school offers

reduction-in-tuition scholarships to needy families. Presently, about 50% of students pay less than full tuition.

Considering what kinds of families send their children to Peachtown, a teacher told me, “I really think the kids here fall into four groups. First, kids whose parents had a negative public-school experience. Then, those who have learning quirks and had social struggles in school. There are parents who want a public school alternative and finally, word of mouth, families who have a personal connection to the school.” These are all groups of people who have not been adequately served by the TPS. Peachtown, with its flexible view of instruction and learning, respect for everyone as a natural learner, and willingness to allow students to contribute to their learning path is a haven for many families. Michelle says, “The culture here is relaxed, be yourself, just being the best you can be in every sense. Public schools may have the same philosophy, but there’s not the carry-through. It’s very strict, regulations, and standards.” Barbara told me, “We often have an inordinate number of entrepreneurial parents who are, self-employed, they’re risk takers, they’re believers; they say, ‘Let’s just do this.’ That’s why I started this school.”

My Students - Autoethnography

I teach in a rural-suburban district in upstate New York. In doing research for a project on the population of our area, I discovered that we have low percentages of minority students, participants in the school lunch program, and families that choose alternative learning settings (private schools, homeschooling). Our district has few rental opportunities and I believe that the real estate situation here has helped to form the demographics of our population which have

changed relatively little in the past three decades. We have seen some increase in poverty among our students, due in part to an increase in seasonal agricultural workers. In general, students enter our district in the primary grades and relatively few leave before the end of high school.

The families in our districts are “true believers” in the value of public-school education. In our town, there are few businesses and the zoning regulations have effectively restricted much of the commercial activity that takes place in adjacent communities. The schools in many ways are the center of the town; literally they are located on a hill in the center of town, but I believe they are a unifying force there, a commonality that most people there share. There are few signs of discontent with what goes on in our classrooms. School events are well-attended, few parents opt their children out of mandated testing, and, in general, budgets pass. There are the usual disagreements over day-to-day issues that sometimes find expression at school board meetings, but there are few signs of a lack of faith in the town’s schools as an institution.

As a teacher I get very few questions about what I do in my classroom with my students all day long. Parents want their children to be happy and their report cards to be good. Rarely, am I asked about what we teach or how I teach it. Even the parents of exceptional students, with advanced and limited abilities, usually just accept that whatever I’m doing is what’s best for their children. This is not due to a lack of intelligence or interest on the parents’ part: they just trust that we know best and the decisions that teachers make are the right ones. A lot of people in this area just believe in their TPS. I mention this to contrast the mindset of many families here with those of parents who make the decision to remove their children from their neighborhood schools to attend a school like Peachtown. Not sending your children to their local TPS is a subversive act.

Treat children patiently and kindly

In recent years, school has placed an increasing emphasis on efficiency and student achievement as measured through written assessments. Classroom management and controlled direction of student attention to learning tasks is a primary concern. Peachtown does not have this same approach and their measure of success and is more committed to a developmentally-focused model and community creation. In this section I will document what I observed of the manner in which Peachtown teachers address their students and how that serves to create their unified learning community. Finally, I will examine the stresses that I feel in my own classroom between the demands on public school teachers to meet defined targets and the nuanced work it takes to create a classroom community.

"We have blurred edges.": Peachtown's Avoidance of Hierarchies Through Trust

The formal declarations found in the school's Mission Statement and Academic Program identify the school's commitment to each child's individuality and innate capacities. This belief finds expression in the manner that the adults in the school community act towards the students there. My observations indicate agreement between the teachers at the school and the school's philosophy towards its students. The students there are valued and seen, even at a young age, as worthy of being listened to regarding the topics that are being discussed. In attempting to understand the ways in which the teachers express their love for their students it is important to note the teachers' own words regarding what they do and how they see their students. When the school's founder says, "I want five and six year olds to learn real history. The idea of creating a kindergarten-appropriate curriculum is so stultifying, it's so dumb. When we raise your children

and they ask questions and you answer them in full, intelligent sentences, they will have better vocabulary and be articulate. That's what I mean by setting the standard high.," she is revealing much about what Peachtown thinks of their children: not only that they are capable of understanding and benefitting by such an approach, but that they have sufficient innate resources and that <u>such an education is what they deserve.</u>

Simply put, Peachtown believes in its students. If you are committed to the idea that even the least experienced learners are worthy of the best you have to offer in Science and History, then that will affect how you treat those students. While it is customary for teachers in TPS to manage their classes so as to maintain maximum control, Peachtown operates with the belief that its students need latitude in order to engage with the subjects they are exposed to. They are aware that the practices that they use are different from those to be found in TPS. The current director, Alyssa, told me, "This place is a better practice for life than the public-school model. It's a very open and accepting place." Peachtown intentionally is non-conformist, it is not trying to fit students into a strictly defined model of behavior. The Mission Statement states, "…embracing Individuality and Differences. Peachtown Education is NOT about conformity." It clearly stands outside of the world of "best practices"; for both students and teachers believe, that while they are a community that is always looking to grow together, there is already much within them that deserves accommodation. Alyssa added, "Learning is so innate. There's nothing you can do to stop kids from wanting to learn. Until they get older and you make it less and less fun and more and more bureaucratic. School can get in the way of learning. Everybody needs autonomy to learn and use that learning and not feel restricted." A place that looks at the children

that come to them as already possessing what they need to learn, not as antithetical to what they are doing, is predisposed to treat them in a more sympathetic way.

Parents may be drawn to Peachtown because of the different way in which the teachers engage with their students. One told me that she knew that at this school her children would be treated as individuals, with their own capacities and gifts. At her TPS she thought they were being compared to a "checklist" and, "not being seen from who they truly are." In the year of this study, Peachtown saw a significant growth in its younger group. "What I see is lots of parents, who are just starting their school journey, see this as a school that's going to challenge their kids or be the place that they'll fit in better because they need more attention, even if they don't plan on keeping their kids here. We're a gentle start," the director told me.

We are back with Michelle's group, on the day of the digestion lesson. The Kittens and Owls are now at the circular tables, off of the rug, but still in the largest room of the house. Michelle has placed them in intentional pairs, some of them of different ages, but it is obvious, looking at the groups, that they are all comfortable together. She lets her know that they're going to be doing a tasting activity to decide whether particular foods are broken down through mechanical or chemical digestion. As I have seen many times with Michelle, when her group of young children pair off or are beginning something new, there is a considerable amount of noise and conversation not related to what they are about to do. Rather than identify particular children who are a problem with this or loudly and pointedly admonish the group for their noise, she just seems to accept the conversation as part of who they are, not allow it to distract her or upset her, and at the appropriate moment, she is able to move the group as a whole to the next place she needs them to be. Her "management" of the situation is to allow them to developmentally be

themselves up to the point where it detracts from the learning of the group. “It’s hard for us to learn while you’re doing that,” is about as forceful as I ever heard her be with a child or her group, It is important to note that at Peachtown it is always about the learning. Children discover very early on, through the words and actions of their teachers, that this is a community devoted to learning and they have a part to play in it working.

As Michelle holds up two snacks, the room quiets. One of them is pretzels, the other cotton candy. She directs them to whisper in their partner’s ear what kind of digestion is needed for the pretzels: chemical, mechanical, or both. There is a lot of pretty quiet whispering. They are back with her and the lesson moves on. But when she holds up the cotton candy, they become a lot more animated and louder. In watching this, I wrote, “*But there is no edge to this talk; not sneaky, just kid-like.”* Their conversation is about what they are doing, what kind of digestion would be needed for each of these foods. Again, their conversation is viewed as a necessary part of the learning process. Since they are not tied to a tight time schedule here, Michelle has the freedom to allow these conversations to unfold and support their learning. She had told me, “I had taught Montessori. I liked that model where the kids work at their own pace. Time is a huge issue. In any craft, you need time to figure out what you’re thinking.”

Next, she has the pairs chew the pretzels and they are very much with her, as when she follows that with them eating the cotton candy. The room is unusually quiet, given the number of young children here and that candy is involved, but there is no direction necessary. A Mechanical/Chemical graphic organizer is passed out and using a small whiteboard, she leads them in its completion. Each group tells what kind of digestion they thought was necessary for the two foods and she records their choices. They seem to understand that while digesting a

pretzel involves chewing, it may not be that simple. A girl says, “Both, if you wait it will dissolve in your mouth.” Jayden and Ella add, “Both—you can eat it and it dissolves too. You can chew it and suck on it.” And then, it’s on to the cotton candy for this group of young scientists.

Michelle later tells me, “It[the learning]’s mixed into everything we do so that kids don’t feel they’re rushed. They’re allowed to use their imaginations. We can have all week to work on a single project to let their ideas come through.” This relaxed model of schooling is one that Michelle is very comfortable with. She walked away from all of the financial advantages of a public school teaching position, after becoming so disillusioned with the pace. “I think the biggest problem is the pace, the rush. Just give them this material, cover it, even if they don’t understand, just get it down. It was one of the reasons I quit.” But it may require an adjustment to teachers who are new to Peachtown and their sense of time. A newer teacher there told me, “At first, I was anxious about covering curriculum, because that’s how public-school programs you. I’ve had to stop and remember that here it’s ok to go on a tangent, to cover other ideas and topics, and discuss what else the kids are doing in their lives while we do our Math.”

Genelle instructs the older group, which is split into two smaller sections for their Math. I observed her on four different occasions, with both groups. Displaying the same patience that I saw from the other teachers here, she always appeared to be very organized, prepared with a wide-ranging set of activities, depending on the needs of the students in each group. Due to the skill-based nature of the Math instruction here, at times she had multiple different activities going on simultaneously on a single topic. Although she is relatively new to Peachtown, she shares the school’s commitment to making learning appropriate for what each child needs. “It’s

a supportive environment here. The kids can have an intense day when they' re ready to cover a lot of ground or we can back off when that s where they are. I can individualize a single Math topic in many different ways." I watched her instruct students of wide-ranging ability levels and temperaments and she always displayed the patience and consideration that each child needed.

Michelle once said, "“The kids know we have a respect for them. We look at the kids as equals." This relates to Peachtown's independence from many TPS hierarchies, the most significant of which is that which places children in a subservient role, as compared to the adults who structure their learning experiences. To see the students here as equals is to create a sense of identification between all members of the community. As detailed in the previous chapter, the Peachtown community is made up of people who dress similarly, call each other by their first names, and feel free to share from their own lives as part of their learning together. Alyssa once said, "I see Morning Meeting like sitting down at the dinner table. Grandpa has these stories to tell and Dad wants to talk about politics, It's all welcome. The older kids understand that there are things they don't say that might upset the younger kids, like you'd protect a younger sibling. You just know what questions to ask and what not to say. You can be more open here; in the Morning Meetings you address things."

TPS is rarely like sitting down for a meal with your family. One of the key elements of teacher preparation is learning the techniques of "classroom management," the ability to maintain order and focus while teaching 20-30 students. These sort of management strategies are not as visible here. Peachtown teachers manage much less than they encourage and nurture, in the same way that families operate with the knowledge that not everything that can be said should be, for we all have to get along tomorrow. An alumnus once told me, "We were all in

community classes. Looking back, there were times it didn't even look like 'school': it was much better than that."

Thinking about the uniqueness of what goes on at Peachtown in today's society, as reflected in their institutional schools, Mary Ann once said, "If you think about today and the struggles we're having, what is missing is a sense of community. When I see a multi-age group, as young as 4, learning together and helping each other, that's a very precious thing." And the special thing that unites communities is the sense that they are all pulling in the same direction. "When you're in a school environment where they keep publicly posted lists ranked in order of how well you did, it ends up pitting kids against each other. That's not how communities are built where people feel good about being members. Testing and assessment can work against the community you're trying to build," Alyssa said to me. Peachtown, in bypassing that competition, instead has all of its practices working towards creating a community where the learning of the group is paramount. The Peachtown community is regularly having to teach this to new students as they enter the school. Both Barb and Alyssa spoke about the significant role that the children play in showing new students what is valued in this environment. "When kids start here the older kids stifle when they try to bring some of their public-school habits. Our older kids here set the tone and pull everybody else along."

The kindness that the adults show to the students is here both observable and palpable. Michelle said, "We have blurred edges." And Peachtown uses that blurring to soften distinctions and coalesce adults and children in a common pursuit of learning, not separately, but together.

Starting Over Again Every September - Autoethnography

Creating a community anew each Fall is a challenge for me. After having spent 180 days with a group of students who just walked out the door 10 weeks earlier, September can feel like finding your way around a strange city you were just dropped in, as your new group walks in the door. The ways and manners that worked before may not be appropriate now. For me, September is the most difficult month on the teaching calendar: they don't know me, I don't know them, they don't know my routines, I don't know how much they're comfortable with. I'm confident that once my new students and I get to know each other it will all come together and we'll work well as a unit. However, going through the days that eventually forge that include many missteps on my part and misunderstandings from them as we settle on what this particular class will look like.

What I want for my class is for things to run smoothly with as little intervention from me as possible. We are at the place that I want us to be when they know the routines well enough that they get and do what they need to do without my pointing out every little step. I have found that this is more likely to occur the less controlling that I do early in the year. While a good piece of September needs to be directive and re-focusing, depending on the grade level, I attempt to work in as many opportunities for choice and students solving problems, working together, and coming up with their own solutions to problems. This is especially true in Science instruction, where unfortunately, due to the primary emphasis on Math and ELA scores, less time is committed than previously. Many Science lessons have been reduced to demonstrations by the teacher. I long ago committed to allowing my students to get their hands on the materials we use and to do the activities and experiments themselves. Over the years this has resulted in many

broken materials, lots of noise, arguments, and a great deal of spilled water (and one time, a small fire). But I'd like to think that by allowing them to fully participate in the scientific inquiry, perhaps my students have gotten the idea that I trust them. And perhaps if they see that I trust them with a test tube or a tuning fork, they get the idea that they can be trusted to do the responsible thing throughout the school day, year, and career. That's how my community is built.

A co-learning community where everyone present has room to grow

The prevailing public-school model includes a definite distinction in roles. Children come to school to be learners and the adults at the school are considered to be the ones who will provide and structure the learning that will be done. Conversely, Peachtown has intentionally created, and through its practices maintained, a lateral environment of co-learning. This section demonstrates the ways that co-learning is enacted there. Following that I will discuss learning with, and at times from, my students.

"We're both learning about these things together": Teachers and Students as Peers at Peachtown

Peachtown emphasizes cooperation and collaboration in its students' learning. I never saw a timed piece of work where students had to rush through an assignment in order to be compared and ranked against each other. For that matter, I didn't see one student's work held up as an example which the others should be emulating. Individual students were praised and complemented for what they did—frequently by each other---but there was no communication that the particular form or approach that a certain student took was "the way" to go. This was true also in Genelle's Math lessons with the older group, whereas the concepts become more

advanced, process and form become more particular and essential to accuracy. Perhaps more significantly, the teachers here do not hold up what they themselves do as the model for their students to emulate. The priority is always on the student's learning and their individual way for expressing what they know.

"I am a peer with my students. We're both learning about these things together. It's my job to facilitate it, but they can teach me as much about a subject as I can them. Equality is something that makes Peachtown so different and so unique," a teacher there told me. The key to co-learning at this school is this sense, communicated by the teachers in words and actions, that their students have a significant part to play in the construction of knowledge at the school and that their teachers see what they do with them as a collaborative project. Because Peachtown does not employ a competitive model and does not use many of the markers of individual achievement---report card and test grades, public rewards or division of students based on performance---this school is able to both prioritize the learning of the community over the individual and establish a cooperative paradigm where all members support the others in furthering their progress.

"As soon as you reward something, you kill it, "Alyssa told me. By using language that specifically addresses each student as an individual, the teachers at Peachtown focus on the learning that is being done by that person, not in relation to anyone else at the school or a level of achievement identified by anyone outside of the school. When I listen to the dialogue that occurs in the instruction it is only in reference to the particular activity of the moment. There is a deliberate intention to not use competition or any kind of stress-inducing pressure to with any of the work that is done. The teachers know the students there well enough that they are aware

where each child is with their individual learning, but they have decided the best way to positively influence children towards becoming mature, responsible learners is not to demand things from them, but to create an environment that values learners. Alyssa explained, “That’s why we don’t have homework…except to read for 15 minutes every night. But we don’t check. There’s no penalty if you forgot. It helps if you have a group of kids pulling them in the right direction.”

That “pulling in the right direction” is intended to strengthen the sense of co-learning that is nearly communal here. Again, this is not something happens accidentally; I found no suggestion here that co-learning develops organically and naturally, While the director sees each child’s learning as innate, she is aware of what Peachtown is not. “When you’re in a school environment where they keep publicly posted lists ranked in order of how well you did, it ends up pitting kids against each other. That’s not how communities are built where people feel good about being members.”

Additionally, the goal is to have the students in the community have a clear sense of what they are and what is valued there. In conversations with and observation of teachers and students, reading as a cultural value is unquestioned here. “Everyone here loves reading. Everyone. It’s what we’re all about. No one comes here and stays very long without falling in love with reading,” Alyssa told me. When I heard this and questioned how this could be possible for a school that routinely has new students enter mid-year, she insisted, saying, “No one here thinks reading’s not cool. We’re really intentional about it.” The mechanism by which the school ensures this is connected to the concept of community learning as being the paramount value. She explained: “We do have kids who come in with those self-limiting ideas, but you need a

core of kids to pull them out of it." Rather than a hierarchy of discipline and rewards and punishments to enforce the value that is placed on reading or rely on an adult-created system, the students in the community demonstrate what the standard is here.

I observed the older kids from a chair in the back corner of the room where they do their work. One Spring day, I could see Cayuga Lake out the front window of the room and the green lawn of the college campus where the school resides in the window over my shoulder. The group was spilt between two tables and engaged in a conversation comparing two books as part of a larger activity spread over weeks, that was set up to mimic "March Madness." Each table had two students who had read the book and were presenting their impressions and description of the particular story. While this "upper group" includes 9-13 year olds, it's not always easy to tell who is older than who. The scene is classic "Peachtown;" lots of energy, few raised hands, and lots of opinions freely shared.

I listen to the first table present on their book, advocate for it, argue why it should "move on" in the competition, but mostly I notice the enthusiasm they have about their book. The question period includes some silliness, but you can tell the by the way that the questions from the rest of the room are answered that these students know their book. Once they're done, the kids at the table right in front of me, present on their book; all the students are engaged, paying attention, listening to their fellow learners talk about a book that they are as enthusiastic about as the first group was about theirs. Their presentation, while certainly not comprehensive, is both entertaining and informative and I can't help but notice that *it matters to them that they convince their classmates to love their book too!* I remember Barbara telling me., "There's a very academic culture here. Kids talk about books in their spare time. They're comparing the books

they've read, the reading that they've done." They second group answers questions from the other table, which is followed by another discussion this time comparing the two books before the group decides which book will advance.

I need to point out that during this entire time, there was a teacher present in the room, seated in the corner opposite me. Other than telling each group when to begin, she said very little. Her questions were part of the time together, but they did not seem to be designed questions, intended to lead the discussion in a particular direction, but just a part of the learning. "I am a peer with my students. We're both learning about these things together. It's my job to facilitate it, but they can teach me as much about a subject as I can them. Equality is something that makes Peachtown so different and so unique." She also noted that the books they were using were not part of a packaged literacy product, but books that they had walked as a group to the town library to get. "Public school teachers don't think to supplement their classroom libraries with the public library. I got all of the books I used from the public library." This co-learning community frequently uses the library of their community for their resources.

It is difficult to maintain an enthusiasm for co-learning in a school environment where choices are narrow and dictated. Michelle told me, "The kids get to decide what their projects will be. The kids don't feel they have to be a certain model." It has been suggested that time, space, and choice are important aspects of authentic learning (Zak, 2013). At Peachtown, children are not given reading assignments that include comprehension worksheets or logging pages read to document the time they spent on their work. "That counteracts trying to create readers. We don't punish kids who don't read. We just try to encourage what's fun about it."

On this particular Winter morning, things are running a bit behind and there's some improvising going on to begin the day. The school was in the midst of a unit on Colonial America that was going to lead to their dressing and acting like colonists at their holiday fair. All of the students of the school, Alyssa, and some teachers are gathered near the rug. She tells them that they are going to be playing a game to give everyone a better idea of what it would have been like to be alive at that point in history. One of the teachers moves over to the rug, carrying a box from which each child takes a card. The room starts to buzz as they read what is on the cards, with the youngest children getting help from the independent readers in their group. On the back of the cards are roles that they, the entire school together, will be playing to start the day. Most have the word "colonist" on their cards, but one is the "king", some are "members of parliament," a few are colonists. The king (who actually is a female student) is seated on the window seat above the rug, while the kids sort themselves based into groups, based on their roles.

Each of the "colonists" soon receives 10 M & Ms. The "king" then decides that each colonist must give her a single M & M, which the "colonists" don't like, but they don't complain too much when the "tax collectors" come by to collect what is owed. Over the next 20 minutes the "king" comes up with other reasons to collect more taxes (candy) and again and again the "tax collectors" come by and take from the colonists to give to the king and in a pretty short time the people of the colony are upset as they see their personal candy accounts shrinking. They talk among themselves about what they can do. Alyssa remembered, ". They were taxed without

representation---they were so into it! -You give them M and Ms and they can understand it, everything they thought and did was as it was with adults in history. 'Let's give them what they want, it's not that bad.' But they saw their cups were getting emptier and said, 'Well this isn't fair.'"

So the colonists wrote letters to the King, asking him (actually her) to stop taking their money, but the King here at Peachtown---as with King George---is loving the treasure that is piling up and refuses to relent. The next time the royal tax collectors come around to collect more, the colonists refused. The king---one of the older students, obviously informed about the facts of the Revolutionary War—told them, "You can go to jail and lose all of your money or you can pay your taxes." It was an amazing thing to watch, a wonderful job of co-learning where the entire community was involved in coming to an understanding of the reality of "taxation without representation." The communal knowledge construction was a living example of the school's belief that each student can play a part in contributing to the community's knowledge, without a worksheet or a state standard in sight and had it ended there it would have been impressive.

But, this one little boy, one of the youngest kids in the room refused to give his last M & Ms, and said, "No! Send me to jail!" Which absolutely incited the rest of the colonists and they said, "That's it! We're declaring war!" The 2 boys playing tax collectors were almost crying, they felt so guilty.. Again, the lessons about democracy and participation in civic life and forms of government were invaluable and shared by the community. The room was alive throughout the activity and there seemed little doubt as to the shared learning. At this point the activity had

to stop so the day could move on, but later, a teacher told me, "On the playground ever since they've been playing Revolutionary War. They assign each other parts."

By seeing each member of the community as having the capacity to contribute to the school's communal learning, the Peachtown leadership has created an environment where learning is the most important thing that they do. Barbara once told me, "In public-school , nobody's talking about ideas, There you do your work and get good grades, but the focus is social and sports." Without those distractions, at Peachtown learning is what they do there. Alyssa noted, "Some kids are going to exceed the spot; some are going to fall short. But they've all gotten something out of it." More than that, they are all taught to respect everyone, because anyone who you are around can contribute to your growth. In doing so, Peachtown demonstrates how a cooperative, communal model of learning can work. Barbara said, "All big kids like to play and all little kids like to know 'big things." Yet, there was no test given to assess what goals were met by this activity. In the final section of this chapter, I will discuss how Peachtown answers the question, "But if you don't test them, how do you know that they're learning?"

"Organic ELA": Going with your Students to a more vital place - Autoethnography

As a First Grade teacher, I work with very young students. It can be a very tiring job, since in many ways, your average six year old cannot do a whole lot on their own. However, while it is true that such a student possesses limited physical and coordination skills, it has been my experience that there are children whom just show up in your room with abilities and proclivities that are inexplicably beyond their years. Perhaps the most memorable example of this is my career was a young lady named Erin.

For 14 years at the beginning of my career, I bounced between 4th and 6th grades, waiting for a 1st Grade position to open up. For five of those years I team-taught with a wonderful teacher and we shared our students in different configurations. Prior to the NCLB testing onslaught, the jewel of my day, the time that was the centerpiece of my year, was the daily 90 minute ELA block. In putting together the roster for this group, I would comb through the students' cumulative folders, looking for signs of creativity and self-expression, that would make them a good fit for my group. We were so far off of the prescribed ELA program for 6th Grade, I wonder how I got away with it. Poetry reading, plays, singing, painting, long written pieces conceived of by the students----these were what my ELA students did. We covered what we needed to in the curriculum, but then we were off to a different place than any other ELA group in the school. For this to work I needed a certain type of student and in Erin I had my poster child for this "organic ELA" class.

This girl was so confident about herself, but not in an arrogant way, in a manner that let you know she was sure about what she was doing and---to her classmates---you should be too. She would talk about why she wrote about what she did and what she thought about whatever we were talking about and in doing so she seemed by some sort of unarticulated modeling to convince the rest of the class that they could be this way too. And musically!---her singing and piano playing---she was tremendous, but her abilities didn't so much intimidate as they did inspire. There are times as a teacher that you know the most influential person in that room isn't you, but one of your students, and if you're wise, on occasion, you follow their lead. That year, I feel like all of us together, but definitely influenced by Erin, made that ELA group into a

memorable cohort, through her example of unqualified belief that what she did had value. She taught her classmates that they should show themselves in the work they do and be proud of it. That was a great year for me and she was no small part of it. Erin reminded me that the classroom dynamic between teacher and students is not a one- or even two-lane road, but a web that is constantly being built and rebuilt.

Avoiding the Testing Hierarchy

Contemporary schooling equates student achievement with test success. The currency for valuing and comparing teachers, students, and schools has been established as the results of year-end assessments. Peachtown has never subscribed to that metric or the philosophy that underlies it. In this section, I consider their forms of observing and measuring student growth and the ways that they are applied. Finally, I conclude this chapter, with my final consideration of my own teaching in this section. I describe my efforts at convincing my students to be careful learners, even when they're "on the clock.".

"People who send their kids here, that's not what they signed up for." Peachtown's Measuring Growth Through Performance

"School can get in the way of learning. Everybody needs autonomy to learn and use that learning and not feel restricted." Among the established school hierarchies that Peachtown avoids is that of evaluating and ranking its members through the use of grades, alphanumeric report cards, and testing. Alyssa said, "Testing and assessment can work against the community you're trying to build. I mean public schools are having to have special "anxiety groups" to help

all the kids who are feeling the stress. So much of what is frustrating about public school is getting away from the judging and ranking. Now even teachers are judged by it." Peachtown's original Mission Statement does not mention assessment, although it does state that the school, "does not rely upon pedagogical dogma, pat curricula, or pre-determined methodologies," and that it expects its teachers to, "create an ever-changing amalgam of their own, which is variously applied to meet the needs of very different students." (p. 2) Certainly, this language does not seem to be synchronous with an assessment through standardization approach. The school's Academic Program statement does have an Assessment section, which more fully describes the school's approach to the contemporary realities of academic evaluation. "Written, oral, and visual work and class participation contribute to a student evaluation as do personal initiative, responsibility, and the ability to work with others. Attributes of generosity and compassion are valued as highly as academic and artistic achievement," (p. 2) Certainly this is not surprising, given the value that Peachtown places on both student choice and community learning. However, the same document mentions, "Standardized testing is not employed, although eighth grade students who desire are prepared for New York State Regents examinations."

In considering assessment practices at Peachtown, I will divide my findings. The first of these is concerned with assessment of lessons, concepts, and units; the day-to-day work of teachers and students together. Peachtown students do not take tests to confirm mastery of knowledge, concepts or skills. I never saw or heard a teacher there reference grades or a gradebook when discussing students. Mary Ann's older group maintains sketchbooks throughout the year that include many samples of writing and visual representations of what they have learned, but nothing I saw indicated that the work done in there was used to compare a student to

any sort of academic expectations. As the students mature, they are able to choose projects to show their learning, but the occasions on which they are used does not seem to conform to any sort of schoolwide policy. Alyssa did note, however, it is with these projects that the older group's learning, while part of a schoolwide curriculum, distinguishes itself: "The older kids often have independent projects to show what they've learned. We have a list of topics we all try to cover. When it comes to wars, the older kids might study the reality, while the younger kids study the culture. In Science, the older kids go deeper."

While Peachtown avoids traditional written assessments, they operate in the same educational landscape as TPS with mandatory benchmarks and tests. Parents of children currently in school are aware that written assessments are the currency of institutional education. But Alyssa is very clear about where Peachtown stands. "We don't give tests. People who send their kids here, that's not what they signed up for. That's what's tricky about the school growing." Barbara once told me, "The fact that we don't test is a real positive for most people who come to look at us."

Still, parents who may have sought out Peachtown because they operate outside the testing establishment will want to have some way to measure their child's learning, even if in a less formal manner. In speaking with Alyssa, it's obvious that this is a question she has had to answer. "People will say, 'How do I know? [that children here are learning]' Have a conversation with a kid! Here's an e-mail from a parent excited about all the things her son comes home talking about. Different aspects that she didn't learn about until much later. What does it matter if they don't know dates? We can all Google that. Talk to them and you can hear they know something about the context." After many hours of conversations with leaders and

teachers here, it seems clear that the key to verifying that learning has occurred is the child themselves. This is yet another example of the trust that this school puts in their students and their behaviors as “evidence”---to use Common Core phraseology----that they have learned. Rather than relying on an externally-produced measure---test or rubric---learning here is demonstrated by the members of the community. Michelle says of her younger students, “We know kids have learned by their doing, their performance.” Alyssa expanded on that with, “We know kids have learned, not when they can repeat what we told them, but when they can come up with something on their own Math or insightful questions. When they own it. If a kid is excited, that’s a success. Excited about what they’ve mastered, excited to share it with someone else.” Here, knowledge is not something that is so much mastered, as it is experienced and engaged with, each student in their own way.

Mary Ann also referenced this personal sense of connection between the student and what they may do with their learning as a sign of their growth. “You know what they’ve learned from what they’ve written. Success is completion of work, pride in what they’ve made, and when they review they can recall what they did and they’re happy about it.” I find it necessary to point out that this model, which Barbara once referred to as, “nebulous,” is at times hard to necessarily attach to prevailing learning standards and may not cover a number of expected skills, especially as relates to some finer points of writing. The significant amount of choice that is given to students also extends to the manner in which teachers construct their lessons. For this project I attended the yearly planning session in July, along with speaking with each teacher about the process they used in producing their lessons. It was quite clear, from the variety of answers I received, that there is a philosophical agreement aligned with the school’s emphasis on choice

and community and that teachers regularly communicate with each other about what they are doing. However, there is no insistence that teachers use a set of “best practices” in instructing their students and obviously no written benchmarks to assess progress. “Unlike Public School, we assume our teachers know how the student is doing relative to the norms of the grade. You don’t have to prove it, because you just know from being with them,” Barbara told me. ”When you’re about administer a test in Public School, you don’t know who’s going to do well? No one likes standardized tests. Maybe parents and New York State. They’re all meaningless,” Teachers being able to be almost intuitively aware of their students’ progress here is helped by the size of the learning groups that each teacher instructs. Alyssa, who teaches Math to the “Kittens” and “Owls,” the two youngest learning groups said, “In a group where there’s only 4 kids I can tell quickly who doesn’t get it.” She has taught both older and younger groups, both ELA and Math, in addition to her current duties as director of the school and is in a unique position to comment on the effects of the school’s non-testing stance on growing the school and parent’s perception of a Peachtown education.

“It’s a marketing challenge, it’s a tricky to convince parents it’s going to be ok to be outside of that system. Testing gives parents something to grade their children against. You need to convince them that you can still teach children everything they’ll need to know without that [testing]. Some people are just more comfortable with the black and white. Those people don’t stay with us.” This echoed an earlier comment from Barbara about the child of a parent who chooses to send their child to Peachtown. ”Parents who want that kind of affirmation [test scores] are going to have a problem with a school like this. They’re not creative thinkers, they’re not risk takers.” These comments from the two women who have led this school indicated to me

that Peachtown sees itself both as attracting a certain kind of family and firmly positioned outside of the mainstream. The teachers here also feel very strong about Peachtown's distinctive nature apart from much of contemporary schooling. Michelle said, "I would never want to go back and teach public school again. I do not like the place that public school is heading. Students are not given any freedom. Your day is completely planned."

The second facet of my findings concerns the way that student progress at Peachtown is expressed to the world outside of the school. The first portion of this area reflects the communication of student progress to parents. Teachers are available to speak to parents nearly every day during the week. More formally, while no alphanumeric rankings are used, the school provides families with information, on four separate occasions during the year. With this model, every family is guaranteed an in-depth accounting of their child's progress every ten weeks. Parent-teacher conferences are held at the school at the end of the first quarter of the year (November) and the third quarter(April). Narrative report cards, covering the work done in each subject area are issued mid-year (January) and at the end of the year (June). "The narrative is written in terms of where the child is developmentally, not referencing norms. I let them know if they're lagging or excelling." MaryAnn also told me that an outside evaluator is used to determine each child's reading abilities relative to grade-level expectations and that information is also communicated to parents.

In discussing assessment with the Peachtown staff, I received a lot of responses regarding how they would determine if their students had been successful. As befits an environment that prioritizes community learning and interpersonal relationships, many of the goals that the teachers have concern social maturity. Barbara frequently told me how difficult it is to educate

children to be independent, thoughtful individuals in the current environment, remembering that, ”The common denominator is that here it’s such a caring, personalized education. “Parents want their children to be cared for.” Michelle referred back to this original vision, noting that, “Barb’s philosophy is to create a better society in our students here.” She explained that, saying, “This school teaches children to be good citizens first and foremost and love the learning process and a place that teaches people to want to learn.” For her, success for her students will mean, **“**They will be able to relate with others, be a kind person, be a productive member of society.”

Mary Ann told me, “Graduates should be able to, on the social level, be better equipped with skills and tools to work in a small community that they can apply in larger groups.” Again and again I heard the teachers here relate that what they were teaching at Peachtown should have an impact on the way their students ultimately participated in society. “Once they leave here the skills and tools they have, they can go out into the world and know the whole range of humanity with what they know.”

I Really Mean That You Should Take Your Time - Autoethnography

We feed kids a lot of mixed messages in school, especially when they’re young. We tell them to take their time, be thoughtful, consider what they’re doing, and then we decide how well they’ve done on timed tests. If time space, and choice are the key elements of authentic learning, then by designing assessments that are time-influenced, we are teaching students that what is important is getting to an answer quickly, not necessarily thoughtfully. I tell them every day “take your time” and “think about what you’re going to do before you do it,” but then when the testers come to grab them three times a year to put my students through a battery of ELA and

Math criterion-normed computer-based timed evaluations, I have to gather them around me and say, “Well, you know how we always say…” and explain how this is all different.

But Clara is not impressed. She’s a very happy student in my class this year, with above average skills in all areas, a great reader, who almost always is smiling. She usually does her work standing up, sometimes softly singing, although she seems to mix work time with equal amounts of time talking with her friends. She is a wonderful student and a joy to have in class. What she isn’t, is in a hurry. Clara moves at her own pace and no matter the prodding or cajoling she gets done what she gets done, but she just doesn’t rush through things. To work with her is to enjoy being with such an infectious learner. But to look at her test scores, you’d think she was struggling. Nearly all of the measures that they use with my First Graders are timed and Clara’s profile there is mediocre at best; at times she falls into that “red range” where they’re asking me about her at data meetings. I’ve told her parents that while I’m fine with things the way they are, someday, given what the system is demanding, Clara may need to pick up the pace a bit.

I’ve talked to her some about why she needs to go faster on those testing days and she nods her head, but for someone who loves to sing and dance at some point every day in our room, I’m not sure she really believes me. She’s learning, she’s growing, she loves being with her friends---that’s not a bad schoolyear for anyone. So I don’t really push her on it, because even if her testing profile doesn’t show it, by the most important measure---her performance---Clara is an accomplished learner. And a great person to be around.

My Career as a Progressive School Sympathizer: I'm Not Peachtown

At the end of the final section of my last data chapter, I feel the need to consider where I stand in the educational landscape. I have made frequent references to the existing educational landscape and Peachtown's positionality in relation to the characteristics of today's institutionalized schools. I obviously am impressed by much that I saw there during this study. At the same time, I have been a public-school teacher, firmly entrenched within that institution, for 32 years now. It would be dishonest to suggest that, in my public school setting, I have done what the teachers at Peachtown do

During my time as a teacher, I have always been able to find a small number of colleagues who are willing to bend and at times, ignore rules, do the minimum necessary to comply with policies, and grant their children freedoms not commonly available to most students. While not confrontationally insubordinate, they---we?---are certainly teachers who do what we have to do to survive, but are not designing our year around "the standards." Instead, we each individually reveal to our classes what we think is most vital to their learning in that particular year. That frequently falls outside the curriculum for our grade levels, but rests comfortably inside what we think is best for them as growing learners. I believe that what I have been doing is closer to "The Peachtown Model" than the normative expectations for a public-school teacher.

Early in my career, I was fortunate enough to find my mentor. While my district eventually had a formal "Mentor Program," this was just a case of my coming to know a teacher who had something, who <u>was</u> something I wanted to be. He didn't teach at my grade level; he

wasn't even an elementary-level teacher. Herm was an eighth grade English teacher who had taken a pretty unique path into the profession. He spoke with his students conversationally, yet confidently, and undoubtedly had a very self-assured style that seemed to be his own creation. More than anything, to me as a young teacher who had not always enjoyed his own school days, he seemed to be authentic, with a teaching voice of his own. He exuded so much individuality that there didn't seem to be any question that Herm went his own way with things in his classroom and if that coincided with the curriculum so much the better, but he didn't seem to worry about it. He didn't do things designed to impress you with his creativity: he was genuine.

When I consider my career, I think that's the model I have sought to emulate, one with significant portions of autonomy and individuality. I discovered that in my mentor, have tried to practice it in my classroom, and saw it at Peachtown. For Herm and I it was attempting to allow our students enough freedom that they could find their own paths for self-expression, while revealing to them vital examples of what reading and writing could be. Peachtown has created an environment centered around these things. But while I have done my best to allow for a more open, flexible, child-centered classroom, I've also had to use prescribed curriculum and spend significant pieces of time preparing my students for assessments that produce much data, but little depth of knowledge about them. There are a significant number of us running this somewhat subversive campaign; what we have to sneak in, Peachtown was designed around and lives out.

In this chapter I have discussed how the members of Peachtown have come together to form a co-learning community where communal knowledge is produced and each individual

valued as participating in that creative process. I have pointed to specific practices and beliefs that have made this setting thrive and prevail for three decades. I now turn to a discussion of what I learned in this study in light of my original questions, and how these findings relate to four different aspects of progressive education.

CHAPTER 8

DISCUSSION

I undertook this project to discover what a contemporary progressive school is like in the contemporary educational landscape. While the scholarship on progressive education is voluminous, in recent decades less and less research has been done on progressive education practices. I was looking to identify the specific practices that currently are used to enact a traditional progressive view of education. As an experienced public-school teacher my primary interest is in the specific activities that the teachers and children are undertaking during the school day. Through observations and interviews I wanted to see what it meant for a child to be educated in a progressive school environment in an era that places so much focus on data and assessment.

In this chapter I will consider in four different ways how what I learned intersects with the questions I posed in beginning this study. In the initial section I will consider my original question: "What are the principles and practices of a small independent progressive school in the Age of Accountability?" (p. 15) Next, I consider in depth the ways that Peachtown's practices compare with Kohn's eight characteristics of progressive education that formed the theoretical framework of this study (p 73). My third section will briefly make a comparison between the most distinctive, defining aspects of a Peachtown education and what is normative in contemporary TPS. Finally, I will share how what I learned at this one small progressive school speaks to the persistence of the progressive education model, in an educational landscape that prioritizes values and practices in opposition to the progressive vision.

Principles and Practices

Peachtown Elementary School has operated on a series of philosophies that are part of a counter-narrative to the realities of an institutional schooling system. The many quotes that I have presented here from the school's mission statement present a clear and consistent vision of an alternative and perhaps even counter-cultural learning paradigm. Given the current focus on testing and assessment in our public schools, it is reasonable to describe the current practices there as being focused on maximizing conformity, control, and compliance. It is a model of learning that prioritizes management and a narrowed set of instructional strategies. At every turn, it is both narrowing and a restriction of the educational vision that informs our schools. I am not the only one who has seen this is having an impoverishing effect on the learning that is done there (Teitelbaum & Brodsky, 2008).

The most distinctive aspects of the practices at Peachtown are the use of a Schoolwide Curriculum and the Mixed Age Learning groups. It important to see that both of these practices contribute to a communal, collective learning experience. This aspect of Peachtown that values shared learning is noteworthy for three reasons. First, it distinguishes the learning dynamic of Peachtown from the emphasis on individual achievement competitiveness at TPS. Secondly, while the Progressive Education tradition is characterized by both child-centered education and community engagement, the path taken at many such schools may more resemble the competitiveness of TPS than Peachtown. Additionally, it represents an elevation of the community and the ways in which each member contributes to it over the individual learner and the habits that develop to promote individual success. Ironically, while students and parents point to how students at Peachtown are truly seen as individuals, this is accomplished in the context of

putting the community and its learning first. The individual is best served by their first serving the community.

The self-developed Schoolwide Curriculum is noteworthy for the way it transcends accepted notions of curriculum. Instead of separating curriculum into grade-level/age segments, Peachtown generally instructs in the same area of History and Science to every student at the same time, through their “Main Lessons.” While there is some differentiation between the older and younger groups, there is a consistency to the level of rigor and academic seriousness asked of each student. Barbara stressed this, telling me, “The curriculum outline is the same for both levels. Each teacher makes of it what they will, but the concepts are still there.” The use of this curriculum is significant both for its availability to every child in the school and the high academic content that it contains. When Alyssa says, “We teach History. It’s fact-based. We’re not taking time out leading up to St. Patricks Day to make leprechauns as a craft, we’re talking about abolition and suffrage,” she is pointing to an essential element of this school and its curriculum.

What is done here is serious and demanding. That fact can sometimes become obscured by the kind manner in which the place operates. If you consider the instructional vignettes of the last three chapters there are examples of demanding, challenging work being asked of young children. While Alyssa has said, “It doesn’t feel like a more academically serious place, but I think they may be, because we’ve learned what kids can absorb,” she reveals that Peachtown’s instruction demands more of their children than might be normatively expected. They have learned, through trusting that a child’s innate abilities and curiosities can enable them to stay engaged, that the youngest of students has significant academic capacity. Barbara told me that

one of the most common problems their students have when going to their next school is boredom. This is a comment that was echoed in a number of the conversations I had with alumni about their Peachtown experience.

If Peachtown's Schoolwide Curriculum transcends expectations of grade-based content, then its Multi-Age Grouping is also transcendent in the way that it combines members of the community during their learning day. Again, it is necessary to point out that this is not necessarily a characteristic of traditional Progressive Education practice, although it is more likely to be found in small, independent schools. There is a similarity to the "Democratic Schools" of the 1970s (Miller, 2002) in this regard, but with a greater intentionality than was found in many of those environments. The entire school is in this sort of configuration for its daily Morning Meeting and at lunch. At the most microscopic of levels, this affects how the older students care for the younger ones and the youngest students model themselves after their older schoolmates. In the learning groups, while the gap between oldest and youngest is smaller, similar behaviors occur. These groupings allow teachers to strategically combine children of different ages in order to promote growth among all participants.

On a larger scale, by restricting divisions to a minimum, Peachtown again is re-enforcing the centrality of their community. It is not grade level vs grade level or boys vs girls, the paramount value is the learning that is done by the community. Many former students spoke about how much they gained in their lives outside of school by being grouped with children of different ages as they learned. Working with each other, they are able to see that the ability to contribute to the knowledge of the group is not defined solely by age. Additionally, being placed in a context where they need to both help and be dependent on those around them, these students

are part of a model that is based less on efficiency and competition and more on collaboration and being open to responding to the needs of others.

In an environment where there are no clear benchmarks to be met and no tests to be prepared for, differentiation of instruction has a different look than might be found elsewhere. When Barbara says, "If everyone knew the same thing, they haven't pursued their own interests. That's where growth occurs," she is pointing to Peachtown's willingness to both allow students to express their learning in different ways and contribute to what their learning looks like. The school's faith in all of its students to be able to learn allows them to view each child's education as both intricately connected to the learning community as a whole (largely through the use of the Schoolwide Curriculum) and able to be individualized to each child's interests.

This conception of differentiation here goes beyond instruction and to the learning itself. An inordinate amount of research has been devoted to instructional differentiation and not enough towards differentiation in learning. An alumnus of Peachtown told me, "The school really allowed me to learn in my own way, and grow in that, and really worked to understand me as a child and how I can best learn." This is an expansion of what is commonly meant in educational discussions about "differentiation," which has tended to focus on instructional practices and teachers. It is quite a different thing than what this student is recalling, the school's concern that each child leave there with a sense of who they are as a learner. This is a truly child-centered education, not just in terms of their interests, but who they are. In order for this sort of differentiation to occur there needs to be both an environment and practices in place that allow the child the time to learn about themselves and how they take in information from the world. Again, "child-centered education" is a normative progressive school characteristic (Russell,

2012), but I wonder if what I saw at Peachtown is a somewhat different iteration of this term. I see it as closer to the Prospect School's use of "descriptive inquiry" in discerning its' students' proclivities and strengths in learning (Rodgers, 2011). This is truly an education that has the students as the most vital element in the learning day.

I can't let this discussion end without touching on the intentional use of informality here. I have spoken frequently about this setting as more of a community than what is most commonly considered a school. This is due in large part to their transcending traditional school forms of appearance, conversation, and efficiency. It can be argued that the informalities of Peachtown are the binding that connect these other processes of curriculum, grouping, and differentiation. Those practices could all be present, but lack cohesion without the sense of egalitarianism and heterarchy provided by a pervading sense of informality. All members of the community can see each other as both learners and sources of knowledge because of the school's history of seeing students as peers that can be learned from.

I think it is significant to identify the way in which Peachtown views as its students. It manages to avoid excesses of the "free school movement" of the 1960s (Miller, 2002) and the nearly total self-direction of education at the Sudbury Valley School (Greenberg, 1995), while also standing outside of contemporary TPS. They transcend the traditional forms of schooling, especially as concerns the place that teachers and students play in the community's learning process. This is most clearly communicated by not confining the children there to the "student" role, but allowing them to exert additional influence on the path that the group's learning will take. By looking to relate with instead of solely managing their students, they are able to create a less formal environment where all there can respond to the day's learning more as members of a

family would, than in the normative schooling model, which tends to lead all parties towards fulfilling roles, rather than potentials. The relaxed atmosphere allows the growth of a community together, one that is not required to stop and measure the progress of each individual regularly, but instead is focused on the school as a dynamic group of co-learners.

Taken together, the practices that I have pointed to in this section, point as much to the manner of engagement at this school as they do to what might generally be considered "school practices." While I have cited few specific instructional strategies or student expectations, the five practices that I have mentioned underpin what I see as the central mission of the school: to create a unified learning community that works each day to increase the shared knowledge of the people who gather here four days a week. By having everyone study the same content simultaneously with students of different ages in an informal setting that allows both for group and individual growth, this community is built each year. In speaking with the two directors of the school there have been years when it came together better than others which has to be expected with the fluid student population common to independent private schools. But their goal has been the same for many years. "It has to be fun, it has to be collegial, the children all have to be operating with the same feeling. It has to be about caring, community, and fun."

In this section I have reviewed the findings around the question that started my inquiry: , "What are the principles and practices of a small independent progressive school in the Age of Accountability?" (p. 14) I have shown how Peachtown Elementary School uses Mixed-Age Grouping, Schoolwide Curriculum, a different conception of Differentiation, and Informality in its daily practices. In my Conceptual Framework (p. 15,16) I noted my intention to see how the practices I observed lined up with Alfie Kohn's 2008 work on Progressive Education. In that

article, he pointed to eight characteristics of truly progressive schools. In my next section I will show how my findings at Peachtown intersect with his assertions.

"Progressive Education: Why It's Hard to Beat, But Also Hard to Find"
Kohn (2008)

In this article, Kohn both acknowledges the disagreements among self-identified progressive educators and, "that a common core of progressive education emerges, however hazily." He also notes the evidence of progressivism in public schooling and the failure of progressive schools to completely enact in their vision. He then identifies eight characteristics that are most likely to be found in such environments. In the following section, I identify each of the characteristics cited in this article and present the evidence in this study to see whether Peachtown's practices line up with Kohn's guidelines. Finally, I briefly comment on the use of progressive practices in my own teaching experience.

Attending to the Whole Child

Kohn asserts. "Progressive educators are concerned with helping children become not only good learners but also good people. Schooling isn't seen as being about just academics." His emphasis here is on the child not as a student first, but more importantly as a person. In de-emphasizing purely academic constructions of school success, he is also discounting the increased use of standardized measures to measure that success. In presenting us with a vision of schools as places where academics are not the clear priority, but just one that should be in service of influencing the child to be a socially adept member of a group, he is pointing us to a more

community-based model. It is this, more family-like system, that is congruent with what I saw at Peachtown.

As I shared in the previous three chapters, many of the comments from the teachers about the goals of the school intersect comfortably with the quote about, “not only good learners but also good people.” Mary Ann told me, “This school serves and educates children in a different way. Once they leave here the skills and tools they have, they can go out into the world and know the whole range of humanity with what they know.” Michelle said, “This school teaches children to be good citizens first and foremost,” and Barbara added, “The common denominator is that here it’s such a caring, personalized education. Peachtown is a place where children are cared for and cared about.” Clearly, the teachers at Peachtown agree with this aspect of Kohn’s progressive school analysis. Further their use of practices---Whole School Curriculum, Mixed Age Groups---that assume an innate, perhaps “pre-academic” capacity that all children bring with them, shows this school’s prioritizing of the human commonalities as opposed to academic proficiency. The faith that they have in their students’ ability to process complex ideas and work with students of different age levels further speaks to their congruency with Kohn on this aspect.

Community

Kohn’s description under this point is strongly supportive of environments that discount competition in favor of the learning done within the group as a whole. “Interdependence counts at least as much as independence, so it follows that practices that pit students against one another in some kind of competition, thereby undermining a feeling of community, are deliberately avoided.” He sees this principle as applying to all aspects of the school day, not just those in

formal instructional circumstances. “Children learn with and from one another in a caring community, and that’s true of moral as well as academic learning.” His points are in agreement with interviews and observations that I made for this study.

In re-reading Kohn’s comments on the effects of competitiveness, I was reminded of Alyssa’s saying, “When you’re in a school environment where they keep publicly posted lists ranked in order of how well you did, it ends up pitting kids against each other. That’s not how communities are built where people feel good about being members. Testing and assessment can work against the community you’re trying to build.” I also thought back to the learning groups that I saw there and the way that the teachers there would speak with individual students about their work. I never heard them compare one child’s work with another or with a model that the teachers themselves had provided. It is part of Peachtown’s differentiation practices that has each child treated in terms of their own strengths and needs. Since they are not aiming for a type of work that will be sufficient enough for a state test or to meet a benchmark, they use this non-competitive manner to re-enforce their relaxed model of education that allows each child to grow in their own way. Michelle said, “They’re given much more freedom to learn at their own pace. It’s more of an intrinsic motivation to learn about what you love. We let them delve into subjects deeply.”

More than anything, Peachtown is about building its community. It takes to heart Kohn’s statement about competition undermining community. While it is encouraging of each student, it does not set certain leaners apart from others due to their performance. “As soon as you reward something, you kill it,” Alyssa said. It is always about the community learning together, not about individual performance. The informal times that the students of all ages spend together

allow for the sharing of knowledge. Additionally, I never once saw or heard about a timed test where student outcomes were compared. The practices at Peachtown completely coincide with Kohn's observations here.

Collaboration

Kohn**'s "**collaborative problem-solving" here appears to be at one with Peachtown's view of themselves as a co-learning community whose members treat each other as peers. He sees progressive schools as places where," In place of rewards for complying with the adults' expectations, or punitive consequences for failing to do so, progressive schools are characterized by what could be called a "working with" rather than a "doing to" model. " This has implications for both learning and relationships at the school. The overriding element is the willingness for all members of such a community to see themselves and others as having something of value to contribute to whatever situation arises. Peachtown's heterarchical nature makes it an environment where such a perspective is used for growth and development.

Environments that use, "rewards for complying with the adults' expectations, or punitive consequences for failing to do so," are employing a traditional TPS role-based structure, which usually defines members as either "teachers" or "students." In doing so it establishes hierarchies with expectations, limitations, and definitions that can fail to take account individual strengths and needs. Since students are at the receiving end of this equation they end up being managed through the TPS triad of conformity, control, and compliance. However, Peachtown does not apply this paradigm to its students. "We're pretty equal here. We look at the kids as equals and the kids feel that. That's why we call each other by their first names. The kids learn from each

other when they see how we respond to each other," Michelle said to me. It is the use of this conception of children, as deserving respect equal to that accorded to an adult that results in Peachtown's manifesting Kohn's concept of collaboration. Another Peachtown teacher said, ""I am a peer with my students. We're both learning about these things together. It's my job to facilitate it, but they can teach me as much about a subject as I can them." There is very little that can contribute more to a collaborative environment than to see the person next to you as having value and treating them that way. Peachtown allows its students to contribute to the path of their learning and to demonstrate their knowledge in ways of their own choosing. This is a place where students are "worked with" not "done to."

Social Justice

Kohn expresses the belief that progressive school students should be looking beyond their school environment to a responsibility for those in the areas around them. He sees the need for the sense of "community" that they are developing to include concern for those beyond their immediate social group. Progressive schools should see that, "Students are helped to locate themselves in widening circles of care that extend beyond self, beyond friends, beyond their own ethnic group, and beyond their own country. Opportunities are offered not only to learn about, but also to put into action, a commitment to diversity and to improving the lives of others." This has also long been a part of the Progressive Education tradition in many prominent schools.

This is the characteristic of Kohn's that I found the least evidence for at Peachtown. I can recall Morning Meetings that include discussions of issues such as suffrage and voting rights. Frequently during this time current events are discussed and I saw Alyssa on more than

one occasion allow rather extensive conversations about discrimination and the role that privilege plays in the opportunities that different people have in society. Prominent examples of discrimination and repression were used and at times supplemented with whole group readings about these issues. Instructionally, the Schoolwide Curriculum's historical topics include issues that would fall into the Social Justice category. I am thinking specifically about lessons that I saw on Immigration and the Labor Movement. There were several opportunities for the students to react to the historical realities and circumstances of the situations they were being exposed to. However, perhaps because this is an elementary school and many of the children are very young I did not see opportunities for Kohn's suggestion of, "put into action, a commitment to diversity and to improving the lives of others." The children of this school engage with their surrounding community in many ways, I just did not see it in the context of pursuing social justice.

Intrinsic Motivation

Kohn's focus here seems to be wider than in many of his other characteristics, calling for educators to examine the intent behind the activities of their students. " When considering (or reconsidering) educational policies and practices, the first question that progressive educators are likely to ask is, 'What's the effect on students' *interest* in learning, their desire to continue reading, thinking, and questioning?'" This shows Kohn's skepticism towards the prevailing TPS model which is guided more by allegiance to standards, benchmarks, and other externally-imposed measures. It is in agreement with the Peachtown principle that, ""Education is not a finite set of knowledge and skills. It's a growth model; you perceive things, you get an idea, and you pursue it." This characteristic of Kohn's is also shared by Progressive Education's traditional pursuit of child-centered education (Chernetskaya, 2013).

The most distinctive Peachtown practices concerning curriculum, grouping, and student individuality all cohere around this aspect of Kohn' s progressive school definition. They expose children to complex concepts in multi-age groups and allow them to demonstrate their learning in self-chosen forms because they believe that is what is best for them as learners. Peachtown allows for a greater latitude for discussion of ideas and thoughts because they are confident of its effect on "reading, thinking, and questioning." In this same section, Kohn declares, "Conventional practices, including homework, grades, and tests, prove difficult to justify for anyone who is serious about promoting long-term dispositions." This is in agreement with Peachtown's near total avoidance of homework and written tests. "We don't have homework…except to read for 15 minutes every night. But we don't check. There's no penalty if you forgot," she told me. On this issue Peachtown and Kohn are together in endorsing only those practices that promote further student interest in learning.

Deep Understanding

Kohn goes to great lengths here to distinguish between excellence and difficulty in schoolwork. Pointing out that the accumulation of facts and skills is most important in their application, he writes, "Progressive education tends to be organized around problems, projects, and questions." This is clearly different from the contemporary TPS obsession with students showing "mastery" of skills at the levels assigned by the standards. But it is similar to the philosophy and practices at Peachtown that do not separate skills from the context in which they need to be used. Barbara told me, ""Education is not a finite set of knowledge and skills. Every skill you acquire should be in the context of content." The work there is very content-based as demonstrated in the center point of the Peachtown learning day----the Schoolwide

Curriculum as taught in the Main Lesson. In speaking with the teachers and attending their weekly meetings, their concern was always with content and how the students would put together what they had been taught. This too is in agreement with Kohn's assertions here.

I also find a similarity between Kohn's theory and Peachtown's intersection of instruction, assessment, and learning. "The teaching is typically interdisciplinary, the assessment rarely focuses on rote memorization, and excellence isn't confused with "rigor," he writes. His depictions of these aspects of a progressive school adeptly match what is done at Peachtown. Their Main Lessons regularly combine reading and writing skills with historical and scientific content. The assessment that they do frequently is of projects that the students themselves choose. Finally, the school's use of complex academic content along with their willingness to allow significant amounts of student choice gives them opportunities to excel with content that matters to them. Michelle said, "It's more of an intrinsic motivation to learn about what you love. We let them delve into subjects deeply. This is definitely a more academically challenging place."

Active Learning

Kohn's description of this concept is similar to what I have described as Peachtown's willingness to allow students to exercise some choice in the path that their learning will take. He writes, "In progressive schools, students play a vital role in helping to design the curriculum, formulate the questions, seek out (and create) answers, think through possibilities, and evaluate how successful they — and their teachers — have been." What he is outlining is a different conceptualization of the roles played by the members of the learning community. It is less

similar to the TPS model and instead allows for the type of differentiation and innovation that independent schools have the latitude to exercise. Peachtown has chosen a set of practices that fulfill the criteria that Kohn has put forward, with the exception of evaluation of teachers.

My study showed that Peachtown, by placing faith in its students with its grouping and curricular decisions encourages them to be actively involved in their learning. I saw several examples of discussions surrounding different content pieces where children were asked their perspectives on historical situations. They also are given the freedom to choose the ways in which to display what they have learned. Michelle told me, “They’re allowed to use their imaginations, We can have all week to work on a single project to let their ideas come through.” Teachers are also willing to invest time to conducting discussions that they influence without directing and in the course of these conversations, students are able to listen to and react to each other’s ideas. In this way, the concept of “active learning” is expanded, from each individual’s being able to impact the direction of their learning to the dynamic that is created within the group affecting the learning community. I see Peachtown’s primary concern as advancing the knowledge of the community as a group and by allowing their students to be active participants instead of just passive receivers, they are endorsing Kohn’s belief that, “learning is a matter of constructing ideas rather than passively absorbing information or practicing skills.”

Taking Kids Seriously

Kohn’s description of his final characteristic is a good summary of Peachtown’s attitude towards its students. The many facets that he delineates here can be compared with philosophies and practices that I observed that show his assertions in action. In examining the list that Kohn

assembled it seems that he has placed this characteristic last as a cumulative summation of sorts, considering the detail that he takes in explicating it. That Peachtown is significantly congruent with his descriptions here shows how well this school aligns with his identifying characteristics.

When I read Kohn's claim that, "Progressive educators take their cue from the children — and are particularly attentive to differences among them. (Each student is unique, so a single set of policies, expectations, or assignments would be as counterproductive as it was disrespectful.)," it reminds me of an early interview I did with a teacher at Peachtown. She told me that there, "We fit the curriculum around the student." This matches up with the choices that students I observed there had in different ways to show their learning. It was similarly echoed by alumni who remembered Peachtown as a place where they were able to research in areas of their interest. The assertion that, "The curriculum isn't just based on interest, but on *these children's* interests…teachers don't just design a course of study *for* their students; they design it *with* them, and they welcome unexpected detours," also evokes Peachtown practices. I recall the Summer planning meeting I attended there where the teachers discussed how the year's curriculum units fit the students in their groups. Similarly, the "unexpected detours" comment reminded me of the spacious use of time at Peachtown that allows for wide-ranging inclusive discussions.

Finally, the way that Peachtown's teachers allow their students' contributions to affect—although not alter---the path of learning for a day or unit is echoed in Kohn's work. Alyssa's belief that, "Everybody needs autonomy to learn and use that learning and not feel restricted," is possible when, "Progressive educators realize that the students must help to formulate not only

the course of study but also the outcomes or standards that inform those lessons." (Kohn) If this final point is the culmination of Kohn's attempt at a Progressive Education definition, then Peachtown's similarity to his model says a great deal about the alignment between their practices and Kohn's theory here. Looking at Kohn's series of identifying elements, I believe it is clear that the philosophies and practices of Peachtown are in agreement with his model.

In this section I have compared Alfie Kohn's characterization of Progressive Education with the findings of this study for Peachtown Elementary School. While there are significant similarities in seven of the eight of Kohn's facets, I did find a relative dearth of evidence regarding Social Justice. However, in his cumulative element, "Taking Kids Seriously," Peachtown had significant similarity to the description that Kohn provided. In the last part of this section, I will now reflect on how these progressive practices have been a part of my own teaching.

"The influence of progressive ideas." – Progressive education in the TPS classroom

One of my good friends, who I taught with for many years, once told me, "You know what your problem is? You always fall in love with your class." In all facets of my life, I think that you can tell what matters to you is revealed by how you spend your time. I have spent most of the last 32 years with children, from 5 to 13 years old, sharing with them many of the most valued books, ideas, and experiences of my life because I thought it would enrich them as they started to develop into the people they eventually would become. Yes, I take kids seriously and the way I chose to enact that that has isolated me from my colleagues many times.

It didn’t take long for me to be reminded, shortly after becoming a teacher, of all the things that had frustrated me as a student. Chief among these was the way I was spoken to throughout most of school, in a condescending, patronizing way, as if I wasn’t capable of understanding any part of “real world” ideas. When I started teaching, I promised myself I would never speak to my students that way and, remembering that there were times I could have participated in conversations as a student, that I knew relevant things, I always assumed that my kids could keep up. I’ve treated my class, no matter what grade I’ve taught, as if they could learn challenging content, if I presented it in the appropriate way. My reference point has rarely been to first look at the state standards and the particular curriculum items prescribed for a particular grade level, but instead to try to use those activities and concepts that I thought they would be most animated by. More than once this has brought me into conflict with my colleagues who feel more committed to confining their instruction to the prescribed standards.

When I consider Kohn’s characteristics as a group, I see them coming together around the way that we treat children in school. No doubt, younger people, lacking experience and agency, need protection and guidance. But in schools I think that has resulted in a severe discounting of what students are capable of. Many of these elements: being actively involved, getting to work with others, being able to choose how we spend our time, being able to deeply look into what interests us---these are all expectations that we would have as adults. If we were treated as students too often are, we would be offended and think that our time was being wasted. Yet, these suggestions could be a topic of controversy for many in the Education field because of the limited expectations and confined boundaries for our students. Put simply, I don’t think we treat students like people often enough! Over 32 my years as a teacher, it is my hope and belief,

that I have consistently treated my students as if they always had the capacity to learn and something useful to contribute to the learning of those around them.

"What are the philosophical principles and instructional practices of a school operating as an alternative to Traditional Public Schools in the Age of Accountability?"

On page 85 of my Methodology chapter, in discussing my research setting, I put forth the above question, looking to frame where my findings would be located relative to current TPS practices. A major reason that I undertook this study was to document the operations of a school operating in the contemporary educational landscape. The following section is a treatment of different aspects of contemporary institutional schooling that I have identified. First, I will focus on the three themes that are common to most TPS practices---Conformity, Control, and Compliance---and contrast what I saw at Peachtown with accepted institutional practices. Then I will examine three areas of the student experience that I believe that can be used as a lens to depict what is distinctive about Peachtown relative to TPS.

Conformity

In environments where conformity is an indicator of both predispositions and status, "Many individuals conform to a single, homogeneous standard of behavior, despite heterogeneous underlying preferences." (Bernheim, 1994, p. 841). In primarily social institutions, like schools, that perform frequent rankings and judgements, conformity can become an assumed part of membership. The contemporary institutional school, in the Age of Accountability has taken conformity, historically a value of public schooling, and elevated it even higher through the use of standardized assessments and teaching methods. In many ways,

conforming, going along with a narrowly prescribed set of behaviors and forms, has now become the most apparent school value. When instruction is guided by a set of "best practices" defined by their ability to yield adequate standardized testing results then it can hardly be surprising that we are now communicating to children that success for them will be defined in equally as narrow terms.

Peachtown, from its Mission Statement forward, has publicly and intentionally facilitated a type of education that is decidedly non-conformist. While the school has values that it supports in its philosophies and practices, there is always notable space left for each student to express opinions, create projects, and do their work in an individualized manner. For example, the teachers at Peachtown talked to me about how reading is valued by everyone there, but they are able to accomplish this without required checklists or assignments. Alyssa said, ""No one here thinks reading's not cool. We're really intentional about it. We don't punish kids who don't read. We just try to encourage what's fun about it. But we don't check. There's no penalty if you forgot." This is the difference between a setting that models the things that are important to it and one that requires it. By enabling students to display their learning in ways that they choose and impact discussions, Peachtown has built into its practices enough individuality to insulate it from the conformity risk that any institution takes. I heard former students describe the freedom that they were given to pursue their own interests within the schoolwide curriculum and the founder declare that, "If everyone knew the same thing, they haven't pursued their own interests. That's where growth occurs." I am convinced that what has grown here is an academically serious learning setting that is able to maintain the highest learning expectations while having enough faith in its students, that allowing them to pursue their own paths is the surest way to excellence.

Control

As the institution responsible for the well-being of most of the nation’s children and adolescents 10 months out of the year, TPS must exercise enough control to guarantee their safety. The challenge is to control the environment enough to maintain such an equilibrium while allowing enough room within those boundaries for students to exercise their energetic imaginations and attempts at expression. It is possible to see the enforcement of rules designed to achieve a consistency of behavior as having an impact on what learning looks like in such institutionalized settings. As control has become a more valued commodity in TPS, the room for children to react in ways authentic to their developing selves, ways necessary for them to grow as learners, can be diminished. Unfortunately, a quiet class, sitting still in their seats, in a room where only the teacher talking has too often come to be seen as the goal.

At Peachtown, room was always left for the students to be their natural selves. That is not to say that the teachers weren’t in control, but more than once I wrote in my notes, “Is this a different type of classroom management?” The manner of structure used here is connected to the school’s intention to use informality and heterarchy. Teachers are able to maintain the order and structure needed for safety and the ability for students to learn. However, they do not use the authority that they obviously could apply to limit students’ responses in discussions or not allow them to use their individuality in make learning decisions. When roles are rigid, hierarchical social situations in schools can result in “controller” and “controlling” groups. When this happens, at times the controlling actions can extend beyond structure and safety and become unduly limiting. In learning settings, where students’ capacity to become engaged, interact, and at times make missteps common to their developmental situation need to be accommodated, such

control can adversely affect learning. Peachtown's practices further student autonomy, increasing the possibility of teachers and students collaborating and learning together.

Compliance

The influence that state governments have on what is done in TPS classrooms has increased in recent years with the growth in required assessments linked to learning standards. Institutional schools are less intentional settings than legal entities, obligated to follow the mandates of their state governing bodies. Among these are curricular and assessment requirements that are also linked to local school's funding through state tax revenues. Compliance with the dictates of their governing bodies becomes a value that is then expected at each level of the educational institution. At the classroom level this means that teachers are expected to comply with the demands put upon them and students, rather than looking to their innate resources of creativity and curiosity, they instead are rewarded depending on their fidelity to the compliance model.

Independent schools, like Peachtown, while "required" to address the skills and content delineated in state standards, because they are not required to administer required exams, have the opportunity to put less value on compliance, as a facet of educational success. At Peachtown, I saw very little time devoted to getting students to comply with policies and edicts, beyond those designed to ensure safety and respect for other members of the community. Instead, this school has both practices and ways of engaging students that encourage a more divergent manner of learning. When the founder of the school says, "Everyone shouldn't necessarily be learning the same thing" and the current director states, "Everybody needs autonomy to learn and use that

learning and not feel restricted," it is clear that a notably different model of education is being used here. I find that one of the most significant aspects of what is done at Peachtown is this intentional decision to not align itself with the contemporary valuing of conformity, control, and compliance. Because they put so much faith in their children's natural abilities to learn and their innate desire to grow through engaging with complex curricular concepts, Peachtown does not place a great emphasis on demanding conformity, control, and compliance from its teachers or students. The leadership of this school has never felt as if those characteristics were necessary for learning or growth: in fact, they think they believe that they are impediments to such progress.

Time

As an institution that has structured itself into grade levels, subject areas, and defined class periods, the TPS day is significantly characterized by control of time. Even the youngest students, find themselves "on the clock" with limited time frames in which they are expected to comprehend, practice, and show their learning. Perhaps more significantly, the pervasiveness of this model has trained teachers to present material in a manner that efficiently fits into these limited time boxes, with less concern for the complexity of the concept or the preparedness of the students than staying loyal to the curricular calendar. TPS teaching and learning is evaluated based on how well teachers and students respond to this one model of instruction. This pattern of instruction continues despite research showing that limiting the time that a student is allowed has detrimental effect on learning (Lundberg, 2003).

Throughout this study. I saw that Peachtown used a flexible conceptualization of time in approaching the learning of its community. Main Lesson units are designed on a "6 -7 week"

basis, but at times were extended when the projects that were undertaken required additional days. As these projects would change when the students added to their original concepts, the director and the teachers seemed willing to make adjustments to their calendar. On a more granular level, because the daily schedule has built into it long periods of time for the Main Lesson and Language Arts, I often saw the teachers allow for extended discussions and sharing of personal experience in considering the day's work. They had the latitude to make decisions based upon how that day was going for their group of students and at times would cut lessons short, devote additional time, or go in another way altogether. More than once, I saw a teacher spontaneously confer with another and they would make a decision about moving the time to end or begin the next activity. On other occasions, I saw students granted additional time to finish what they were working. This flexibility of time also lets the teachers there have frequent impromptu individual conversations with their students about their work. Here, a less rigid view of the way that time intersects with work advances the learning that is done.

Space

TPS, as befits their status as institutions, frequently are similar in the spaces that they provide for their students to learn in. Perhaps not surprising in an era that has come to value increasing standardization in the educational experience, contemporary classrooms have tended to share a number of characteristics which allow for maximum predictability and sameness from one school to another, with students confined to the same space, regardless of the task they are being asked to perform. This is a further example of the control that schools exert over their students which I previously referenced in this section. This is so common across TPS in our society that it is difficult not to assume that maximizing a surface uniformity---again instead of

the innate curiosity and creativity---is the goal. This continues to be the model despite research showing that such a rigid imposition of impersonalized student learning space negatively impacts academic progress (Barrett, Zhang, Davies, and Barrett, 2015).

While I have described the learning space at Peachtown previously in this study, I think it is important to reference it here, in contrast to that which is found in most school settings. TPS settings are artificial environments, institutional buildings subdivided for efficiency. Congruent with its belief that all of its students are natural learners, Peachtown provides its learning opportunities in a space where people would normatively live their lives---a home. That setting has not been subdivided to create learning spaces, the areas designed and originally used as a living room, dining room, and bedrooms now serves as spots for instruction and learning. They are more natural spaces for children to be and grow in. Perhaps most importantly, this more natural location is open and spacious enough that children have some choice in where they learn and the type of space that they occupy for different tasks. By returning a measure of control of space to their students Peachtown is again showing its faith that their students will make responsible choices to enhance their learning.

Choice

The amount of choice that a student has over their learning positively increases their achievement. (Hanover Research, 2014) TPS, through the hierarchies and divisions that it is defined by, severely restricts student choice, dictating what students will be taught, at what point

they will learn it, and how they will demonstrate their learning. In doing so, they reduce student autonomy in the interests of providing a standardized education for all, guaranteed by test results that can be compared between classrooms, schools, and states. However, academic choice is not the only area in which schools traditionally restrict student's ability to construct their academics day. Again, in the interests of providing a standardized learning experience, schools also tell students who they will learn with, where they will go, how long they will stay, and by restricting instructional methods through the endorsement of "best practices," how they will be taught. Essentially, a public-school education is a 13 year experience of having your options limited, prescribed, and being told this is good for you. Once again, research has shown a reasonable amount of student choice improves both motivation and achievement (Patall, Cooper, & Wynn, 2010).

The practices that I observed at Peachtown agree with allowing its students to allow a sensible amount of choice in both the path of their learning and the way that they demonstrate what they know. When I heard former students talk about pursuing their interests and being given the freedom to explore reading genres of their choosing, I was curious as to how this would look in a structured school environment. However, what I saw at Peachtown were teachers who take the time to get to know their students well so that they are equipped to use that knowledge, allowing them to make an increasing amount of choice as they mature. Since they are not tied to a benchmark or testing schedule, these teachers can allow students to take directions and make choices that lead to increased student self-knowledge and maturity. As with much at Peachtown, the significant amount of student choice here is teacher-driven.

Peachtown and accountability

I feel it important to note that while Peachtown is sensitive to student interest and open to a variety of manners of demonstrating learning, it is not a setting lacking in accountability. I heard repeated comments from the school's founder and current director that indicated a commitment to holding their students to the highest academic standards. I believe that this is reflected in their use of a schoolwide curriculum that involves the entire school community in studying profound historical and scientific concepts. I would like to suggest that the accountability in place at Perachtown and other such progressive settings is a more authentic one than that currently on place at most TPS. Accountability at many contemporary public schools is defined by standardized test success and fidelity to narrowing concepts such as "Best Practices" and state standards. In comparison, success at Peachtown is seen as students comprehending larger academic ideas and using such understanding in a positive way once they leave the classroom.

In this section I have discussed three different aspects of contemporary institutional schooling that I have identified---Conformity, Control, and Compliance and how these differ at Peachtown Elementary School. I then considered three areas of the student experience—Time, Space, and Choice---and contrasted their use in TPS and Peachtown. I believe that the differences highlighted provide a detailed description of Peachtown's distinctiveness. In the last section of the Discussion Chapter I will examine how the findings of this study correlate with the existing research on the origin, traditions, and characteristics of Progressive Education.

Peachtown and the Progressive Education Tradition

In this section, I would like to conclude the discussion of my findings by placing my observations of Peachtown among the existing research on Progressive Education. Where do the philosophies and practices of this school stand in relation to this tradition? Despite the practices of the ongoing Age of Accountability, Progressive Education has shown a vibrant persistence over the course of many decades and while it may not have intellectually "won the day" in recent years, it has influenced classrooms in many ways (Kohn, 2008; Semel & Sadovnik, 1999). Much that I saw at Peachtown aligns with prevailing scholarship in this area. It is my intention in this section to show that Peachtown historically is part of a legacy of thought and practice that can be traced back to the 19th century child-centered thinkers to the more formalized progressive education movement of the early 20th century, and is a modern day iteration of the democratic/free school movement of the mid-20th century

Child Learning Environments

Peachtown's statements in its formal documents are Rousseauian in their looking to create an environment that supports children's learning by encouraging their personal interests, in place of looking for mere repetition of knowledge. Their philosophies echo Reese (2001)'s description of the work of Pestalozzi and Froebel and their innovative perspectives on the child as a capable learner. I also see similarities between Peachtown's ambitious Schoolwide Curriculum and these two thinkers' approach to having a curriculum that extended beyond accepted norms. The use of collaboration and extended conversations as key parts of learning are also evocative of Gutek (1978)'s scholarship on Neef and his, "Sketch of a Plan and Method of Education," (1808) where he indicated his belief that children had significant innate capacities to

learn. Another education progenitor that Peachtown connects to is Friedrich Froebel, who like the leadership at Peachtown, stressed the importance of maintaining the individuality of each learner.

Among key American educational figures, the work done at Peachtown can be linked to Lucy Mitchell and her Bank Street College of Education. Mitchell believed that children could do profound thinking at a young age and would prosper when given the time and challenged to pursue their ideas (Field & Bauml, 2014). This is similar to Peachtown's encouragement of their students to exercise choice in their learning paths. This sensitivity to students interests and faith in their capacities is also reflective of the work of Margaret Naumberg (Curtis, 1983; Price, 1921). But perhaps more than any other historical figure of Progressive Education, I see the work of Marietta Johnson and her Organic School as finding expression at Peachtown. Johnson's school had no tests, little homework, and no traditional grades (Edwards, 1913).---all practices also found at Peachtown. I recall Alyssa talking about how they create their culture, saying, "As soon as you reward something, you kill it. It counteracts trying to create readers. We don't punish kids who don't read. We just try to encourage what's fun about it. That's why we don't have homework…except to read for 15 minutes every night. But we don't check. There's no penalty if you forgot." With those words I hear an echo of Johnson, who wrote, "There shall be no more driving of children to their tasks even by so apparently harmless incentives as 'grades,' 'marks' or 'promotions.'…the work of the school shall really be the joyous self-expression of the child" (Johnson, 1909 p. 1143).

Peachtown's faith in its students and confidence in them as individuals is notable when considered against today's educational landscape. However, it is simply an extension of a long-

held progressive belief in Child-Centered Education (Russell, 2012) and simply an additional example of student-centered learning at even the youngest grades (Knoester, 2012, Bensman, 1994). It is evidence of the strength of this facet of progressive practice that this emphasis on the child as the center of their learning still persists (Semel & Sadovnik, 1999). However, as Kohn has suggested (2008), there are commonalities that can be discerned. In the case of child-centered education this has been identified as asking the question, "How do you help students find their own voice, work together, take responsibility for their own learning, and all the rest?' (Washburne, 1952; Featherstone, 1991, p. x)

Much of the engagement between teacher and students that I saw at Peachtown was based on a conceptualization of students that saw them as capable of being trusted to responsibly pursue their own learning. This is congruent with previous research done on progressive schools (Winsor, 1973; Stern, 2005). The teachers' comments there that reference allowing children the time and space to pursue their ideas instead of forcing them into narrow definitions of "achievement" is evocative of progressive pioneer Caroline Pratt's comment that "Experimenting means experimenting by children and not experimentation with children." (Sadovnik & Semel, 2002, p.63) The use of the Schoolwide Curriculum at Peachtown, concerned with larger concepts, not working on the memorization of specific dates and facts, but creating a setting where what is learned has a place in their lives has a large number progressive scholarship antecedents (Dewey, 1934; Irwin & Marks, 1924; Sadovnik & Semel, 2002; Antler, 1987; Dewey, 1928; Stern, 2005).

A final area of agreement between Peachtown and what has been documented in Progressive Education literature is the use of projects as learning and assessment tools. First

developed by William Heard Kilpatrick (Tentenbaum, 1951), Peachtown has used these projects as a more authentic expression of a student's interests and achievement, than a packaged curricular assessment designed to have the child pour back out what was recently poured into them (Beineke, 1998; Van Ausdal, 2012). The school is in accord with the progressive tradition of having the student be the primary driver of the project, rather than being directed to their choice (Beineke, 1998; Stern, 2005). Earlier in this study, I quoted Alyssa as being skeptical of schooling that insists on proving learning to pass a test. At Peachtown she said," It's less about the product and more about the process that way. Not that the product doesn't matter, but that's if it is an authentic product and I don't feel that tests are an authentic product of life." Here she displays agreement with Dewey himself who wrote of having, "respect for individual capacities, interests and experience…respect for self-initiated and self-conducted learning." (Dewey, 1928, p.115)

The Peachtown structure

While the environment here provides for significant freedom and choice, it is not without a structure, nor does it resemble some of the organizational excesses of the Free Schooling Era of the 1970s (Miller, 2005). Instead Peachtown provides these opportunities for students while being guided by some of the most prominent critiques of Progressive Education. While this is a "child-centered environment," Peachtown has followed the warnings of no less a Progressive authjority than John Dewey in not erring on the side of permissiveness and disorder (Dworkin, 1959). The flexible environment at Peachtown that I saw was never indulgent of misbehavior or disrespect. The freedoms allowed there are always within a defined focus, as evidenced by the comprehensive cycle of their curricular calendar, so as to not, "promote the formation of

habits of immature, undeveloped and egoistic activity." (Dewey, 1930, p. 205) The choices that are afforded students are always placed within the context of the subject and include a sufficient degree of academic challenge, as Dewey suggested (Dewey, 1928). The balance that is struck there is framed by teachers that encourage student discretion within the boundaries that are set, which allows Peachtown to land in Dewey's "middle ground." (Dewey, 1902a) In doing so they both use traditional progressive education practices along with their self-created Schoolwide Curriculum to create their own particular environment; an occurrence common to contemporary progressive schools (Semel & Sadovnik ,1999; Little & Ellison, 2015).

Among the practices that are a part of the Peachtown model and represented in relevant scholarship is the centrality of curriculum to their mission (Takaya, 2018.) What often struck me, however, was how unschool-like Peachtown appeared, conducting its work in a residence with teachers and students who dressed alike, called each other by their first names, and saw one another as peers. This, in combination with their stated and practiced beliefs about children's innate abilities, echo researchers' comments about the lack of a need to turn to formal methods once children begin school (Thomas and Pattison,2007). Again, as I have pointed out throughout this section, whether intentional or not, much that Peachtown does echoes the words of John Dewey, who clearly stated his skepticism towards the need for school formalism: "Formalization is hostile to genuine mental activity and to sincere emotional growth and expression." (Dewey, 1928a, p. 198) An equal amount of support is found for the school's reliance on collaboration among it students and teachers, most clearly found in their mixed-age grouping. As has been common in progressive environments, Peachtown's encouraging the learning of the group, as opposed to individual achievement ,stands out in comparison to TPS

practices (Zilversmit, 1993.) Again, this has historically been the case in progressive schools where informality helps to create a heterarchical environments that don't depend as much on traditional authority structures, but encourage collaboration between students and also between teachers and students, working cooperatively to construct learning (Dennison, 1969).

Peachtown and Female Progressive Education Leadership

Peachtown's founder and its only two directors have been female. All of the teachers who I observed during this study were female. While some of this may be attributable to teaching as an endemically female profession (Wong, 2017), there is an established pattern of female founding and leadership of progressive schools (Sadovnik & Semel, 2016). Peachtown's focus on the child and their particular interests and the learning community in place of competition among individual students has also been in seen in other progressive schools with female founders (Kraushaar, 1972). While the personal philosophies of their founders and the individual practices of these schools may greatly differ, it has been noted that female leadership of progressive learning settings have consistently applied the three features most common to such environments (Russell, 2012).

Peachtown as an independent school

The defining scholarship on Independent Schools was done by Paula Kane, culminating in her work detailing the six characteristics the define such settings . (Kane, 1992). Peachtown, as a non-affiliated, sectarian private learning settings falls within this category. This section comparisons Kane's definitions with what I found at Peachtown.

Self-Governing

Peachtown is run by a board, that includes and is largely appointed by the director. For many years this was the founder, Barbara, and it now is Alyssa. The conversations that I had with Barbara indicated that in large part the board affirmed her decisions, with little disagreement. While Peachtown is obligated to adhere to state guidelines governing private schools, there is no direct oversight from elected officials (TPS School Board). In reality, the school is governed by the director, who makes personnel and budgetary decisions.

Self-Supporting

As a non-sectarian private school Peachtown does not receive funding from either tax revenues or a sanctioning organization (church or school network). The funds to run the school come primarily through tuition payments. A significant percentage of the students are "on scholarship" due to financial need and do not pay the full tuition cost (approximately $6200 per year). The school receives some support from a variety of philanthropic organizations. The financial bottom line is always a concern here and throughout the year fundraisers are held to improve the fiscal situation.

Self-Directed Curriculum

As has been discussed in detail in the findings of this study, Peachtown uses a Schoolwide Curriculum that all students follow throughout the year. It is essentially a five-year cycle of Scientific and Historical topics that was the creation of the founder that has been updated as needed through the life of the school. Barbara has described this document as including, "Everything from Plato to Aristotle." While this curriculum covers much that is

addressed in the NYS Standards, Barbara has said, “I want five- and six year-olds to learn real history. The idea of creating a kindergarten-appropriate curriculum is so stultifying, it’s so dumb.” The concern here is keeping the students academically engaged on topics of substance, not showing moment-to-moment fidelity to “the standards.”

I was able to observe I a different relationship that Peachtown has to NYS Standards than TPS. Lacking concern about a state assessment that will measure student performance in light of such standards, Peachtown is able to use the guidelines stated there as general prescriptions pointing towards topics of instruction and performance goals which should be addressed at particular points in the learning sequence, They are able to “cover” the standards using their own particular set of choices and groupings that open up what learning actually consists of from moment-to-moment, without the emphasis on test-preparation that TPS do. Barbara is quite accurate in noting that they are, “informed, not imprisoned,” by the standards.

Self-Selected Students

As a private school, Peachtown has no students that are geographically assigned to it. They need to constantly be marketing the uniqueness of what they do and what distinguishes them from other educational choices in the area. Alyssa has said, ““The more transparent we can be, the better the perception of the school will be.” Comments from both teachers and directors indicated that parents who either had less than satisfactory TPS experiences or who are looking for a more eclectic school experience are drawn to this school. It is worth noting that Peachtown regularly enrolls students mid-year who are having frustrating years in their assigned public school.

Self-Selected Faculty

Teachers at Peachtown are hired by the director. Interviews with both Barbara and Alyssa indicated the difficulty they had finding teachers who would fit well in their model. All the teachers that were observed in this study had previous classroom experiences and had been credentialed for the work that they had done. However, New York State Teaching Certification is not required. The primary issues that the directors have in finding faculty is their ease with the relaxed Peachtown model and the low compensation which is a fraction of TPS pay, with no health benefits. During my study, all teachers that I observed were female.

Small Size

Peachtown has always had a very small student population, never exceeding 30 students. They are limited by the small space of the facility in which they are located. In my study, the school had 23 students. In discussing the work done there, the teachers cited the school's smallness as an advantage in meeting the needs of each child. However, both directors spoke of the school's small population as making them quite financially vulnerable when students either graduate or are pulled out to attend TPS.

Peachtown and democratic classroom climate

"Educating for democracy" has been identified as one of the three common characteristics of progressive classrooms (Russell, 2012). One of Kohn (2008)'s six elements of authentic progressive settings is "Social Justice." Anne Angell's 1991 article on Democratic Classroom Climate in Elementary Classrooms builds on **"**Dewey (1916) contention that we, "conceptualize the classroom as an organ of a democratic system." (p. 243) In this piece she

identifies four elements that provide the experiences that educate children to participate in a democratic society. In this section I examine my findings about Peachtown and how they align with Angell's characteristics.

"Peer interaction in cooperative activities."

Angell illustrates her first characteristic, writing, "Classrooms were categorized as open or traditional primarily on the basis of teacher behaviors.; whereas the open classroom teacher acted as a facilitator who encouraged peer teaching and student interaction." (p. 252) In considering the dynamic between the students and teachers at Peachtown, I believe that the environment there can be categorized as "open." Students are encouraged to offer opinions and perspectives throughout the day and at times I saw student contributions affect the course of learning. As has been demonstrated in the findings chapters, on occasion the older students pursue projects that allow them to instruct other members of the community. The teacher comments included in this study I believe sufficiently demonstrate their openness to their students' capacities.

"Free Expression"

The indicator here was, "Perceived freedom to express opinions in class was the best predictor of both general political and school-related attitudes of trust, social integration, confidence, and interest. Exposure to controversial issues was associated with increased social integration and political interest." (p. 253) In the Schoolwide Curriculum Units on Immigration the Labor Movement students were allowed to contribute to discussions, offering perspectives that linked their personal experiences to the larger concepts that were being considered.

Teachers did not just permit these comments, but frequently asked follow-up questions and permitted students to question each other. Trust and faith are two common ways that I have described the attitude that Peachtown teachers take towards their students. Multi-age student groupings increased the variety of these comments. The evidence of this study shows Peachtown including "Free Expression" in their practices.

"Student participation in democratic deliberations and decision making."

I have somewhat mixed feelings about Peachtown's relation to this characteristic. "Student participation—especially participation in making decisions that have a direct bearing on the quality of life at school—contributes to the development of pro-sociality, high level moral reasoning, and a sense of community among the students." (p. 255) I have no reservations that these qualitied are encouraged and developed in Peachtown students. However, while I frequently heard discussions about school issues---instructional and recreational----where student opinions were both solicited and listened to, I'm not sure that what they were doing was decision-making as much as it was community-building. Most of these discussions were about safety issues or special projects and the intent was these conversations seemed to be more prescriptive than anything else. I feel that Peachtown is somewhat aligned with this value of Angell's.

"Respect for diverse viewpoints"

As a small school that regularly combines its students in a variety of contexts, Peachtown encourages all viewpoints to be shared. Cooperative learning here is the standard way of doing things in an environment that devalues individual competition. Because this school arranges the

day so that, as Alyssa told me, "Everyone has the same lessons, those opportunities for spontaneous conversations can occur," they clearly are aligned with Angell's comment, "that cooperative learning promotes a climate of tolerance and pro-sociality in the classroom." (p. 255). The learning that I saw at Peachtown was always conducted in groups and reliant on the members' contributions for it to advance. I saw at least three different teachers there stop and wait for additional student comments to move forward. This modeled a respect for student contributions that the kids then reflected towards each other. I definitely see Peachtown as encouraging this aspect of Angell's work.

In this section I have considered how Peachtown encourages a democratic environment in its learning practices. I used the principles set forth by Anne Angell in her 1991 landmark study on this topic. I see Peachtown as fully aligned with three of her four elements and somewhat in accord with "student participation in democratic deliberations and decision making." The heterarchical environment of flexibility and openness that is nurtured here positively affected the democratic climate of the school. This is also impacted by the teachers at Peachtown and the co-learning that occurs between teachers and students. That is the topic of the final part of this section.

Co-Learning In the Peachtown Community

The essence of the education that a child receives is contained within the teacher-student dynamic. As a lifetime classroom teacher this is my perspective and as I indicated in the Introduction my intention with this study is to show what it is that students do during the day at this progressive school. The observations and interviews that I did indicate that the key to the

Peachtown education are the behaviors of the teachers which are connected to much in the progressive tradition. At Peachtown the teachers demonstrated that they see their students as having innate learning abilities that enable them, at even the youngest of ages, to add value to the learning of the community and to participate in the direction and demonstration of acquired knowledge. The environment there is that of peers learning together, rather than the traditional teacher-student hierarchy.

This lineage of Peachtown teachers seeing their students as learning equals extends to the time before the beginning of widespread institutional education. Thoreau's Concord School encouraged teachers to be peers alongside their students (Hoagland 1955). This positionality along with the freedoms allowed to their students is reflective of the Progressive Education Association's "Seven Principles of Progressive Education" that included "Freedom for children to develop naturally, Interest as the motive of all work, and Teacher as guide, not taskmaster." (Cohen, 1968) Both Peachtown's Mission Statement and its practices are evocative of the earliest progressive schools' efforts to be more respectful of their students (Cremin, 1961). Progressive educators have long recognized the value of students' innate capacities (Counts, 1938) The work at Peachtown is reflective of the work of Progressive Education's most renowned authorities, agreeing with Dewy that filling students with knowledge is antithetical to an authentic education (Stern, 2005) and with Kilpatrick in the value of allowing for student choice in developing projects to demonstrate learning (Pecore, 1997). There is a further connection between Peachtown and these early progressive schools to the Democratic schools of the mid-20th century and their use of practices that significantly respected students' contribution to the learning of the school. (Dennison, 1969, Mercogliano, 1998).

In considering the research on Progressive School teachers, I return to Kohn and his declaration that, "Progressive educators take their cue from the children… they don't just design a course of study for their students, they design it with them." (p. 2) While they are working in this context, many Peachtown teachers previously taught in a TPS environment (Davies, 2002). My interviews with them revealed a congruence with previous scholarship both in their commitment to what they now do (McWilliams, 2003) and the increased happiness they having working in progressive settings (Read, 2014). Michelle once told me, "I had become so unhappy going to work at my public school position." The Peachtown director allows her teachers a significant amount of choice, freedom, discretion in selecting resources, and collaboration opportunities that makes what they do distinctive when compared to their TS colleagues. I believe that the work done in environments such as Peachtown can be considered "artisanal teaching." (Gambone, 2017). Their work coheres with this category in, the "relational nature of their school," having the "professional flexibility to construct a dynamic, successful learning environment that is responsive to…a classroom community," where,"school leaders, parents, and students co-exist with the teachers in an environment of trust." (p. 195) The author also points out that, "That freedom carries with it the added responsibility and work of creating their own curricula and teaching materials." (p. 196) This is the reality at Peachtown that I saw in teacher meetings, planning ,and the execution of lessons, where the teachers have the opportunity to make artistic choices in the creation of their instruction.

I see a connection between the freedoms that Peachtown teachers have and the similar freedoms that they grant their students. But in both cases, the people in those roles need to be willing to responsibly use the latitude being granted to them. One of the unfortunate legacies of

the TPS hierarchy of the teacher-student instructional relationship is that it has narrowed instructional approaches and increased emphasis on control and management. This has constricted both teacher creativity and expression, impoverishing the learning experience for everyone. In progressive settings, the opportunity exists for learning to extend beyond standards and benchmarked skills, for teachers to transcend being “deliverers of instruction,” but to instead provoke learning among their students. This is a part of the “artisinal teacher” role described above, where teachers prepare a space that will allow their students sufficient room to learn and grow in academic and personal ways (Read, 2014). But this is difficult to accomplish when the primary goal is to “meet the standards.” What TPS need and what Peachtown has is a wider lens in viewing what it means to educate, one less focused on skills and outcomes, but more concerned with the perspective taken when learning, with what Kierstead (2006) saw as a, “pedagogy of wonder.” TPS have become so obsessed with only teaching the quantifiable that learning has largely been reduced to fulfilling requirements instead of becoming enchanted with the mystery from which all learning begins. The excitement that I experienced at Peachtown was similar to that found, not coincidentally, in Read (2014)’s description of a progressive elementary school. She builds upon Kierstead’s “pedagogy of wonder,” intertwining it with co-learning and artisanal teaching. Describing two teachers who “found wonder in many places”, she tells how they, “…make their work an art by maintaining a spirit of wonder…and become fellow wonderers through living and working alongside children.” (p.21- 23) At Peachtown this sense of wonder at what an education can be has enabled the teachers there to create an environment that has both guided their students towards what is significant and respected their

capacity to individualize their education. As Barbara, the school's founder once told me, "I like to leave room for a bit of mystery in the learning."

My time at Peachtown

My repeated and frequent trips to Peachtown yielded many hours of observations, considerations, and conversations about teaching and schools. In addition to the formal interviews I conducted, there were many conversations that took place within my observations about what I was seeing, along with telephone calls about the teachers' work there. It would be impossible for this not to have had an effect on those involved in this dynamic. For myself, as someone who has tried to creatively elude, but still has worked within the increasingly narrow perspective of TPS, I had an opportunity to see what another learning environment looked like and hear from its practitioners why they make their instructional and pedagogical choices each day. This caused me to consider my own classroom teaching practice, my instructional decisions and how they might be affecting my students. For Peachtown, both Alyssa and Barbara told me that our discussions caused them to reflect and speak to one another about what they were doing and how their practices developed and evolved. For all of us, this study ultimately became more than a gathering of data, I contend that it grew into a small community of teachers, all very serious about what they do, sharing their experiences, and in the process growing as people.

Implications

The success that Peachtown has experienced in educating students in an environment that prioritizes agency and capacity while avoiding the narrowing of the testing culture offers a model

for all schools to consider. Forgoing many of the traditional school forms and practices, Peachtown educates students relying on a faith in their innate learning abilities. At the most fragile point of their learning lives, Peachtown protects its students from some of education's most prevalent practices and instead creates a cocoon where they as a community can grow together.

Using this approach, Peachtown, for nearly thirty years has educated students that have gone on and been successful in a variety of public school, private school, and collegiate environments. Alumni have had overwhelmingly positive recollections of their time at the school and its effect on their subsequent lives (Kloss, 2018c). In an era of attempts to broaden and diversify the choices available in our culture, institutional schooling has gone the opposite way, more narrowly defining what constitutes learning and teaching. The Age of Accountability is the Age of Standardization. Progressive Education was prescient in prioritizing seeing each person as an individual learner with strengths, interests, and needs of their own and requiring an education to match these realities. The Progressive Tradition, as exemplified in the work at places like Peachtown Elementary School, should be looked at as a resource for considering how TPS could more appropriately serve their students. If we are interested in broadening what an education means for young people in a society that will be demanding more divergent skills, it is hard to defend the narrow standards-based system through which most learners are processed today. There are an increasing number of voices questioning why our institutions are not more responsive to those they are intended to serve. Schools should not be immune to this analysis and should be seeking out examples to better approach their students as having significant capacity to be an active part of their learning, instead of being dictated to. They could do a lot worse than to

borrow from the student-centered learning of Progressive Education. “Progressive education has defended the thesis that activity lies at the root of all true education; it has conceived learning in terms of life situations and growth of character; it has championed the rights of the child as a free personality.” (Counts, 1938, p.113)

There is an unhealthy, unimaginative, essence to what the system of public education and its supporting infrastructure has become in the Age of Data. By narrowing its vision of what learning is, TPS seem defensive, intent on retaining their curricularly-atomized, age-discriminatory model, perpetuating a schooling structure whose form is largely unchanged since its adoption in the mid-19th century. The entire model needs to be rethought and infused with ideas and practices from other learning settings. Chief among these is the limited roles that members of a school community play. By looking at sites like Peachtown and other progressive settings, schooling as an institution could more accurately reflect what learning is like through most of its students’ lives. Rather than prioritizing standardized models of instruction, they could consider adopting structures that sees all members of a school community as both teachers and students, co-learners together, instead of bound by traditionally-defined roles.

I have not been in a university teaching methods class since I took mine in the 1980s and am in no position to responsibly comment on what goes on there. However, having seen the work that the teachers at Peachtown do, I would hope that teacher preparation would include producing teachers whose first priority was to help grow their students as people and enable them to understand how they each as individuals learn. This would require a conceptualization of student achievement that reaches beyond the current accepted definition. In training prospective teachers to learn and nurture their students as individuals with their own standards for success,

these teachers in training could learn to look at themselves in the same way and ask what they as unique individuals have to bring to the relationship they will have with their students. Instead of continuing the conformity model through the use of “best practices,” teachers in training might do work on constructing their own set of personal practices that they could refine to most effectively encourage their students as natural learners. In doing so, there could begin a true effort to produce a generation of “teachers-as-artists,” devoted to developing their craft, not one that will necessarily produce test success, but help grow their students as learners and people ready to contribute to their society, teachers whose performance reaches their audience and changes their lives.

Strengths of This Study

I have completed an in-depth study of Peachtown Elementary School using many of traditional tools of qualitative research. I conducted multiple interviews of all of the teachers, the current director, and the founder. I also spoke with parents, former students, former teachers, and other educators in the area that Peachtown draws its students from. I began my observations there in May 2019, attended planning meetings for the 2019-20 school year that Summer, and made 13 observations during that period. I was at Peachtown two school days before New York State closed all schools and my research would have continued if not for the coronavirus threat that forced the school into distance learning. I had access to all of the pertinent school documents including the Curricular Plan, Academic Statement, and School Mission Statement. I believe that I have responsibly conducted a close examination of this school, its philosophies, and practices. Finally, I was able to bring, to a study of teachers and students, 32 years as a classroom teacher and what it means to try and improve your students’ lives in the brief time you have with them.

Limitations of this study

I was employed full-time as a public school teacher during the entire length of this study. This limited the time that I had to devote to observations, interviews, and the many steps of the research writing process. Peachtown is but one small progressive school with less than 30 students in a rural area and is not necessarily representative of progressive settings in the nation. I found that the number of people willing to speak to me about the school was limited; I would like to have talked to more alumni, parents, and former teachers. The formal documents that Peachtown has produced is relatively small for a school that has existed for three decades. My data about the effects of the school on student achievement are almost entirely anecdotal and self-selected, dependent on those alumni willing to speak with me. Finally, my greatest limitation was time---I would have liked to spend the entire year at Peachtown, taking in the days as they unfolded one after another for this incredible, encouraging, affirming place.

Future Research

My intention with this study, as I have stated more than once in this work, was to show what the day-to-day practices of a contemporary progressive school look like. My concern with the way I presented the data I gathered was that it effectively shows what goes on in a progressive school between students and teachers. There are several more universal issues that I did not consider in this work. Further research into how progressive schools conceptualize race, disability, and class is needed.

The amount of published research on contemporary progressive schools is too small and limited in scope. Much of what has been published recently tends to be historical, instead of

focusing on the philosophies and practices of such settings and their place in the educational landscape of the Age of Accountability. There needs to be a basic questioning of the narrow definition of “student achievement” that begins and ends with test scores. If we are looking to ways in which we can both equip our students for the uncertain world that they are bound to live in and allow for the development of their unique skills, other models than the one we are using need to be considered. As a movement that has been both prevalent and persistent for more than a century---much longer if you consider its intellectual antecedents---progressive education needs to be more closely studied and its use of child-centered education, educating for democracy, and community involvement considered as elements of a true reform of a system that becomes more irrelevant with each passing year. I would like to see more studies conducted of progressive schools of varying sizes, the practices that they use, and the effects that they have on their students. Progressive public schools are a particular understudied setting. Finally, studies of schools that adopt progressive practices in place of their current data-driven methods should also be examined.

There are limitations to what can be done at a school like Peachtown. Operating with a limited budget, in a somewhat isolated location, boundaries exist which confine the work there. Some have argued that progressive schools have largely served more affluent, white families and while that demographically is not true there, the school’s location and the community it is in has a relatively small number of minority students. I will always be convinced that an education that honors choice and a child’s innate abilities to learn is good for all children. Because of the limited funding that the school operates on, it unfortunately is constricted in the compensation it can offer its teachers, both in terms of salary and benefits, and its ability to pay for their faculty

pursuing further formal education. Peachtown teachers could also possibly benefit from some of the training and resources available to taxpayer-funded schools.

I have spent most of my life in schools, either as a teacher or a student. I think that they are fascinating places, but often not for the reason that many would think is their primary mission. Schools change lives for reasons that have nothing to do with standards, benchmarks, or what is traditionally seen as "academic." I think that those of us who have dedicated our lives as teachers, who identify as teachers as much as anything else, sense that more and more we are doing things that ignore students' innate abilities and potentials, while also failing to react to the changes around us. Schools need to do better at seeing past the static roles and categories that we have created; schooling is not learning. Schools are filled with wonderful, loving, caring people working in a seriously flawed system that too often operates as if it values data over people. What I saw at Peachtown gives me hope for what schools can be ---true learning communities where all the members use their capacities to advance the good of the group. I work with a number of people who would like to work in such a place, where teachers are given the freedom to instruct in a way that excites their students and themselves and changes lives. The alternative models exist and those who run public schools need to admit that what they are doing is outdated and increasingly irrelevant and conceive of what goes on in the school day in a different way---one that has existed for over a century in "progressive settings."

I have worked with a lot of wonderful people during the course of my career who did very caring and beneficial things. But the people who lead and teach at Peachtown are my educational heroes. The work that they do there is profoundly respectful of the consideration that ought to be given to every student's capacities and potential, all deserving nurturing, not pruning.

The highest compliment that I can pay to them is to say that I would have been pleased to have my children---all educated in a non-institutional manner---go there and my grandchildren as well. For as one of their teachers told me, “The one thing that I think makes it so different is love. That’s what comes through.” And that’s the most important thing that I discovered in this study.

APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol for Initial Interview of Teachers

1. What was your educational background before coming to teach at this school?
2. What did you do before you worked here that impacted your practice here?
3. What are you educating your children to be able to do when they leave the school?
4. If school culture is the personality of a school, please describe the culture of this school. How do you use time, sp
5. ace, and choice in designing your lessons with your students?
6. How do you know when your children have learned? Can you give example of how you have done that?
7. What role does a child's own interests play in their learning with you? Can you share an example of this?
8. How do you define success for your children? Can you give
9. examples of when that has happened.
10. How do you use play in your teaching? Can you give some examples of that?
11. How is the the learning environment at this school special and possibly unique?
12. This school calls itself "progressive." What does that mean to the work that you do here?
13. How does the lack of assessments at this school affect your teaching practice?
14. What is the influence of this school's rotating curricular model on your teaching?
15. How would you describe the authority structure here between adults and students?

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol Follow-up Interview of Teachers

(aligns with Progressive School values of Kohn, 2008, p. 1-2)

1. How does what you do teach to “the whole child?
2. How is community built at this school?
3. What practices do you use that build collaborative skills in place of competitive ones?
4. What examples can you give of ways that this school has reached outside of itself to positively impact the surrounding community?
5. How do you increase your students’ interest and self-direction of their own learning?
6. How do you structure projects and inquiry to deepen a students’ understanding of their work?
7. What examples can you give of times when students contributed to their course of study and evaluation of their work?
8. How does what you do change as the groups of students you work with evolve and grow?

APPENDIX C

Peachtown Elementary School

Community Demographics

	Female	Male	Caucasian	African American	Hispanic	Bi-racial
Full Time Staff	4	0	3	0	1	0
Part Time Staff	4	1	5	0	0	0
Students	10	13	21	0	0	2

APPENDIX D

Peachtown Staff Identified in this Study

Name	Position
Alyssa	Current Peachtown Director and Teacher
Barbara	Peachtown Founder, Director through June 2019 and Teacher
Genelle	Math Teacher
Mary Ann	Older Group Teacher
Michelle	Younger Group Teacher

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Vita

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