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### Rising With Joy: Re-Defining the Meaning of School Success

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Rising With Joy: Re-Defining the Meaning of School Success

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the

Department of Educational Foundations & Policy Studies

West Chester University

West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of

Masters in Transformative Education & Social

Change

By

Eric Middleton

May 2023

## Dedication

I want to dedicate this thesis to my family. Thank you for the endless love and happy memories.

## Acknowledgements

I must take time to acknowledge a former colleague, Shavon Savage, Esq. Her leadership inspired and encouraged me to take the next step in my educational career. Many thanks to Duke Olurin, Jordan Davis, Nick Wall, and Sean Speers; former colleagues who have grown into great friends. This endeavor would not have been possible without my professors and classmates' unwavering support during this journey. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Dana Morrison, who was my advisor through the program's last semester.

## Abstract

Throughout this thesis, I will be discussing some of the pressure and stresses placed upon educators in the traditional school setting in America. Under an educational system that is about rigid routine and control, I examine the ill effects that come from a lack of creativity and autonomy. My overall goal throughout the thesis is to define what joy looks like for our students and staff. I conclude with a program proposal that links the concepts of free play, movement through wandering, and mental wellness to building a better community.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken *joy* in creative expression and knowledge.

-Albert Einstein

You have spent all night going over your lesson plans, making sure the flow of the lesson goes smoothly. Students are in their seats and finally settled down, ready to listen to what you are saying. The initial ice breaker garners some participation, and you start to feel the engagement level of the class increase. In turn, you begin to have confidence that the lesson will be an enjoyable one for the class. Suddenly, a hand rises in the air, and you think it is something related to the lesson. Instead, it is a student asking to go to the bathroom. Many thoughts may rise in the teacher's head.

*Does that kid really need to use the bathroom? Will more students start to raise their hands to go to the bathroom? Is the hallway safe right now for the student to go out? Will that kid start making poor choices in the hallway? If I say yes, will the kid I said no to earlier be upset? Can this student afford to miss this part of the lesson?*

There is no formula for how to handle these kinds of teaching dilemmas. Unfortunately, in addition to the academic content, this is one example of the added weight of responsibilities when it comes to teaching in schools. Making sure students are lining up in an orderly fashion, students are eating and drinking enough throughout the day, and students are in safe environments in which they can be monitored are all part of the job. The onus gets placed on

the teacher's decision-making capabilities to “restore order.” It is the feeling of constantly walking on eggshells. “If I’m not doing this, then the kids won’t be able to do that.” We did not go into teaching thinking that we needed to produce an elaborate strategy for sending students to the bathroom.

My younger years of teaching were marked with unrealistic expectations based on how I thought my class was supposed to look every day. In turn, I sought to give out consequences and reprimand students that were out of my perceived order. Often, I was looking for the quick fix in terms of handling conflicts inside of the classroom. My goals aligned with me being perceived as a tough teacher and being strict. This was because I was fearful of looking like the teacher that students could take advantage of. Being a recent college graduate, my first formative years as a teacher were about me seeking the sort of respect, and approval that I thought would come naturally with a degree. The pain came from taking conflicts inside of the classroom as a personal battle of people testing me instead of understanding the behavior patterns and classroom environment that goes into what the issue arising is. As a result, my resilience as a teacher during my first full-time years in education is so much different than what it is today. I have become a teacher much more interested in fighting the system than engaging in ideological battles with students. I have learned that it is vital to inject *heart* and *joy* into a world that seeks to make education look as though it is a mechanical, cold process of a way to earn more money as an adult. There is also an acceptance that I may not have the best impact on all my students simply because the universe has simply not aligned itself for us to cross paths in a meaningful way. Sometimes there’s just students you are unable to connect with, but that is what makes building relationships with the ones you can connect with feel so special.



## **Growing Up in American Schools**

I came into education with the burning desire to express myself. I have always been a creative person growing up. At home, my parents always pushed me to go outside and play with my peers. That is my fondest memory of their parenting. Some of my fondest memories from school were activities like a “picture prompt” in which I was tasked with producing a story based upon a single image. I often struggled in classes that were heavily lectured but enjoyed English classes the most because of the discussions that came out of the text. It was one of those spaces in which I felt like I could learn about my classmates. But with few classes feeling like English class, I always wondered, did the school in general care for who I was?

I remember the pressure being on me as a student to make a relationship with my teacher if I wanted to feel like I was completely caught up with everything in terms of grades and assignments. If I wanted a higher grade, I simply just needed to stay after school for help. There was a correlation between lack of relationship with the teacher equaling up to lower marks on the report card. I had gotten by based off my ability to acquiesce and rely on my teachers to help me through tough moments. There were humbling moments in which ego was put to the side in turn for the asking of help. My experience in school was mired by pressure to behave in front of the teacher.

It had come to be about conformity over expression, formula following over creative boundary breaking. As a student, it was about my ability to adopt the classroom culture instead of trying to discover my passions. Success was linked with my behavior and my ability to flow seamlessly within the machinery that was the daily school processes. I often

felt very robotic in school, learning to cancel out things I thought were unacceptable, and I had grown to focus on an identity that fitted well for the school system, but did not really call for who I was. I was identified as a quiet person, but I always knew that I had a burning desire for connection.

### **Life as a Teacher in American Schools**

As an educator, I combined my desire to connect with peers on a deeper level and my creativity outside to thrive in the world of socialized recess. The meaning of recess lies in choice, space, communication, and fun, but too often, things like recess have been weaponized to create more control over students. My concern over the lack of joy in school started to rise as I saw kids being denied access to recess in a manner that I did not agree with. Often, those kids would just be standing on a wall, crying, forced to watch their peers roam around an area with a less chance of an adult critiquing their every move. But could I really blame the educator for making those decisions? As I have stepped in more of a “classroom” role as a PE Teacher, I have realized that those same questions/concerns I had about the bathroom can creep into all of teachers’ decision making, such as allowing a student to move around during recess.

Too often, behavioral expectations take precedence over self-expression. This is a direction that teachers learn in a cycle that trickles down to the student. I have often struggled with the feeling of needing to be a “saint” when I am in school. As a veteran teacher, I am often under the microscope of worrying about “how” I am communicating. There is also a pressure of having to approach everyday with this high amount of energy,

vigor, and professionalism or else get labeled as a teacher that is just “going through the motions.”

It is a job that nonetheless offers a unique experience, and culture that gives one a sense of identity. As an adult, I have identified a lot as a teacher, when it comes to my standing in the world. My retention in the profession has stemmed from building healthy relationships with my co-workers. I have worked to create opportunities to heal, grow, laugh, cry, and expand all because of my faith in human connection. The profession has been a helping hand when it comes to lifting me off my own perceptions as someone that is quiet. Scenarios in the profession have called for me to find the strength, patience, and fortitude that I never knew I had.

### **The Current Context of Schools**

Seeking community, however, has also led to heartbreak. Every year, there are several staff members who decide that the job is too much, and they resign midway through. People that you thought you would be teaming up with until June are gone by October. Nationwide, schools are facing a shortage of staff members as vacancies start to pile up (Jotkoff, 2022). Instead of being able to get into a routine or flow as a teacher, one becomes asked to be more flexible than ever before. Teachers are being asked to cover for other classes, sacrifice their prep times, shorten their lunch schedules, and adjust their curriculum to the latest statewide testing standards of the year. Hope for stability is often stifled by fluctuations in class sizes, unchecked student behaviors that lead to bigger conflicts down the line, and an onus for the teacher to keep parents involved or reassured that their child’s education is going the proper way.

Beyond the exhaustion from this extra work lies the concern that at any moment, it could be too much for oneself to bear. There is a certain look of defeat that once an educator starts to carry it proudly, as a co-worker you start to feel like it is only a matter of time. I have been particularly struck by everyone's eagerness to race at the weekend. Everyone's eagerness to count down the days until the end of the school year after only one month. Star struck by my own eagerness.

The community I once had is fading in this uncertainty. Unions fighting for the same things. Parents do too much or too little. Things have been about the bottom line. But I would argue with you that things have always been that way. Most modern American schools have been a place that has lacked joy. Instead, we invite a system that seeks to stress, test, and administer professionals to drive results. But it is my belief that the results naturally come through building a culture that seeks to retain teachers.

The best learning in the West Chester University Transformative Education and Social Change Masters' program has come from just hearing my peers, who are teachers, talk about their days, and their life. The informal dialogue, emphasis on a care for humanity really brought about a safe space. There is a sense of comfort when knowing that no matter where a teacher teaches, there are some commonalities that bring about the same kind of concerns. Learning the history about how the American school system was formed made it clear that the attitude towards teachers has been specifically designed, manufactured, and tailor made to be how it is. The curriculum has caused me to look at how certain narratives become ingrained in our society.

I started out as an educator that took to heart statistics about an “achievement gap.” As a person of color, you are confronted with all sorts of statistics telling you about where you stand. What started off as an angry kind of motivator for me turned into a humorous thought of what is meant to be a hamster wheel. No matter how many individual people of color play the game, “defy the odds,” the narrative of a people “falling behind,” will always be shouted out from the rooftop. I was told that the meaning of *white* privilege defines itself as being able to identify as an individual. For people of color in America, they often find themselves in a position of representative of an entire race. If a person of color commits a crime it speaks to the crime rate of their community. If a white person commits a crime, it speaks to that person’s state of mind.

Keeping my mind free of the narrative speaks to my central urge for creativity and expression in schools: fighting to be truly seen in this world. Not as a cog or a tool, but as a person that has value in this world. Joy cannot be experienced if one does not feel safe. A space must be created that allows the individual to be their full selves for them to truly feel safe. It is not solely up to the teachers’ systems and procedures. The ideas of everybody must be heard, understood, and taken seriously.

### **My Thematic Concern**

Throughout this thesis, I will argue and make the case for an increased presence of joy in the school setting. This presence of joy in learning is currently lacking in modern education in the United States, and it is having a significant negative impact on teacher retention. To make this case, I will provide a deep dive into the history of the public school system in America. How have things changed? How have things remained the same? What

narrative is being cultivated and pushed? What metrics does a school use to measure success?

The lens in which I view this history will be explained within my philosophy of education. Here is where I detail what I believe a successful school experience should look like. There will be key questions discussed, such as, *what is joy?* My philosophy has developed into one that sees the growth of a child in another way. It will make the case that development emerges from life experience and expression. Too often, children are seen as “blank slates” with nothing to offer when they come inside the classroom but a listening ear to the expert teacher. By re-thinking the ways in which we impart information, we can empower our students to be critical thinking citizens that can mold a different future.

Lastly, I will share an action plan that highlights the importance of bringing joy into schooling through the creation of opportunities for students to wander. My fondest memories of school from a teacher's perspective have been the field trips. There is a certain element of mystery, surprise, and excitement that permeates throughout the day. A chance for the teacher to decenter themselves is what I love most. During those days, it is not about the teacher delivering a lesson, but the onus is put on the student to explore, look around, and learn what they can from the environment. In turn, the teacher can learn *with* their students, without the pressure of being the expert.

In these less structured wanderings, we create the opportunity for true collaboration with parents as they are invited to be chaperones on most of the school trips that I have been blessed to be a part of. I particularly enjoy the songs on the bus and the growing anticipation/excitement as we arrive at the destination. It is a chance to see students in a new

light as routines become unimportant to the memory-making taking place. Additionally, it is an important reminder of the everlasting connection between school and society at-large.

Through exploring these elements, I hope this thesis will be a contribution to the current force of educators, providing them with the rationale and means to bring joy into our schools, and possibly save the profession in the process.

## Chapter Two

### Theoretical Frameworks

Before delving too deep into this paper, it is important to take a step back to analyze some key terms that will be discussed throughout. My critical lexicon will consist of words not typically discussed in common discourse. However, these words are essential towards shaping what most schools look like in America today. Every word will include its definition and how it relates to my thematic concern. It will help shape my philosophy of education and help give credence to the type of interventions that will be implemented.

#### Critical Lexicon

<i>Term</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Connection to Thesis</i>
Constructivism	Constructivism is a paradigm of learning that describes the process of knowledge formation. In constructivist learning, students learn actively rather than wait passively for the teacher to spoon-feed them with information (Ellison & Wu, 2008).	In my thesis, I will call for the empowerment of students. Constructivism contextualizes why it is important to allow students to be active participants in the direction of their education.
Autonomy	the quality or state of being self-governing (Merriam-Webster, 2023),	“Autonomy is often conflated with freedom by parents educated in more traditional, structured environments, but it means self-governance or self-direction, as opposed to being directed or driven by external factors like teachers or curricula. Autonomous learners are



		competent partners in the process of learning, helping to determine what to learn, how to learn it, and the rate of at which to learn” (Bangera, 2017).
Joy	The emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires (Merriam-Webster, 2023)	Our current schools have a lack of joy because it does not work to fulfill the desires of its students and educators. Joy in schools is less about feeling happy but more so focusing on having a purpose and letting the emotions go where they may.
Banking Model of Education	“The banking concept of education is a metaphor created by Paolo Freire for a teaching style where teachers ‘deposit’ knowledge into students’ minds like they are piggy banks. Freire claimed this approach, which was common in the 20th Century, sees students as passive learners who are given no scope for creative freedom or critical thinking” (Drew, 2023).	The banking model of education speaks to the lack of creativity and expression in our schools. It also speaks to the kind of pressure put on educators to be “experts” and how this serves as a detriment for retaining educators at schools for multiple years.
Neoliberalism	Neoliberalism is contemporarily used to refer to market-oriented reform policies such as "eliminating price controls, deregulating capital markets, lowering trade	Neoliberalism speaks to the goals that the dominant power structure in America has. Schools are going in ways that are cost-efficient, marketized, and privatized, and students are being told

	barriers" and reducing, especially through privatization and austerity, state influence in the economy (Boas, 2009)	that they must compete in a global-scale competition for resources.
Meritocracy	A meritocratic education system, by nature, is one where students are enabled to accomplish achievements, and receive corresponding rewards, regardless of outside factors. The common norm in schools is that achievement based on merit explains school success, and that merit is the only means of the upward mobility of all students regarding societal status, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, current social status, etc. (ISL, 2021, p. 1).	Meritocracy is what the dominant structure uses to control behaviors. Through an incentive system that seeks to give out rewards to those willing to follow, buy-in for the system's functionality occurs. It is the idea that schools are good because they can change a person's life if they become a "great student."
Decentering	To disconnect from practical or theoretical assumptions of origin, priority, or essence (Merriam-Webster, 2023).	This relates to the process of the teacher taking a step away from the need to control, administer, and provide information to the student. It takes the teacher away from being the focus of all progress or concerns in the classroom.
Wandering	Movement away from the proper, normal, or usual course or place (Merriam-Webster, 2023).	It serves as a model for helping students feel empowered through allowing them to engage in their local community in new, thrilling ways. This

		model also has the power of invigorating teachers, breaking them from the monotony of the school day.
Critical Pedagogy	Critical pedagogy provides a theoretical framework to examine issues of power in the classroom, and to surface and challenge the biases and oppressive structures that can undermine learning and alienate students (Saunders and Wong, 2020).	It challenges the teacher to do honest self-reflection in terms of the types of wounds that he or she may be afflicted by just following common practices. It is about holding a mirror up to the ways in which we transfer the same kind of oppression afflicted upon us.
Individualism	<i>Individualism</i> is all about taking care of yourself; it is the belief and practice that every person is unique and self-reliant. A belief in <i>individualism</i> also implies that you believe that the government should bud out of your individual affairs. (Merriam-Webster, 2023)	Individualism is a result of the meritocratic reward system that exists in most modern public American schools. This makes our children, and society at-large, less sensitive to the needs of cultures around them when they are solely focused on advancing in this capitalist nation.
Egocentrism	Excessive interest in oneself and concern for one's own welfare or advantage at the expense of or in disregard of others (Merriam-Webster, 2023)	Students at younger ages tend to think everything happens in the world to directly affects them, and as they get older, they begin to realize the larger powers and structures that are put into place to control the population.

## **Philosophy of Education**

There is no magic formula that can erase the hardships and wounds that school produces daily. Education in the purest form revolves around development. Helping a person get from one point to another through the attainment of skills is one part, but another part is through the experience that the individual gains through their own experimentation. Sometimes the only way for a child to learn about the dangers of a fire is to touch it and experience the pain/trauma that goes along with the burn. Experience remains the best teacher when it comes to education. We must not create a system that demonizes failure, making you an unacceptable taboo waiting to get rejected by society. Instead, a loving environment must be produced that embraces experimentation, inquiry, second chances, and a more methodical approach towards solving problems. We can find joy in schools through the quest to create an environment that heals, gives grace, and promotes freedom of choice.

### **Education as Exploration**

Lessons are not just about the teacher's ability to transfer information but also about the student's ability to digest it. The student must be in a state of mind that remains open and connected to their surroundings. One never knows when the right lesson will connect and hit home for a student. My philosophy is that we must not confine education to a single area like school but must take advantage of all the opportunities in the natural world that can teach as well. Education is a lot like nature in the sense that it cannot be tamed. We can try our best to accurately predict when the forecast might rain but nobody ever knows the exact minute raindrops will fall. As much as we think we know about it, there is still so much being discovered. As teachers, we need to stop getting our kids to worry so much about the outcome. Instead, we need to get them to embrace the journey of entering unfamiliar

territory. There is no item too small when it comes to its contribution to furthering human intelligence. Education requires participants to have a curious mind open for revising their original positions.

The ultimate end of education is knowing that your story is worth telling, and knowing what words to put into the novel that will describe who you are as a person. Education cannot sustain itself without joy because there must be a healing process after the story telling. Once we learn from each other from a human perspective, we will understand how to bring joy to one another. When someone is happy, they are truly content in the space, time, and truly engulfed in the moment. Nothing else matters. The pressures that permeate everyday society become alleviated under the state of happiness. When we create safe spaces that allow everyone to be seen, and accounted for, we allow scholars the opportunity to bring joy into their lives.

Teachers should be judged by the connections that they make with their students. The extra measures that they take are to bring a smile upon a child's face. Just because a child is in a distressed situation does not mean that there is no room to celebrate. For me, it was the teachers that brought in actual pie on the mathematical March 14<sup>th</sup> Pi Day, that will leave an imprint in my heart. Making every day feel like a moment, a holiday, a victory is what the good teachers should strive to instruct our kids. One only does two things in this world. Either they win or they learn. No moment is ever too small. Often, the school, through grading and other incentives, manufactures when a student should feel at its happiest peak. We invite a culture of rigor through the form of meritocracy. Asking the student to earn their feeling of joy through hard work and obedience. Assimilation into the

school culture represents the sort of pressures that students face that have now been transferred over to the teacher.

To understand this system is to know that it is a blessing within itself to be able to survive every day in America. These are things that come with wisdom, experience, and a loss of gullibility that comes with age. Terms that others may deem as “street smarts.” Knowing that the capitalist world is a game that keeps you wanting increasingly instead of appreciating what is already there. Simply transferring the skills of how to add numbers in my mind is not education. Getting the child to understand why addition matters to you and how your mind wraps around the numbers based on your personal experience is something that represents education in my mind. This starts with the school allowing the teacher to be their authentic selves, away from having to look like a “professional adult.” Away from the constant pressures that produce burn out.

Critical questioning and a democratic approach to big decision making must be welcomed when it comes to education. Responsibility breeds strong ethics of accountability. We become safe in a space that we know we have the power to influence. Just think about why one’s bedroom becomes a safe space. There is a certain level of privacy that allows you to express yourself combined with the empowerment to change elements in your space at any given moment. Lasting joy comes with finding your purpose, and learning about the spaces that you need that can keep you resilient in the everyday chaos that life presents.

The rest of this chapter will go more in depth on some of the key terms discussed in the critical lexicon to give more of a clear view of how I have arrived at formulating my philosophy of education. These consist of some of the most influential writings and philosophers that have helped me reach this state of mind.

## **Constructivism and the Influence of Piaget**

Piaget's theory of cognitive development strips away the concept of mini adults. Children need much more than just knowledge to make sense of the world. By a certain age, with the right nurturing, children can gain different perspectives of how the world works. It is important to recognize that Piaget's argument is not about asking if children are physically capable of doing labor. If through their experiences, they are learning that the world has no real love for him or her, the logical conclusion becomes suicide. When one's focus is only on pleasing another person, they do not develop a moral/value system to live by. It goes back to that old saying. "If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything."

To achieve *higher order thinking*, Piaget describes intelligence as a combination of assimilation and accommodation. For instance, if a person is running late for work, do they try to run across the street to the building in a wild fashion? No, experience should tell us to assimilate the nature of cars in the streets as dangerous vehicles. But as they move on to the adult stage of cognitive development, they will look for ways to get creative to get to work on time because being late to work goes against his or her value system. A higher order thinking technique would be to hedge out a little bit on the sidewalk, or motion for a car to please stop as you try to hustle across the street. Maintaining this equilibrium is important for the adult that must adjust to a changing world that offers diverse ways to achieve certain needs.

*The Psychology of Intelligence* was written by Jean Piaget and published in 1960.

These writings have a strong connection with constructivism due to their insistence on knowledge being attained through experience and individual experimentation with new objects injected into their reality. Piaget writes,

The whole development of mental activity from perception and habit to symbolic behavior and memory, and to the higher operations of reasoning and formal thought, is thus a function of this gradually increasing distance of interaction, and hence of the equilibrium between an assimilation of realities further and further removed from the action itself and an accommodation of the latter to the former. (p. 9)

He goes on to talk about the benefits of an individual having an organic relationship with the environment that makes way for adaptation. When children are driven to work like the contract children in Switzerland, they are persuaded to only see objects as means to an end, not really looking at the meaning behind the things that they farm. They become robbed of their individuality, personality, and humanity in the mission of profit.

The concept of intelligence being linked with adaptation can also be determined when examining student behaviors during days when a substitute teacher takes over the classroom. The student may exhibit unusual behaviors out of a failure to conceive a new set of rules or routine. Students without that concept of higher order thinking fail to grasp the understanding that the regular teacher will be back in a day or two and that they should want to continue practicing their expected classroom behaviors. Or without higher order thinking, students may grow frustrated with the substitute teacher instead of being patient with that person.



One of Piaget's key concepts for his earlier stages of cognitive development would be the idea of egocentrism. Children think the world thinks and acts on one accord. That accord would be in relation to the child him or herself. How does one go from thinking everyone should eat because he or she is hungry to trying to figure out how you are going to save one loaf of bread for the week? Cognitive development, in the eyes of Piaget, is about growing from this selfishness into a more community minded thinking. He says, "Infantile egocentrism is thus in its essence an undifferentiation between self and social environment" (Rosenberg, Ward, Chiltan 1989). The hard part for educators is getting kids to have confidence, yet still be aware of the need to function within society.

Once a student recognizes that society is composed of various parts moving together, they can get terms like reversibility and centration. Reversibility refers to the ability to break an object down to its simplest element. The object where our food is placed is a table; the table is made of wood. The Labrador has become reduced from dog to animal (Cherry, 2023). The kid starts to understand that the chunk of ice, once melted, will become water. It is the idea of recognizing inter-connectedness within everything. Once this is achieved, a child can move past the traps of centration. Centration is simply a focus on one salient aspect of an item, its definition lies in the act of centering (Merriam-Webster, 2023).

Making sense of the current world around you through exploration, reflection, and connection relates to my overall philosophy of education. It is about looking deeper into the things that comprise our world as objects that can mean so much for different people depending upon their relationship to it. If we give people the time to explore their immediate surroundings, they can begin to cultivate memories around their environment and in turn, can start to draw connections from a world they know. The most important aspect of school

is the environment surrounding the school community. What is the identity of the city or town that I am apart of? How can my actions influence or reinforce the existing culture around me? We measure success in a student growing up in today's American school based upon their ability to go "away" from their home, and gain knowledge somewhere else. Rarely, as educators, do we challenge students to gain a greater sense of what it truly means to be part of a community.

### **Cultural Studies - Giroux**

The ways in which we interact with each other and build social relations out of circumstance is what makes culture. There are stores in which citizens like to convene inside and outside of it for long periods of time. What happens when those stores no longer exist? If sidewalks weren't on that busy street, how would our everyday social relations change? Henry G development. Giroux, in his text entitled *Cultural Studies*, states that "rather than being viewed as a static force, the substance of culture and everyday life repeatedly mutates and is subject to ongoing changes and transformations" (Giroux, 2004). The narrative of the inner-city "ghetto" being a symbol of the destruction capabilities of white supremacy and systemic racism doesn't give too much credence to the resistance that lies in the culture. Out of that resistance, Giroux so elegantly explains how culture can create *utopian possibilities* (Giroux, 2004). Think back to when Hip-Hop was being formed in the late 70's, and the possibilities of a poet to evolve into an MC or crews to handle disputes in a dance battle. It's about people using their skills to figure out the best possible outcome in an environment with a certain amount of resources.

Giroux's exploration on culture and the possibilities that could come out of it ties into my philosophy that we need to be embracing the life journey of our students. The

culture of our student is not some finite thing that can't be changed but it's one that is constantly evolving at a pace that can't be controlled by the school. It's a deep dive into why we should have our students out in the world more, in order to better understand their world. Giroux's work makes the case for the educator to seek a connection with their student population on a deeper level in order to grasp the culture of their immediate environment. "At the same time, it is crucial for educators to recognize that while they need to be attentive to the particular context in which they work, they cannot separate such contexts from larger matters and configurations of power, culture, ideology, politics, and domination" (Giroux, 2004). In order to create a space that gives grace, we must acknowledge the factors that plays a part into the culture we see. What's the driving force behind what motivates an individual? How can one experience joy if they don't have a respect for their own (or other peoples) culture? Giving our students the freedom to explore different possibilities in how they can interact with each other relates to my philosophy of education in terms of putting an emphasis on building meaningful connections.

### **Defining and Forming a Public Pedagogy Philosophy**

Public pedagogy is a melting pot of culture, politics, and power. It's an informal way of learning through spaces that are outside of the institutions traditional power structures provide. Things are always happening. Politics creates the circumstances that lead to culture as power seeks to create hierarchical divisions within our culture to maintain power. "The struggle for social distinction, whatever its symbolic form, is a fundamental dimension of all social life" (Swartz, 1998). Our American school system is based around finding distinctions (meritocracy) in our kids. Who are the gifted students? Who are the students that require special services? Who are the troublemakers? Even amongst schools themselves

we are distinguishing which ones are successful and failing. A successful form of public pedagogy in schools creates chaos to this fine machinery of a reproduction of individuals invested in earning things based on societies' merits (cultural reproduction). It's a complete disruption of the time, space, and rhythm template that intellectuals would deem as a natural progression for the child in their education.

### *An example of Public Pedagogy in Action*

Enlightenment comes from embracing the unknown and accepting the additional elements that are beyond one's control. In the text entitled, *Education in Movement Spaces*, Rae and Django Paris talk about their experience in front of a Minnesota Precinct at a BLM protest against the police killing of Jamar Clark in 2015. They discussed how the moment came from an invitation of personal connection. There's a pulling of persuasion going on that disrupts rhythm. Rae and Django walked into a protest that had been going on for several days as tents and a water/food supply had been figured out. The concept of time became disrupted as accomplishing the goal sets precedence over following a normal schedule that divides up the day between work and leisure. Encapsulating it all, would be the freezing temperatures that disrupt space. As families of old and young people gathered around the bonfires, the very essence of what makes us human drew people stronger together. They would go on to mention that night as saying it was the night "they truly thought a new world was possible and coming" (Paris, 2020, p. 6). At its very core, public pedagogy inspires people to formulate cultures that, in turn, power must adjust to (by way of politics). It's about thinking beyond learning how to fit in as a citizen, but also learning how to influence, listen, and build relationships with all kinds of people. Experiencing those

moments of disruption allowed Rae and Django to truly open their eyes and see the power that's within them.

This informs my theory on education as being one of wander and discovery. Through building a personal connection with their environment, Rae and Django were able to develop a passion that allowed them to learn and grow as people of purpose. We should give our students the time, and room to fight for things of importance to them. What we deem as unimportant for our students is really a reflection of our own cultural upbringings and the power structures that dominate the narratives of our lives.

### **Bourdieu and the Forms of Capital**

This epiphany for Rae and Django can be described in the form of social capital, as described by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. What is the definition of capital? In his book entitled *Forms of Capital*, Mr. Bourdieu (1986) goes on to state that,

Capital, which, in its objectified or embodied forms, takes time to accumulate and which, as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form, contains a tendency to persist in its being, is a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible. (p. 15)

The very fabric of capital is based around this idea of controlling movement, limiting spontaneity and influencing a citizen to maximize their efforts in production in order to accumulate wealth. He mentions that the economic capital is at the core of everything (Bourdieu, 1986). The actual currency we have to buy things with, or the objects that we have to barter. Another major form of capital is our cultural capital. Who gets hired to do the job first? Who gets rewarded with the most economic capital? It's about physical

characteristics, language, and one's ability to assimilate to the and grow accustomed to the laws of the country and the unwritten laws of the local community. As a teacher, if I'm in a neighborhood with a lot of students from Spanish speaking countries, my ability to speak Spanish grants me more cultural capital in that community. So in this sense, cultural capital is accumulated, but in most cases, it's a matter of being in an embodied state, elevated through circumstance. "It thus manages to combine the prestige of innate property with the merits of acquisition" (Bourdieu, 1986). The last form of capital I'll discuss (there are more forms) from Bourdieu is social capital. This is the process of accumulating a wealth of network relations, that in turn, can be converted into cultural or economic capital. "In other words, the network of relationships is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term" (Bourdieu, 1986). Rae and Django saw an opportunity to establish public pedagogy centered around bridging the gap between inner city Chicagoans fighting against police brutality and native youth at Standing Rock who were invested in environmental justice.

Power constricts youth to only doing meaningful convening inside the school's watchful eye. It does this by warning students of the economic and cultural deprivation that he or she will suffer with while being out of school. Those two forms of capital are most tightly linked to the modern day American School System. If we aren't challenging our students to gain cultural and social capital, as educators we are failing our students. We have to allow our students the experiences of interacting with power outside of the controlled environments of schooling and the household. Opportunities for collaboration are key to providing an environment that is welcoming for all.

## Closing Reflections

### On Being a Student in the U.S.

My experience growing up in public school system will always be marred by a feeling of hyper structure, rigid demands, and a feeling of personal anxiety. This anxiety came from a feeling of not being able to express myself, and not feeling like the culture that I grew up in was valued enough. The most joyful moments would be those times in middle school and high school when we had the freedom to go out for lunch. But I remember being blindsided by the amount of freedom given to me in college. It was a struggle and adjustment figuring out how I was going to create my own schedule around my classes. I had realized that I had spent my time in public school merely being a student, allowing my teachers and administrators to guide me into what was best for a time, instead of truly figuring out what to do to occupy my time. I think this is the biggest attribute that we can teach our students. How to take advantage of their free time in order to bring some joy in their lives. Joy is more than just finding happiness in leisure activities, but also about finding a connection with your world. I wish school was less about pushing forward but instead about relishing and celebrating the moments.

As stated by Giroux (2004),

The current challenge for intellectuals is to reclaim the language of social, agency, solidarity, democracy, and public life as the basis for rethinking how to name, theorize, and strategize a new kind of politics, notions of political agency, and collective struggle.

If our relationships serve as means to our economic capital ends, it will be hard to envision any kind of new world when our perspective isn't challenged. School should be a place in which students are encouraged to come up with middle ground decisions that acknowledge the collective struggle. Achievement becomes defined through one's ability to navigate through different spaces instead of one based on personal accumulation of "knowledge." We must learn how to embrace the uncomfortable. This is done through a process of wandering in the outside world, and truly seeking out ways in which you can influence and be influenced by power. Education should embrace transformation through exploration in the spirit of constant growth and improvement. So many students like myself have felt like they had to limit or restrict their full selves in order to find "success" in schools when in fact, the mission should always be to cater to the needs of a changing population influenced under a culture shaped through new inventions.

### **On being a Teacher in the U.S.**

One of my biggest fears before taking up the profession would be my insecurities over the content I was going to deliver. I was always afraid of having a lesson end up with a student embarrassing me in front of the class in terms of how to do the particular thing I was trying to teach. I was afraid of the whole class laughing at me and being seen as an incompetent teacher. This is why I began my career working after school until I felt comfortable to be in the classroom full time.

I had realized during my time as a teacher that it was equally as important for myself not to embarrass any students over a particular mistake. I learned that I can't be the one that triggers a student into a state of frustration. If I keep an open mind towards learning what students are bringing to the table, maybe they will keep an open mind towards hearing my



suggestions on how to navigate the space better. I've learned to cherish the little moments in which I'm greeting students in the hallways passing by me or leaving/entering the school. In terms of handling conflicts, the best thing has been knowing when students need their personal space and giving it to them. As the chapters go by, I'll go more in depth on the concept of wandering, because often, that is the best technique in terms of calming students down. Allowing them to take a walk and engaging in small talk with them about their personal lives in order for them to calm down by taking their minds off their situation.

Working with students and trying to get to know them I'm always stepping out of my comfort zone into a space that's more welcoming. I'm normally a reserved guy but inside the school, I transform myself into many different characters all for the hope of engaging and demonstrating to kids that's it's ok to be your unique self. I also believe in less lecturing and more modeling of behaviors that you seek. In order to have a welcoming space, the community must be judged on how it responds to conflicts and challenges. It is through finding grace, understanding, and patience that one truly finds joy.

## Chapter Three

### Historical and Literature Review

The forming of American schools has been done with a common word one may hear often in teaching training circles. That word would be intentional. This process has led to a culture of uncertainty, nervousness, pressure, seriousness, flexibility, and rigor. Joy has never been a priority when it comes to helping children grow. This historical and literature review will dive deeper into the goals of the American society when it comes to developing children. It is about analyzing what is deemed as the “model student.”

### School-Failure! A History of Alarm Rings

This section is on major governmental actions on educational reforms that have taken place in America. What were the main focuses of those reforms and how did it play a role in this current atmosphere of high stakes pressure, rigor, and demand?

### Nation At Risk

In 1983, the Reagan Administration released to the public a report entitled *Nation at Risk* on the state of education in America. It was alarmist, and straight forward in its message that America was in trouble if it did not produce clear academic results. There were reports of test scores dropping, and dropout rates rising. Here is a direct quote written by the National Commission on Excellence in Education in the report *Nation at Risk* (1983).

We live among determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets, not only with products but also with the ideas of our laboratories and neighborhood workshops. America's

position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer (p.10)

The quote is a direct introduction into the concept of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is the direct belief that the market and economic growth of a nation is the most important thing towards guiding a nation (Manning, 2022). It is the stance that America must lead the way in terms of being the wealthiest country, and that is what will keep the country going. Through economic growth, this can make way for limited government interference (Manning, 2022).

The government is saying that it wants to take less responsibility and place the blame of economic hardships on the citizens' inability to compete with people in other nations. It places other people and cultures as the enemy, instead of promoting true understanding, the means of economics isolates our citizens into thinking they must contribute to America's economy. Accountability and pushing the standards for children became the goal. This was done through a central measuring system of state testing that gave way to the eventual grading of schools. Now, the school itself would be seen as the country. A great project that can either pass or fail if it does not adhere to the government's standards of instruction. Teachers face a heavy burden of not wanting to let their entire school down if students in their class do poorly on a test. The commission mentions "disturbing facts" (p.23) relating to the student behavior in terms of studying as evidence to a lack of student achievement, an argument saying that students have too much free time.

The report suggested that teachers were attracting the "lowest-qualified" professionals. In addition to that, it also mentioned that there were severe staffing shortages of teachers; this is especially in areas seen as highly needed such as science and math

courses (p.23). Not only did the report foreshadow our current teacher shortage crisis, but it also warned us of a changing market geared around technology. “One estimate indicates that by the turn of the century millions of jobs will involve laser technology and robotics” (p.12). Thus, explaining why the commission was so concerned with getting highly qualified teachers in areas such as science and math. In theory, your qualification and expertise become related to your skills that can transfer in the job market rather than one’s ability to make a true connection with another person. Here is a quote by Jal Mehta (2015) in the journal article entitled *Escaping the Shadow: A Nation at Risk and Its Far-Reaching Influence*:

A Nation at Risk (like Sputnik before it) did play an important role in concentrating attention on the economic functions of schooling. By linking an old set of concerns about education’s economic role to a new analysis of international economic competition and the shift to a postindustrial economy, A Nation at Risk succeeded in elevating the economic purpose of schooling over its other purposes (p.23)

Even today, as a graduate student, the first responses to my experience in school have been what am I going to do with the degree? I am not allowed to be in the moment and just revel in the joy of learning. Instead, I am supposed to be taking tangible things that will help me get the next job. If I am unsure about where I want to go in terms of employment, can I truly find joy in the moment? The report has done an excellent job in terms of normalizing a panic about your schooling experience, given way too many “reforms” that have taken shape in the United States of America.

## **No Child Left Behind Act**

The hunt for efficiency created a never-ending cycle of government intervention and shaming under the guise of new hope. The time devoted towards recess started to lessen during the 1990's, and it further dwindled with the enactment of No Child Left Behind in 2001, which emphasized English language arts and mathematics (Ramstetter, 2017). There are two distinct things that stand out when addressing the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. States get to design their own statewide test and define what is proficient. The second component of NCLB (No Child Left Behind) that stands out would be that schools are vulnerable to get shut down after three years if no growth is shown for their students on a year-by-year basis (Klein, 2015). In the atmosphere created by the Nation at Risk Report, there is an allowance of tying in money with academic performance. Families were getting warned that their children would end up economically desolate without schooling. Now, the emphasis is on the schools to become organized to avoid being shut down.

In my history as an educator under this guise of standardized testing, I have noticed that a lot of things that would serve as a de-stressor for teachers are put in place during testing time. Classrooms typically have two adults that are in the space during testing. The time of the day is shortened to half a day for students. There is zero tolerance for distracting behaviors, and an emphasis on a quiet space that could serve as such a balancing factor for teachers typically moving in a louder, chaotic space. There is a fun pep rally days before the test, and the simplicity of just allowing students to do the work to the best of their ability without constant guidance. Overall, the teacher becomes decentered as they are unable to answer or guide students during test taking. We create a safe space for children only during this testing time as the days prior to that are dedicated towards drilling our students to be able to take the test.

The tradeoff is the overwhelming pressure of teaching to the test prior to taking it. There is an expectation of students to do well despite a lack of desire among most students to take standardized tests. Teachers are subject to evaluations on their performance based on how students do in standardized tests. There seems to be a link between teacher efficacy, test-stress, and job satisfaction based upon classroom management (Von der Embse, 2016). According to a study from Temple University and University of Virginia in the article entitled “Test Stress and Teacher Efficacy,” classroom management and student engagement is the source for stress related to tests (Von Der Embse, 2016). Here is a direct quote that ties in how teachers are feeling:

A wealth of research has demonstrated that teachers are satisfied with the aspects of their jobs that involve instruction and direct interactions with students. However, teachers often are dissatisfied with other conditions (e.g., poor climate, annual evaluations based upon test performance) and this influences job performance (Crossman & Harris, 2006; von der Embse et al., 2015, p.6).

There is a disconnect between the goals of the schools driven by the need to please the state and the teacher, motivated by the need to build relationships. Creating an atmosphere catered around test-taking does not always align with the teacher’s values and learning style. This is a limitation of the teaching profession. The full story is not told, and the value of the uniqueness of what that teacher brings becomes lost in evaluation. We have a government that thinks a school year is like climbing a ladder to your destination when it is a rollercoaster ride of emotions. Accumulation of information takes precedence over fixing classroom conflict. Teaching the lesson is seen as the right thing to do while engaging in whole group mediation sessions with your students becomes frowned upon as a waste of time.

## **Purpose of Education**

The increased workload thrust upon teachers lies in the realization that school is used as an instrument to instruct children on how to be proper citizens. School was never designed to just strictly teach a subject. School serves as the picture we paint on how children need to be developed. In the book entitled *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Friere discusses the true art of what it means to educate. “Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication” (Freire, 1970, p. 77). To advocate for healthier cultural exchanges, fun must be supported and not deemed as a threat to student progress. Schools should be working towards building memorable moments for children that allow them to envision a greater society. Being truly educated in this society lies in one’s ability to formulate a work/life balance. This comes with constant reflection, revision, communication, and creative thinking.

## **History Impacting Staff Turnover**

The previous section dealt with the everyday interactions between teachers and students being molded by members close to the government. This section will delve deeper into the government's actions that have led to the ongoing frustration of teachers and their lack of retention in the profession.

### **One Room Schoolhouse (1776-1830)**

Before the traditional public-school structure that we know that had been established in the United States, schools used to be privatized. During the early 1800’s, this type of

education saw teachers oversee a one room schoolhouse. A small house-like structure with one room, a stove for heat, and a platform that would serve as the teacher's desk. Students of all ages were in the one room schoolhouse with sizes ranging from 6 to 40 (Blakemore, 2018). The teachers taught a wide range of curriculum with some of the older students (mostly sitting towards the back) being selected to help tutor their peers. It was less structured, more informal with students taking long breaks from school to help with work. There was no need for an expansive workforce in the educational field. As explained by Blakemore (2018), “That laxity was unacceptable for a British teacher named Joseph Lancaster, who invented a system to counter it. By the early 19th century, his system had migrated to the United States—and convinced many cities that they could afford a school” (p. 2). This model, the Lancastrian model, extended the one room schoolhouse into a larger schoolhouse holding upwards to 1,000 students. Older or more advanced students were given the formal duties of “monitors” in an army like structure serving as lieutenants to the sole teacher. As explained by Erin Blakemore (2018):

Even before public school was required in Pennsylvania, cities like Harrisburg set up their own free schools using the system. Maryland briefly had monitorial schools statewide in the 1820s, and other states participated, too. Between 1806 and the 1830s, Lancaster and his monitors dominated classrooms in the U.S. (p. 2)

The schoolhouse era saw the greatest amount of partnership between students and teachers. Teachers relied on students and entrusted them to do major tasks in the interest of learning. Although the idea of a one room schoolhouse may have seemed daunting, there was not much pressure on the teacher to be the one solely responsible for depositing information. It was up to the student to form a sense of community with their peers and



learn from one another. As time goes on, we start to see the government impose a distance between this partnership and transform the culture of teaching slowly.

### **Taylorism & The Prussian Model of Education**

The development of infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and an interstate railroad system transformed America's economy into an emerging global power. No longer were businesses subjected to their locality. A shoe salesperson in Upstate NY now must compete with a store in Manhattan because it is much easier for customers to travel and look for different options. The increased competition caused businesses to have to be smart about how they sell and produce their product.

As the march of industrialization made thousands of workers dependent on the uncontrollable difficulties of the business cycle and the generosity of employers—described by some at the time as “putting the living of the many in the hands of the few”—the widening imbalance between classes spurred economic reformers to action (Britannica, 2023, p. 6).

Taylorism, the approach of scientific management developed by Frederick Taylor, was based on getting the most efficiency out of a worker. It was about studying the worker's good and unhealthy habits to make a schedule that optimizes the highest production level. As recounted by E. Wayne Ross (2010),

A study of Taylorism is a crucial element in understanding the history of industry and education in North America. And an examination of the aims and application of the principles of scientific management is key to developing an appreciation for the

experiences of workers in the 20th century as well as understanding why the schools we have exist. (p. 33)

In this era, even schools were subject to the principles of Taylorism. The distance that starts to be created between teachers and students is mirrored in the relationships employers have with their employees. Instead of taking on journeymen and training them. It became more about what would be the most cost-efficient option. Now, you are using a lot of time to train a journeyman, employees start to look for ways in which they can already hire someone experienced in the field to get increased production.

The age of reform gave way to the Prussian model of education that we still see in schools today. This model did away with the emphasis on relationship building but instead on qualifications. A student is to listen to the teacher because the teacher “knows best.” It was about setting up your classroom in a way that will get the most out of your students to improve the school’s reputation among the larger state.

King Fredrick systematically established a schooling model engineered to ensure that the “spirit of ability within” was permanently extinguished. Children were depersonalized and isolated from each other at an early age. Seated in rows, they were easily silenced, controlled, and forced to engage in rote tasks whose sole purpose was to inculcate obedience. Taught fragmented subjects that deprived them of context and perspective, their thinking was intentionally and systematically stunted. These practices shaped the curriculum of the Prussian public schools for over a century (Meshchaninov, 2012, p. 4).

Once privatized, education became a public institution open to the poor. This idea made sense in the Taylorism lens when you think about employers wanting to keep their

employees' minds focused on the task by reassuring them that their children will be safe in one place for 8 hours out of the day. We start to see a shift from the ideal American being one of moral standard to the ideal American being one of hard-working, wealthy, and industrious nature.

### **Philanthropy**

The nature of this emphasis on standards has left schools susceptible to the battleground that is school choice and funding. Every year, schools are left with the uncertainty of how they will be supported by their local government. In Erika Kitzmiller's book on the rise and fall of Germantown High School entitled *The Roots of Educational Inequality*, she elaborates on how schools were never supported and pushed by the government. Schools like Germantown High School and Central High School in Philadelphia had to rely on philanthropic efforts from upper middle-class families to fund the programs that would give them this necessary distinction they hoped to cling on to. She goes on to explain how schools developed reputations of being "good" and "bad" schools along racial lines due to schools with primarily upper middle class white families having the private funds to provide their institutions with programming. "Economic need and the instability of the labor market also influenced the decisions that Philadelphia families made about their children's secondary schools" (Kitzmiller, 2022, p. 39). By the early 1900's there was a complete shift from worrying about the child maturing morally to now focusing on how to make that child more competitive for an advantageous position in the workplace. Parents started to think more so in the line of what a school can offer their child for the future.

## **Alternative Visions of Education**

This section focuses on individuals that have sought to transform our conceptualization of education. These thinkers had grand ideas that worked to criticize our capitalist system and ask questions about its true intentions. These scholars provide us with a vision for how human beings should interact. It is a vision that asks us all to reexamine our own goals.

### **Daniel Greenberg**

Located in Framingham, Massachusetts: The Sudbury Valley school represents the idea of an institution working to match Goldman's vision for how a child grows up. Students had complete autonomy picking the things they wanted to do throughout the day. I am a fan of the idea that students are only required to stay for about 5 hours. In traditional schools, there is a natural tension when it comes to dealing with time. The rigid schedule adds stress when trying to transition students in the way you as an educator need to transition them. The decisions that administration makes in terms of how much time is focused on each subject are telling towards what subjects are seen as more important than others. At Sudbury, there is no shaming in doing the things that you want to do. Children playing video games for consecutive hours straight in a school is not met with discontent. The act of truly seeing a child as a human being and helping to usher in their true potential can be ascribed in the student judicial process at Sudbury. All decisions regarding staff, rules, and consequences are made in a diplomatic way with every person regardless of age granted the opportunity to have an equal vote.

Daniel Greenberg, one of the founders of the Sudbury Valley School in 1968 has a very intriguing essay entitled “Why Children Play?” In that essay, he points out that play is never a mindless endeavor of pointless gag. Instead, playing within itself is experimentation and exercises of skills that are previously attained. Playing the piano is an experiment with the sound around you but also an exercise in your hand-eye coordination, ability to sit and concentrate for a long time. “Without play, people cannot practice and improve their ability to build frameworks, the primary skill necessary to figure out how to affect our environment. To encourage people to practice this skill, it is made enjoyable, where I mean by “enjoyable” something we want to do because it is pleasurable, it’s fun (Greenberg, 2021).” As humans we have a natural inclination for being among nature. Play allows us to finetune skills to better be around nature and be around the people we love with a full self-awareness of one’s capabilities. There is no sense of playing without choice.

It is very telling that the Sudbury Valley School has been able to last so long without government assistance. A school that does not boast about test scores or how many students get accepted into an Ivy League University every year. It is a simple philosophy that relies on one thing; put trust in the child. Without the constraints of having to be the “perfect student” at their school they can play to figure out what their true passions may be. The career path of Sudbury Valley Alumni is not as important as instilling the mindset of resilience and choice making. That resilience comes from an institution that seeks to empower and validate the *true potential* that lies in every child.

In a 1988 interview, Greenberg discussed the removal and absolute rejection of titles. He refused to be seen as a “director” or even known as a “founder.” He would go on to say how he preferred himself to be known as a staff member that is willing to assist and

give their opinion whenever the opportunity presents itself. It's not necessary to have to check on and know what each child should be doing at every hour. His most poignant remarks are regarding the development of a child. He says that 4-year-olds have a much easier time adjusting to the freedom and democracy of Sudbury Valley. For older kids around 12 that come, they struggle figuring out how to best handle their time (Sudbury Valley Press, 1988). This is often due to the overarching goal that has become a hunt for “good grades” instead of trying to figure out what it is one is passionate about. Greenberg talks about a rejection of grades, and progress reports that seem to only pigeonhole children into certain areas.

### **Connections to My Experience: Recess and Play in Schools**

As stated by Jones (2022),

I think people are scared because they don't know what to do if kids are playing. They feel like it's this free-for-all, that children are just running around and doing whatever they want, and the teacher eats bonbons in the corner and doesn't do anything, right? And so that leaves them feeling, well, there's no role for me in all of this if I'm just letting the children play. (WestEd, 2022)

Educational scholar, Denisha Jones, in part one of the *Exploring the Powerful Role of Play* Webinar series entitled “Play Matters,” discusses the matter that in our hunt to do what's right for children by setting them up for success with skill attainment, we are not fulfilling their natural urges of play. She talks about issues with classroom management boiling down to students wanting to play while a teacher wants to deliver a lesson (Jones, 2022). She warns of a school system that is often pushing students along from grade to grade without

truly fulfilling what they desire in their personal lives. As stated by Jones (2022), “Most people want their children to be happy, to be confident, to take the initiative, try new things, to be kind, to take different perspectives, to experiment, to inquiry, to ask questions, to get a passion for something, right?” A lot of lasting, feel good memories involve play. As adults we still crave this feeling of joyful exploration, but we use the term “vacation.” Not being in a situation in which one is controlled through a tight knit schedule, but being in a mental state in which you are letting your inner passions take over presents another kind of growth on the path to life-long learning.

Despite play being a major desire for all of us as human beings, I have witnessed firsthand how using recess as an incentive can take the joy away from school. Students' misbehaving will often be sent to a wall area where they must watch their peers engage in free play. This makes me think of philosopher Pierre Bourdieu's argument about symbolic violence. The actions you make that do not physically harm people into submission but mentally remind them of the power they are surrounded by (Wiegmann, 2017). It is more of a symbol to the other students that at any given moment your free time could be taken away. Due to the time constraints of recess, and the fear of facing punishments for infractions, students often fall into a routine during their free time. As a person in charge of ensuring recess is fully equipped with activities, I have noticed that whenever I lead something new, students are more willing to try it. But, left unsupported, students will often fall into the routine of doing the same things every day during recess. There is a lack of creativity and imagination that is necessary to make up their own games. But once again, when recess is only 25 minutes at the most, I do not blame students for wanting to do what they know best in such a brief period.

Many problems typically occur at the end of recess when students realize that they have not fully taken advantage of the limited time available for them. Often, students will rebel, and refuse to line up quickly and get inside for the teacher. This continuous game of push and pull only adds to the constant stress placed upon everyone in the school community. We do not prepare our students for healthy decision making because of this atmosphere of a schooling environment in which the teacher controls everything.

### **The Impact of Technology on Joy**

#### **Being Alone**

Embracing the discomfort and getting out of this restrictive climate of education is what I am all about. The consequences of not doing so can play a huge psychological effect as social-media technology continues to have increased impact in our life. Sherry Turkle, author of the book *Alone Together*, describes technology as this seductive force of comfort. She says that “we romance the robot and become inseparable from our smart phone” (p. 4). She mentions that as cellphones get smarter to know what we like, the more information we will give and the more we trust technology as a companion that will know just what to say and show when you are feeling down. She says that “technology makes us busier than ever and ever more in search of retreat” (p. 11). It sucks you in with the allure of being productive, only to tap into your childlike instincts of exploration that makes a person want to escape. Turkle would go on to mention that the trivial things we used to take for granted, like having an actual verbal face to face conversation, have become almost optional in this digital texting world.



To what extent has technology made it less likely for people to have powerful impacts in the community? The glorification (and love as previously explained) of it as this sort of life saver has turned our relationship with technology into one of reliance instead of vanity. History tells us that modern technology in schools has always been painted as this game changer for the betterment of the country. Larry Cuban deems this ideology around technology as “Magical Thinking.” This is the idea that academic performance for kids will change our society for the good. Larger societal problems become heaped on the school. We become entranced in a state of euphoria based on what could be.

### **Machines and Behaviors**

In the article entitled *Teaching Machines*, in 1958, B.F. Skinner describes the need for the student to play more of an active role in their learning. A lot of the inspiration for his Skinner Teaching Machine was based on the Pressey Multiple Choice machine introduced in the 1920's. Pressey believed that machines had the opportunity to not only be more efficient, but to teach as well. Based on his studies of the pros and cons of the Pressey machine, Skinner concluded that *Immediate Feedback*, through a reward/punishment system is best for the development of children. He says, “By confirming correct responses and by weakening responses which should not have been acquired, a self-testing machine does, indeed, teach; but it is not designed primarily for that purpose” (p. 969). Skinner is making the case for machines teaching students how to learn. The process of being engaged, blocking out your classmates, and being focused on your work is the ideal behavior within the classroom. He goes on to say; “In education the behavior to be shaped and maintained is usually verbal, and it is to be brought under the control of both verbal and nonverbal stimuli. Fortunately, the special problems raised by verbal behavior can be submitted to a similar

analysis” (p. 970). Behaviorism differentiates from strict motivation because it does not rely on a certain subject, or moment to motivate the student to achieve the behavior. It is about a system of rules and regulations designed to bring out the “model student” that is always listening, eager to learn.

For his Teaching Machine, Skinner wanted to allow students the opportunity to write in their own answers into a machine for immediate feedback. There was a sense that students needed to be more active in their responses as they waited for their rewards and punishments. Skinner gives his justification here:

The student must compose his response rather than select it from a set of alternatives, as in a multiple-choice self-rater. One reason for this is that we want him to recall rather than recognize to make a response as well as see that it is right. Another reason is that effective multiple-choice material must contain plausible wrong responses, which are out of place in the delicate process of "shaping" behavior because they strengthen unwanted forms (p. 970).

Skinner goes on to compare his teaching machines to that of a private tutor. A relationship that makes learning more personalized. Skinner argued in favor of Teaching Machines being able to adapt quicker to a child's disabilities.

Many blind children are treated today as feeble-minded because no one has had the time or patience to make contact with them. Deaf-mutes, spastics, and others suffer similar handicaps. A teaching machine can be adapted to special kinds of communication as, for example, Braille and, above all, it has infinite patience. (p. 976)

This is a bold proclamation when considered. Skinner, in a case of magical thinking, argues that people with intellectual disabilities will be treated differently, with more dignity, and opportunity if they engage within the machine.

The central theme that becomes prevalent is the notion of a nation in crisis. Behaviorism observes the culture of our society and predicts future outcomes. It calls on the answer to many of life's problems being in the hands of the condition of our behavior. There is this sense that man has a natural tendency to behave in an animalistic manner when unchecked. Skinner pointed to the rise in juvenile rates among youth in America as evidence of a nation in crises. Ironically, in the same year that the teaching machine came out, the book "Lord of the Flies" was also published. This story about a group of stranded schoolchildren on an island turning violent against each other can make Skinner's argument for why we need to keep children in a controlled environment where we can regulate their behaviors and encourage them to invest in learning through teaching machines rather than hoping that they receive motivation from the teacher.

### **Summary and Look Ahead**

The ways in which we can imagine alternative approaches to schooling become stifled by the pressure of having to perform well on state standardized tests. Under the umbrella of Taylorism and trying to get the most out of students, the relationship between the teacher and the student has dissolved from the caring parent-like figure in the one room schoolhouse, to the desired "highly qualified" teacher that you should be quiet and listen to. This separation is done through constant evaluations of the teacher and linking student performance of tests to the teacher's overall quality. As a result, end goals lie in student proficiency in core subjects while things like recess become used as a reward. In our lust to

make students the best future workers that they can be, schools are forgetting the personal desires and goals that students already have. These goals are not about what job they want but about what type of person they want to be. Even though technology is seen as a game changer in terms of bringing equity, it also serves as a tool to mold behavior through its' built-in reward systems. Embracing free play is about equipping our students with better critical thinking and imaginative skills so that they can have a voice not only in the school, but in the community at large. Schools like Sudbury Valley have taken the pressure off teachers by making student agency and autonomy the norm.

Chapter 4 will be an outline that will address my strategy for bringing more joy into schools. Through a promotion of physical and mental exploration, I want to explore the capabilities of an after-school program that can serve as a true stress relief for the student and the teacher. How do we promote after-school programs that can foster authentic relationships between diverse groups in the school hierarchy? It is clear that there has been a narration of failure that has permeated our American schools, and it is vital that success in schools must be redefined by the amount of joy it can bring into the entire school community.

## Chapter Four

### Critical Action Research Program Proposal

The key parts in Chapter Three recognize the idea of school as a continuous developmental model that adjusts and shifts with the time. The history of some of the most alternative approaches in education started with the foundation that the school's vision, principles, and overall direction can change to meet the needs of its constituents. Myles Horton and the rest of the educators at Highlander school in Tennessee recognized the passion that a lot of its students of color had for civil rights reform, so the school adjusted its focus to that over union worker rights. It is a principle of remaining open and flexible while also valuing the issues going on with students today.

Did you know that the youngest kid to attend a college in the United States of America would be Michael Kearny at the age of 6 years old (Slaymaker, 2022)? In general, if students show a passion for learning and instruction, schools in America have had a history of being flexible to serve children's needs. Why not create an atmosphere that gives students the opportunity and time to explore their passions, and make themselves more marketable to their given profession? Staffing shortages are already increasing with these kinds of flexible measures as there have been moments when classes are combined inside of a gym or auditorium space for an extended period due to the lack of available teachers. We need to strip down and get to the heart of the possibilities that schools present. True joy comes from finding a purpose and a way to contribute to society at large. At our core, humans are social creatures, as progress has only been made through collaboration of individuals with like-minded passions for specific things. The first step of school is to recognize that students and adults need FREE time, an opportunity to explore without being

timed, questioned, or judged. The power to stop a session when one wants is a powerful tool, and responsibility that we need to bestow on our students to relieve pressure off our teachers. As stated by Brent Schulte, a high school teacher in the Steiner system, “I would disagree with the statement that more classroom time equals more success. I think it has to be used correctly...If you think about breathing in and breathing out: sitting in a classroom, you’re taking in all this information all day, there needs to be a time – a break – to kind of breathe out and let some of that stuff live within you” (need a citation here for this quote).

### **The Wander Program**

My aim is to create an after-school program that allows students many opportunities to reflect on all the good things in their environment as well as teaching them to have agency in their free time. As expressed in earlier chapters, recess has often been diminished as a reward that should be earned under the umbrella of meritocracy. This after-school program plays on this notion of time, as students can directly choose when they want to attend and how long they want to attend it for. The hope is to increase the amount of courage and risk taking that is needed for adults as they get older. Starting the first week with a mental wandering full of meditation, educators and students will first realize that schools have had many dramatic effects on everybody. It is important for me to highlight this point because too often, based on the demographics and location of our schools in an urban environment, the suburban school environment often gets put on a pedestal due to the resources it has to offer. I argue that students in a city have much more of an advantage due to the diversity and the many opportunities to meet new people in a highly populated space.

Labels like under-served or underprivileged communities may speak to the economic challenges, but the rich cultural explorations overshadow whatever narrative may bring. For

me personally, moving to Philadelphia has been a revelation in terms of recognizing the intersectionality of Blackness that is present. Living in this city has allowed me to really appreciate and be in awe of the impact that movements like the Nation of Islam had in the 1960's. I had no idea that the Muslim population was so high and rich among Black people in Philadelphia. With Malcolm X being one of my personal heroes, it is truly inspiring to see the level of love for Islam, and it was a great reminder for me to be tolerant.

But I cannot get that sense in schools. It is through my constant walks around the city that have allowed me to notice the kind of intersectionality that makes culture so vibrant. Intersectionality is a paradigm that addresses the multiple dimensions of identity and social systems as they intersect with one another and relate to inequality, such as racism, genderism, heterosexism, ageism, and classism, among other variables (APA, 2017b). It is in my walks along 52<sup>nd</sup> street, close to my school in West Philadelphia, that I'm constantly reminded of black people that are business owners, curators on the street corners, and overall change agents, as the street is constantly busy with many happenings. Even when I pack my lunch, I still make an effort to walk around the neighborhood of the school in which I work on in order to get a feel for the day-to-day experience. It's one of my biggest stress relievers, and I'm very thankful that I have the opportunity/time to go out.

Through the constant stain of feeling like your school is somehow lesser because it lacks resources, the daily reminder of strength, ingenuity, and creativity among everyday people living in that community reminds me that I don't need to be the savior, expert teacher that lifts students out of their situation. Just by purely engaging in an act of wandering for lunch each day as a teacher, I'm able to get a feel for the kind of strength that awakens joy inside of me through a sense of hope.

## Goals

The aims in The Wander Program would be *to redefine what we personally see about our environments*. It will also serve as a *learning tool to think about the different ways we interact in specific settings*. This will create the opportunity to *figure out the kind of spaces we would like to see in our schools*. What are the places that bring out emotions such as reliance, compassion, curiosity, and a sense of strength? *Establishing a love for our environment* is the first step towards keeping *an optimistic view that keeps everyone involved in a democratic process*.

Mentally, a sense of calm and openness will be projected through mindfulness techniques that allow us to manipulate our space and time. It's important that we allow for ourselves to be in a position to be healed. Unbound by the urge to rush and compete with peers, a development of openness will lead to a more democratic approach towards how the group will approach each space. Through techniques such as reflective writing and meditation, we can present a vulnerability that allows our students to connect with us on a deeper level. So, on the surface, we are doing physical wandering into different spaces, but in addition to that, mentally we are allowing our psyches to travel through the crevices in our mind to discover who we are.

The aim is for teachers, the facilitators of the program to rediscover their "why" in terms of what makes students so special. In an environment, that takes the pressure off of the teacher to deliver information, but instead, challenges the teacher to be open, and make connections. It can serve as a workshop for future lessons and ideas on how to make one's space even more welcoming. By the end of the program, teachers should be able to see the benefits of offering students free time. In turn, through the social-emotional changes that are



occurring within the classroom, administrators will be on page in terms of advocating for more autonomy in the day for our students.

We hope that students break out of the vicious cycle of staying with their immediate peer groups based upon a few commonalities of interest, and instead, learn to be open to the possibilities and benefits of interacting with different people outside of a controlled environment. Unplugging ourselves from the digital world and just taking a second to really breathe, look around, and see people for the qualities that they possess, and as people that identify themselves in many different intersectional ties. It is about raising awareness and tolerance as we seek to improve the emotional and social well-being of our student body.

Through promoting exploration, *The Wander Program* also seeks to improve physical health through walking and wandering in space. “One in six youth in the U.S. have obesity, according to data from the latest National Survey of Children’s Health” (Laurence, 2023). Physical endurance is needed to prepare for the regimentation of 9 months of schooling that requires students to sit down for extended periods of time. Programs like these promote the idea of learning through being active.

Lastly, the program should be one that promotes learning through play. Through a relaxed, open-minded concept of community, every space entered should have a priority of being playful in its tone. When we go somewhere, what are the things that we can do that will bring us joy? As facilitators of the program, it is up to us to guide our students towards thinking about unusual ways to interact in different spaces. In parks, could we play a big tag game? In museums, should we print out a scavenger hunt activity? Should we take time to journal at a college campus nearby? Susan Engel has a wonderful quote in her article “Joy: A Subject Schools Lack.” Engel (2015) states,

Becoming educated should not require giving up joy but rather lead to finding joy in new kinds of things: reading novels instead of playing with small figures, conducting experiments instead of sinking cups in the bathtub, and debating serious issues rather than stringing together nonsense words, for example. In some cases, schools should help children find new, more grown-up ways of doing the same things that are perennial sources of joy: making art, making friends, making decisions.

When thinking about different areas to go, are we really challenging ourselves to break out of our comfort zones? The quote really speaks to there being multiple paths towards the same means. Our biggest source of joy may come from overcoming a fear of getting out of our routines. It is ok to feel all kinds of emotions such as happiness, sadness, but the trick is remaining curious and having an intellectual vigor for life.

#### Solution To Concern

Schools have embraced a pressure packed, test-backed, data-driven world in which we can no longer enjoy our present accomplishments without being worried about potential “outcomes” calculated based upon our previous actions. “As a result, we have a school system that is focused on credentialing more than learning and whose benefits flow to the degree holder more than to economy or society” (Labaree, 1997, p. 197). We have become so focused on making sure the individual is equipped with knowledge instead of making sure the individual learns how to see itself as part of the society. As a result, to properly “motivate” our student population, the idea of fun and play has been weaponized as an incentive based upon one’s ability to sit down and listen to the teacher. Schools are suffering from staffing shortages due to a lack of community and culture indicative of their population. This program serves as a healing tool of resilience to help teachers and students

get through the ebbs and flows of the school year by helping educators rediscover our passions and why we get into the profession in the first place. Rediscovering our love for our surroundings and our overall gratefulness for life is something that can help prevent burn-out on all fronts. “If the education system is to avoid the fast approaching "teacher turnover cliff," says Doris Santoro, professor of education at Bowdoin College in Maine, districts and school leaders have to focus on structural change in schools beyond doing what is necessary to fill shortages” (Walker, 2021). This after school program will seek to serve as evidence for increased recess like free time opportunities in which students and teachers can get more opportunity for brain breaks and a chance to exhale. Through a promotion of health, we can start to have real conversations about the vitality of a merit-based system that has seemed to revel in making things challenging for its constituents through the constant lean towards grades and other measures deemed to separate us. As a nation, we tend to wait until the ultimate tragedy of school shootings occur to really start talking about mental health, but as long we don't put anything in place to manipulate time out of the redundancy of the everyday routines of school, we can never truly address the pressure that takes members of the school community towards doing taboo things that the outside society scoffs at the notion of it happening.

### **Key Program Components**

This section deals with how the program will be laid out for the year. The hope is to have a low pressure, high impact dichotomy that strips away the notion of people having to feel like they are adding increased responsibilities on their plate related to schoolwork. There will be no culminating events, each month of the school year will consist of three sessions that will be open enrollment, on a sign-up basis with no long-term contracts or

commitments necessary for students. The sessions will be focused on mental wellness, physical wellness, and social-emotional well-being.

### **Mental Sessions**

The mental wellness portions will consist of silent reflecting through the acts of meditation, as well as reflective writing sessions, that challenge the student to really think critically about their time in school in terms of the many ways that it plays an impact in life. In her book entitled *Wounded by School: Recapturing the Joy in Learning*, Kirsten Olsen states, “one of the ways school wounds us is by teaching us that we must wait passively until someone else does something about the conditions of our lives that make us unhappy” (p. 184). We have learned to grow comfortable with feeling outraged, over-worked, and discontented with our current standing, constantly looking for positive feedback and reinforcement through all we do. One needs to look no further than the rise of Instagram and why “like” counts were recently experimented in terms of its availability to the public by 2018. In Amy Chozick’s NY Times article entitled “This is the guy taking away the likes,” she mentions that Instagram started an initiative entitled “Project Daisy” aimed to de-pressure the app for its users encouraging that followers of a particular user stay focused on the content rather than the engagement of that person (Chozick,2020). Adam Mosseri, head of Instagram, had this to say about Instagram’s testing theory that hiding likes will increase post volume. In an article with CNBC, he is quoted as saying, “The idea is to try and depressurize Instagram, to make it less of a competition, give people more space to focus on connecting with the people they love and the things that inspire them” (Rodriguez, 2019).

Through reflections, openness, and the process of allowing oneself to mentally wander, we can re-think schooling as something to foster community instead of a track race

of competition. It is about letting go of the notion of needing to think in a certain way to get to a certain point. It is about understanding that places can represent calm, and not just be a barrier keeping you from getting where you feel like you are intended to go.

### **Physical Wanderings**

During these days, we will take our mindfulness approach out in the open world and go to space to wander around. These will consist of things like nature walks, scavenger hunts, taking photos, or going into space to do intense observation. It is about drawing inspiration and allowing oneself to genuinely appreciate the beauty of the immediate world around them. The beginning of the year will consist of walks around places that are close to the school, as the ending build of the program would be to think about ways in which we can wander affectively in larger spaces. The mindful meditation process should allow students to think about ways in which they can enhance their experience and challenge themselves. Zach Morgan is a writer, and editor in San Diego who has written a wonderful blog entitled *Reaping the Benefits of Wandering*. He is quoted as saying this about wandering,

It felt absolutely amazing. While the actual physical activity of walking certainly contributed to how good I felt, the main thing was that I had no obligations and no instructions I was chained to. I had no appointments to keep. I had no destinations to reach. I was allowed, for just an afternoon, to go where I wanted to go, explore where I wanted to explore. I could stop whenever I wanted to; there was no one I had to listen to.

It is about the idea of being able to get lost in time and become embellished by moments that could ignite us to carry on future endeavors.

As facilitators of the program, it is our duty to encourage students (and ourselves) to really do the act of physical wandering by themselves if they can. This act, being one that is unscripted without a clear end goal in mind, is a lot easier to do when you are not factoring someone else's emotional wellbeing. It is about coming to the realization that the actual act of being able to walk around is a luxury within itself given the health benefits that come along with staying active. Guided initial small group sessions with a facilitator, mixed in with personal sessions, will contribute to an ending goal of everyone being able to wander around as much as possible in a larger space among other people with the same intentions.

### **Play – Extended Recess**

Lastly, combining the mental and physical aspects of wandering through targeted walk, we can engage in healthy play in a recess like after school session filled with choices of activities for people to do. As facilitators, it is our job to bring items for our students that can foster exploration. Play at its core relies upon experimentation and serves as the positive product of doing mental and physical wandering. Daniel Greenberg, one of the founders of the previously discussed *Sudbury Valley School*, had a quote about the components that go into a person being in a playful mood. As stated by Greenberg (2021),

Play being an activity that is consciously driven, we must look to the mind's workings to get a handle on what drives play in all its forms. One of the characteristics of the mind is *awareness* – the ability to recognize and record the environment (both

external and internal). All animals possess some degree of awareness, as it is the mechanism by which they interact with their environments to survive. (p.1)

For me, this quote means that the more time we spend trying to disassociate ourselves from the world, we are missing chances to be truly playful, and in turn, without the act of playing, it is hard to find a certain joy in life. Environments are filled with history, culture, and innovation; always subject to change, when empowered by those that know it is innerworkings. When we try to separate ourselves, the world becomes something that does not make sense because we have not constructed our own framework through the act of playing. “Play symbolizes all the activities that are leading to the explosion of inventiveness and originality in every domain” (Greenberg, 2021). From our play, the cycle of mental reflection can begin again as we think about the ways in which we choose to interact with our environment. Can any of the things that we choose to play with lead to a meaningful life in the future? These are the big questions that can begin to be answered.

Below is a guide for facilitators that provides examples of each of these areas:

<b>Session</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Facilitator Notes</b>
Mental Wandering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meditation &amp; Yogs 10 mins</li> <li>• Discuss Places near School to Explore – 20 Mins</li> <li>• Discuss what we should look for as a group.</li> <li>• Discuss logistics for what we would need for the trip.</li> </ul>	<p>Try to figure out the current wounds of the students and the baggage you bring to school.</p> <p>Incorporate Ice Breakers for getting to know students. For example, running a game like 2 truths and a lie is a great 1<sup>st</sup> activity.</p>

Physical Wanderings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guided walking tours of famous historical landmarks. (Hour Session)</li> <li>• Before and After School 10-minute walks around the school.</li> <li>• Nature Hikes, going to different parks. (Hour Session)</li> </ul>	<p>Try to get students to revel in the moment, be hyper aware of their surroundings.</p> <p>Encourage them to interact with their environments and peers in ways that can bring joy in that space.</p>
Free Play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A chance for students and teachers alike to be in an environment that encourages recess like decision making.</li> <li>• Once people step into space, not a lot of directions are given.</li> <li>• The aim is to create a celebratory, carnival-like atmosphere that encourages a safe, welcoming space.</li> </ul>	<p>Try to include things that are not seen during recess.</p> <p>Ultimately, what would be the best kind of space at the school for people to wander around and feel comfortable exploring and playing?</p>

### Target Audience

I see this program working best for Middle Schoolers (Grades 6-8) that struggle staying still in class and have yet to find a particular area of interest. This age group is important because these are the kids that are old enough to walk by themselves and can truly be comfortable with moments of wandering by themselves. Also, at this age, the responsibility of walking by themselves is, in general, a new, exciting kind of concept. Having talks around safety and having an approach to walking that incorporates learning about your surrounding environment is a valuable safety tool that will help students at this



age reach that high-school maturity level. The emphasis on walking is also a helping steppingstone towards getting these youth interested in extra-curricular activities, through the mindset of the benefits of what staying active can do. Also, at this age, students begin to lose that playful imagination that they had as preschoolers, and during recess times, middle schoolers tend to constantly just stand around and “talk.” In an online article for the Hechinger Report entitled, “Play is Crucial for Middle Schoolers Too,” statistics show the decline in physical activity in adolescence. As cited by Samuels (2022),

A 2008 study in the Journal of the American Medical Association used accelerometers to capture the activity levels of youth from ages 9 to 15. Nine-year-olds, on average, engaged in three hours of moderate to vigorous activity on weekends and weekdays, well above the recommendation of 60 minutes a day from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The researchers found that activity levels plunged as children reached adolescence. By age 15, they were getting an average of 49 minutes on weekdays and 35 minutes on weekends.

As educators, we must want our kids to live enriching lives regardless of the scores that they produce in your classroom. Students must feel the same sensation of insatiable learning in their own environments. It is our chance to identify with the students in our given environment and ask, what does it mean to be a representative of it? These students are not just “our babies,” they are currently consumers in the global marketplace, and some are even rich business owners at a youthful age.

Passions often begin with a desire to help your given community when you recognize an area of need. We can bring joy to our students and ourselves by figuring out new ways to inspire them. Often, it is students at middle school age that are often slandered

with the common trope of being apathetic, dispirited individual only concerned about social media likes. Programs like these can start to shake that narrative that kids do not want to be kids anymore. While incorporating the physical aspects of play, middle-schoolers can also get the sense of what it means to be on a team through active planning. The possibilities of wander in your area can only stretch as far as the group is willing to cooperate, strategize and accommodate for all its constituents. Here, students are getting aspects of the kind of government council run at Sudbury Valley as through our mental wellness sessions, we can start to really begin with discussing how, and what is our purpose behind our walks. How do we stay safe? How do we accommodate everyone? How do we keep everyone engaged? How should we move in a certain space? What is the kind of spaces that we can create that will bring people into wander? Educators must allow an agency for the students to grapple with these kinds of questions.

## **Planning**

I envision a flexible program that incorporates the key program components of mental wellness, physical wandering, and free play. The mental wellness days can also serve as strategizing days for what people would like to do during their free time and where the group would like to physically wander. But it is less about time, and routine and more so about building experiences, and accomplishing end goals. The group may want to focus on a particular component for a week or break each component down on a month-by-month basis. The program is one that starts with mental wellness in the beginning of the year and transitions to physical wanderings as the year ends. If the program ties in all components and incorporates student agency/choice; it will serve its purpose.

## **Moving Forward**

This section speaks to some of the long-term goals of the program that will help bring joy into our schooling experience.

### **Wander Spaces**

One way this program can help bring joy to the entire school is through the creation of wander spaces. Days and areas that allow their peers to break and unwind in exploration. Exploration for the sake of it, celebrating the chance to go out in space, and be measured by what YOU do inside of it, not by how you are guided by it. Incorporating these kinds of *wander spaces* as opportunities for students and a place of agency for students will allow them to view schooling in another light. Often, in school, as teachers, we designate these areas as “calming corners” for our students to go to in case they need a designated break. Every student deserves the opportunity to become engulfed in a space that brings calm. For instance, if everyone in the program is passionate about foods from diverse cultures that they represent. A kind of *wander space* could be an eat around the world day in which students have an opportunity to go into different classrooms, and taste test foods from around the world.

### **More Free Time**

Ultimately, advocating for the expansion of free time on all fronts is what I think needs to happen. Given the recent rise in the trend of high stakes state testing and tracking, there has been immense pressure on educators to keep children inside of a structured schedule that is down to the very detail of when students go to the bathroom. It is about working with students to develop leadership qualities that will allow them to produce well

thought out plans that will enrich their school year. Recent staff shortages already cause an influx of free time, as substitute teachers struggle to make up ground that has been laid out by the previous instructor. When we open the space for free time on a larger scale for all students, the door of collaboration amongst educators starts to open and the pressure of one person trying to do everything for over 20 students becomes eased. Addressing staffing shortages in our schools, starts with systemic changes in the way most schools in America are run.

## Chapter Five

### Implementation and Evaluation

The anticipated timeline for The Wander Program should be based upon location. For example, if your school resides in the northeast, the best timeline for this program would be the early fall or spring months. This way, the group can incorporate more physical wandering in their program. The goal is to establish a feeling of safety first through initial meetings in which members of the program can just talk and/or relax with each other. Allowing the democratic process to take shape is key when thinking about future sessions under this program because it may take longer for other groups of students to gel. During this initial ice-breaking process the central lesson should be that we cannot operate under a free space if we are unaware of the rules and the people around us. Before taking part in free play and physical wandering, the central questions of how we move as a group should be understood and the rules comprised of the students and teachers. If we are engaged in some sort of free play and a conflict arises, the consequences should be drawn up and agreed upon by all members of the group. It is about building this sense of mental exploration before the physical wanderings occur. The program will falter once it starts to feel like a routine. Sessions may last longer or shorter on certain days. The culmination event should be one that is determined by the whole group.

#### **Institutional Approval/Community Involvement**

Facilitators of the program should meet with their administrators for a discussion about setting some preliminary ground rules for the physical wandering aspect of the program. The facilitator should already have some areas mapped out before the meeting to

provide a sense of vision. There should be a partnership between the administration and the facilitator to help get parent involvement. For trips that are of great distance from the school, the facilitator should be coordinating with administration. A selling point for stakeholders to invest in the program would be that it promotes student after-school physical activity without the pressure of having to join a sports team.

## **Evaluation**

The initial stages of the evaluation process begin with student and teacher participants engaging themselves with a baseline survey that has them honestly share their feelings about the residence in which they live or teach in. Every participant will be asked to grade various aspects of the residence in which they live or teach in, from Transportation, Schools, Parks, Housing, Food, Arts, History, Technology, etc.

Sample Survey:

1. What do you like most about this neighborhood?
  
2. Overall, how clean is this neighborhood?
  - Extremely clean
  - Very clean
  - Somewhat clean
  - Not so clean
  - Not at all clean
  
3. What types of activities would you participate in if they were available in this neighborhood?
  
4. Does this neighborhood have too many, too few, or about the right number of grocery stores?
  - Far too many
  - Too many
  - The right amount

- Too few
- Far too few

7. About how long have you lived in this neighborhood?

Years

Months

8. How much longer do you expect to live in this neighborhood?

Years

Months

9. How often do you visit the public parks in this neighborhood?

- Very often
- Somewhat often
- Not so often
- Not at all often

10. Do you think there are too many neighborhood events, too few neighborhood events, or the right amount of neighborhood events?

- Far too many
- Too many
- The right amount
- Too few
- Far too few

Students will be then asked to participate in several written reflections throughout the program. In these reflections, they will write down observations and will start to try to figure out aspects of their environment in which they are particularly drawn to. The ending question for facilitators to ask when evaluating the program would be, what is the level of connection that the students have with their immediate surroundings? Can students and teachers find areas in their school environment that can provide a sense of comfort and joy? Students will be tasked to think about some of the advantages (and disadvantages) of being more observant of their local residence. Another central question would be, what is our

relationship with free time and maintaining that connection with our outside world? In the times in which we are freely choosing things to do, are we looking to isolate or engrain ourselves in society? Over time, the reflections should represent a deep thought process about their relationship with the place considered home.

Students and teacher participants would take another survey at the end of the school year before the program leader would begin analyzing the responses and looking for changes over time. The student writing reflections will also be analyzed for evidence of student growth. In particular, the leader would review student writing with the following questions in mind:

- Is there evidence that students have redefined what they see about their environment?
- Is there evidence that students are thinking about the different ways we interact in specific settings?
- Is there evidence that students have thought about the kind of spaces we would like to see in our schools?
- Is there evidence that students have identified places that bring out emotions such as reliance, compassion, curiosity, and a sense of strength?
- Is there evidence that students have established a love for their environment and an optimistic view that keeps everyone involved in a democratic process?

Once this analysis is completed, the program leader will share the findings with the group and engage in a reflective discussion about what should stay the same and what should be changed in the program. This process would take place each year so that the



student and teacher participants feel connected to the future of the program and invested in its success.

### **Limitations**

The overall challenge for a program such as this would be figuring out the right kind of teacher-student ratio that would make sense. The perfect combination that allows for student voice to flourish without too much guidance and sway from the instructor. Figuring out the optimal number of people involved will be an ongoing point of evaluation moving forward. The program must be willing to be flexible to meet high demand.

Student attendance is also a variable that serves as a limitation. Unforeseen circumstances might cause students to miss weeks of the program. These fluctuations in attendance may serve as a deterrent from the community like atmosphere that is trying to be established. The program must also be prepared to make the most with a small teacher to student ratio.

Meeting desires and gathering materials for students to engage with is a critical concern. The facilitator should be steering the group towards attainable goals that could be built upon for larger endeavors in the future. Funding for programs like these is inseparably linked to the overall spending budget of the school, and community support that can help provide money towards extra-curricular activities. Figuring out a way the group can be innovative and create an atmosphere of choice with the number of resources available will be important in attaining sustainable success.

## Looking Ahead

I would love to see the basic principles of mental wellness, physical wandering, and free play embedded in the curriculum of all American schools. The program seeks to influence ways in which we can decenter the teacher and allow for a community-like atmosphere inside of the classroom. The history described in chapter 3 tells us that incorporating these aspects in daily lessons will not be an easy task. We need to erase the narrative of a good teacher being one that has everything organized, is an expert in their content, and can transfer certain skills to students. We need to define and evaluate ourselves as educators that work to build authentic relationships born out of curiosity, exploration, and play. When we discuss issues of classroom management, how much of it is simply children trying to play and break away from structured routines? Are we working towards helping the youth make their childhood one full of rich experiences or are we trying to scare students into obedience? Concepts like recess should not be seen as a brain break for teachers to simply check out. Instead, these kinds of times should be expanded, and prioritized as a learning moment for educators in the schooling space. We can truly be responsive to the needs of children when we take a step back, observe, ask questions, and see where their passions lie. As Kane (2012) suggests, “Play will be to the 21st century what work was to the industrial age—our dominant way of knowing, doing, and creating value.”

If the program is successful, I could see the components being adopted by administrators to use for professional development. These days will be centered around healing, agency, and exploration. Garnering a vision that puts joy through exploration at the fore front. I can also envision a contingent of likeminded educators working to form a non-profit organization that partners up with similar programs and schools that align with the

vision. Having a set number of staff dedicated to the vision on a yearly basis will allow for the opportunity of some long-term goals. Overall, if districts can start measuring success for schools by the experiences of joy that it is able to create for our students, the narrative of what it takes to truly reform education will be re-written.



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