Reflections on a Decade in Education: Professional Tributaries, Graduate Coursework, and an Ongoing Commitment to Creating Necessary Change in Public Education

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Contents

Governing Question:

How have the salient moments of my career and graduate coursework contributed to my interest in creating meaningful change in education and my commitment to professional life-long learning moving forward?

Abstract:

This report chronicles the development of my commitment to exploring radical change in education in an effort to provide students with the skills necessary to define, and achieve, *their* vision of success in a time of accelerated societal shifts. As I approach a decade in the field, my interests have organically developed and focused on the areas of adolescent development, educational access and policy, and the larger impacts of the accelerated time in which we live. The nature of the Learning, Teaching, & Educational program has provided a framework to dig deeper into these areas to varying degrees through my coursework. As part of my capstone, I have ruminated on my career and graduate work chronologically, to reflect on *how* and *why* my focus areas connect, and to reaffirm my commitment to life-long learning as I leave the structure of graduate school. I believe meaningful, innovative, and effective preparation for our students can only be achieved by radical, sweeping, and strategic changes in the way we think about, and define, student success. Educational policy over the past several decades has been the equivalent of 'educational fracking', when we should actually be working towards 'educational solar power'. Creative rethinking of pedagogy and policy, will continue to shape my professional work beyond the LTET program, and as I close this chapter of graduate studies it is essential to take stock of where I have been, in order to think about where I will go from here.

Professional and Academic Tributaries

The Giver, by Lois Lowry, is a young adult novel which was a part of the ELA

curriculum when I was an 8th grade teacher. One of the last lessons in the curricular unit

involved reading and analyzing Lowry's 1994 Newbury Award acceptance speech. In beautiful

detail, Lowry shares how the story came to be as a result of pivotal moments and lessons

throughout her own life.

> *"Every author is asked again and again the question we probably each have come to dread the*
> *most: HOW DID YOU GET THIS IDEA? We give glib, quick answers because there are other*
> *hands raised, other kids in the audience waiting. I'd like, tonight, to dispense with my usual*
> *flippancy and glibness and try to tell you the origins of this book. It is a little like Jonas looking*
> *into the river and realizing that it carries with it everything that has come from an Elsewhere. A*
> *spring, perhaps, at the beginning, bubbling up from the earth; then a trickle from a glacier; a*
> *mountain stream entering farther along; and each tributary bringing with it the collected bits and*
> *pieces from the past, from the distant, from the countless Elsewheres: all of it moving, mingled, in*
> *the current." (Lowry, 1994)*

Throughout my career in education, and subsequent graduate work in the Learning,

Teaching, and Educational Transformation program at Umass Boston, there have been many

tributaries of experience and observation which have brought me to the present. As I began to

think about my capstone project early in the semester, I thought quite a bit about my work in

education both professionally and academically. Lowry brilliantly used the image of individual

tributaries leading into a larger river, each one adding to the collective 'whole' of experiences.

Using the same analogy seems a fitting way to frame, and ultimately, to reflect on, why I have

focused on adolescent development, educational policy, and the technological renaissance in

which we live. These three areas of focus developed over years, and began mutually exclusive of

one another. As I approached the end of my graduate work, I began to consider connections between them. Over time I became more interested in the in varying ways they potentially influenced and/or impacted one another. It is important to note: I believe that all of my experiences in education, academically and professionally, have value. It would be impossible to include each one, so I have selected some of the most consequential and influential as examples tributaries that have brought me to the present.

The Path to Learning, Teaching, and Educational Transformation

When I began teaching in 2007, I thought I would be in the classroom until I retired. In 2011, I started an MeD program at University of Massachusetts Boston on the General Education/certification track. Soon after I began my first class, I had to put school on hold due to my mother's illness. After taking some time away from the program, focused on her treatment and care, I was able to turn my attention back to school. During the period when I put my studies on hold, much had changed in regard to the intended trajectory of my career in the classroom. There was not one single moment which made me rethink my career within education, there were observations and situations of varying depth which evolved over years. As I began my capstone in the fall, I began to read through my work to in an effort to distill how and what to incorporate in my final project. Reviewing my work chronologically provided an unanticipated clarity, I recognized an almost chain-reaction in my thinking. Once I began to shape my course work to focus on aspects of education that I was drawn to, and intrigued by, my path became more evident, and the passion and excitement for my areas of began to surface. Rereading my application essay for the first time since 2011, a particular passage provided a bit of foreshadowing:

"The young adults that I have now in my classroom have the potential to be the community leaders of tomorrow. They have the potential to be whoever they want to be, they need to be encouraged, and they need to be believed in. I want the students that pass through my class each year to connect with the curriculum, their peers, and most importantly: I want them to connect with themselves, to begin to understand the limitless potential that their future holds. I am in my third year as an educator. I have learned more during these fast moving years, more than I could have imagined. I have learned how to manage a classroom. I have learned that my colleagues are my best resource. I have learned to expect the unexpected. I have learned that a school day can turn from good to bad, and from bad to good in an instant. I have learned that this generation of children have adult pressures placed upon them, and those pressures can very easily spill into the classroom, and impact their education. I have learned that I am a good teacher, with the potential to be great.

 Aside from all the things that I have learned I know there is so much more that that I need to know to be the best. I know that I have many lessons to learn in my classroom, and I also know there are many lessons that I can take from a University of Massachusetts classroom. I consider myself a lifelong learner, and look forward to continuing my education."

When I wrote my application essay, I was not thinking about anything other than being a teacher, but in retrospect I was beginning to contemplate some of the questions which would ultimately led me in a different direction within the field. References to student experience as it relates to the curriculum, and the need to consider outside influences of our changing society immediately stood out to me as the subtle beginnings of some larger questions that would develop later in my studies and career. Leaving the classroom was one of the most difficult decisions I have made in my life through the present. I loved teaching, and I still miss being with students every day, but the current of my tributaries led me to unexpected places. After the end of the school year in 2013, I began the next chapter of my career with The Steppingstone Foundation. Steppingstone is a non-profit focused on placing underrepresented Boston Public School students into exam or Independent Schools, my primary role was advising students and their families during the placement process. Secondary roles included curriculum writing, design and implementation of professional development, and seasonal faculty hiring and training. In

2014, I officially changed my graduate studies into the Learning, Teaching, and Educational

Transformation Med program, and serendipitously was able to transfer my first two graduate

courses into the LTET program. Most recently in the spring of 2016, I accepted a position at the

Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston. My work is centered around faculty training

and curriculum writing for an online program being piloted through the Stepping Up to

Technology grant issued by the Federal Office of Special Education.

Professional Tributaries & Salient Moments

My first position in education was at St. Ann's School in Dorchester, Massachusetts. My

position was teaching social studies for grades 6,7,8. I had just received my preliminary

certification, it was only a few weeks before the school year, it was the only the second position I

had interviewed for. My undergraduate degree was in English Literature, and I had spent the 5

years since graduation in healthcare. Needless to say, I simultaneously felt excited and terrified

to have my own classroom. The spring before I began teaching, I spent several days in the

classroom of a high school friend who taught at a K-8 school in the South End of Boston.

Volunteering there was something I would do from time to time, long before I decided to

become an educator myself, so over the course of a few years I got to know his colleagues.

During my visit in the spring of 2007, I found myself chatting with the 4th grade teacher. She

had been teaching for 35 years, she was no nonsense, she had a wickedly funny but dry sense of

humor...someone my Nana would have called 'a hot ticket'. She originated from Brooklyn, and

her accent and affect reminded me of a (female) Larry David. Our conversation that afternoon

was one I would come back to as the current of my career began to shift years later.

"Sooooo Meaghan, I hear you're gonna be a teacher? " she began, "You're gonna change kids lives, huh??" I believe I replied with some version of 'yes, I hope so..' She continued, "Well, good luck to you. I think you'll be great. Really. But lemmie give you a little piece of advice…" she leaned in close, tilted her chin down, raised her eyebrows conspicuously, and looked me in the eye over the frames of her bifocals. "You wanna help those kids? You gotta get through the adults first." She patted me on the shoulder in a dramatic way that felt reminiscent of a movie cliche, like an old war worn general giving advice to a young naive recruit, who had not yet been hardened by battle. As I walked away I thought to myself, 'Jesus Christ, she's more cynical than I thought.', and didn't give it a second thought until two years later.

After my first year teaching at parochial school, I was hired to teach 8th grade ELA at a public school in a small seaside town south of Boston. Unlike most towns on the coast of Massachusetts, this particular town was socioeconomically diverse, we hovered around 30-35% of students on free and reduced lunch in my five years with the district. I began teaching just as the district began to feel the impact of No Child Left Behind which had been passed in 2001, and by the time I left the classroom in 2013, we had been cut to the bone.

My first years in the classroom were magic. Unicorns, Narnia, Hogwarts kind of magic. Don't get me wrong, it was challenging, I came into the field with no pedagogical preparation, no experience with classroom management...there was a steep learning curve. I leaned into it, I took to it, I had discovered my purpose and my passion. Each passing day provided valuable experience and lessons. Small victories led to larger ones and I was finding my footing. As motivated and satisfied as I was in my ELA classroom, I became discouraged by the cuts that bookended each academic year. I slowly realized that No Child Left Behind was about as

inaccurate as they come as a policy description. In my opinion, the policy itself left all students behind. Students were left behind because the nature of the policy left them behind, the priority was clearly not student centered, it was data centered. Soon, just about everything in the building either came second to, or was a casualty of, Math and ELA MCAS test preparation.

<u>Positions Cut 2008-2013</u>
- Vice Principal
- One special educator
- Two paraprofessionals
- The entire social studies faculty
- One custodial position
- Librarian
- All foreign language positions
- Music and art were both made a .8
- The health teacher retired, so they rolled that curriculum into physical education

The cuts allowed portions of our budget allocated to new math and English faculty positions, specifically MCAS prep. All students in grades 7 & 8 were required to take MCAS prep in math and ELA classes in addition to the standard curriculum in the subjects. Reading specialists were hired to work with students' whose testing was consistently 'needs improvement'. Hundreds of workbooks were purchased so students could be better prepared for math and ELA MCAS tests. When I began there, professional development had been something I not only looked forward to, but benefited from. By the time I left, it had exclusively been used to 'unpack' and 'repack' data, hours of analysis with chart paper and markers. When I began the school's climate and culture was energized, collaborative, and positive- there was a sense of community among the students, faculty and administration. Each year though, with every cut, the shift was palpable. While I was teaching at the parochial school, there was no pressure on the

students, staff or administration around high stakes testing. Students took the Terra Nova in the fall, but those scores did not define our student and they did not define our school. The scores were used as they should be: one piece of information among many that provided a collective glimpse into certain skill sets of students. It was over the course of the 2009-2010 academic year that I began to hear the faint but immediately recognizable Brooklyn accent of Gloria in the back of my mind, recalling the cryptic advice she doled out like a soothsayer just two years before. During the remainder of my time in the classroom, Gloria's advice began to seem less a cynical warning, and more a salient observation. In my remaining time in the classroom, I became increasingly concerned and critical of educational policy, primarily its impact on the overall climate and culture of schools, underrepresented student populations, and the message it sends to all students about the criteria with which we define success and failure.

As I stated previously: there were many tributaries that led to the decision to leave the classroom, but there was one tipping point. Looking back, I think that this experience was a tipping point because it affected me in a deeply personal way. A way that started a bit of fire within me, not to put too dramatic a point on it,

"I had a student who had been in my district since Kindergarten. He loved school, he enjoyed it, he was always encouraging to his peers. He was a student who stood up for everyone, he was friends with everyone, and I really mean everyone. He was enthusiastic every time he was in my classroom. He was essentially illiterate. This young man would volunteer to read in class. Volunteer. It was painful, but he tried. I had never seen anything like this, and it was happening in my classroom. Within the first month of the year, when I realized that he needed a lot more help than he was getting, I went to my principal. I was livid. How can a child be a part of this district and not one person has noticed this? I am not exaggerating when I tell you I went Norma Ray; I went Karen Silkwood level- ballistic in that office. After I was done, my boss very casually said, "Well, Meg, sometimes kids fall through the cracks." And that was the end of it. I left his office knowing it would be my last as a classroom teacher. There were a lot of other moments that led me to that decision, but this was my tipping point. I did have his mother request academic testing, and he was diagnosed with dyslexia. He was able to start high school with an IEP. But,

for the rest of my life, I will wonder what would have happened if someone had intervened earlier." (Carroll-Rateau, Unpublished, 2016)

How did this happen? How did a student get *that* far and no one noticed? What did this student's story, my boss's reaction, the failure of his previous teachers, say about what was prioritized and focused on in the public system? This was the first time I sincerely conflicted about the profession I loved so much. This was the moment I decided to research careers beyond the classroom, and discovered the LTET program at UMass Boston. Through my graduate coursework in LTET, I have been able to explore some of my inherent concerns and questions around educational policy and high stakes testing and how we define student success and failure in the 21st century public educational system.

Tributaries and Salient Moments of Academic Coursework

Learning Teaching & Educational Transformation was appealing as it was designed to explore careers in education outside of classroom instruction, and would allow me to choose areas within the field to focus my coursework on. My course of study was centered around: student needs in the 21st century, school culture and policy, organizational change, and technology. I have included below salient tributaries and exhibits from my LTET work which brought me to a deeper level of understanding within my focus areas, and my work in the field. Coursework from my early graduate studies was not able to be recovered from an antiquated laptop, however I have provided a brief reflection of their contributions to my overall graduate work.

I.   *2011 - Sociocultural Foundations*

Sociocultural Foundations was an introduction to cultural experiences and considerations that educators must be mindful of. My own experience as a student of public education was not diverse demographically or through the curriculum. At this point in my *professional* career my experience with diversity within the student population was socioeconomic, but not racial or cultural. The Steppingstone Foundation was my first experience working with a racially and culturally diverse student population, and my work in this course provided a base of knowledge and understanding that contributed to my work with underrepresented students and families.

II.   *2013- Advanced Negotiation and Mediation*

Advanced Negotiation and Mediation was one of the most unique classroom experiences from the entirety of my post-secondary studies, due in part to the instructors. Stacy Smith and Doug Thompson both worked at The Consensus Building Institute, in Cambridge Massachusetts. Both were active mediators with diverse field experience that spanned the globe, and they shared processes and outcomes using examples from their own work. Although the case studies we explored in class were not centered around educational issues, the mediation strategies can be applied within our field.

III.   2014- Collaboration & Organizational Change

Collaboration & Organizational Change explored mindful and diverse approaches to create and maintain successful workplace relationships. At the time, I was with The Steppingstone Foundation, a place where collaboration occurred daily, and organizational change was happening through new program initiatives. It was tremendously beneficial to apply some of the strategies right out of the classroom, and in doing so I believe I was able to connect to the content in a deeper way. As I look ahead to my career, the processes and approaches to collaboration and organizational change will certainly contribute to my exploration of meaningful change in education.

IV.   2015 - Race Culture & Human Services

Work in this course introduced me to the complexities of acculturation, assimilation, and amalgamation as they relate to human services. Through course readings and discussion, we explored obstacles and identified the needs of underrepresented populations served. Within the public school system, student populations will continue to become more diverse and it is essential to account for, and address, each of our students' unique Ecological Systems. Student experiences are as diverse as our students themselves, and public education must be mindful and inclusive in our approach to policy and pedagogy.

Thinking, Learning, & Computers led to a salient and unexpected revelation about the lens with which I had viewed the relationship between technology, adolescents, and the classroom. The lens I was looking through was not one of objectivity, but one that was quite frankly, one of cocky assumption and emotional frustration. The nature of Critical and Creative Thinking classes is a unique one, which requires iterative reflection and development of thinking over the course of the semester. Through this process, I recognized how difficult it had become to maintain objectivity between professional observations and personal feelings when it came to my career. Education is a deeply personal field, and having passion for the work is an absolute necessity. Education *should* be personal. There is a difference between passion and emotion however, and they can easily and subtly influence one another for better or worse. It was an important lesson that will remain with me throughout my career. All aspects of being an educator require an 'active' process: curriculum development and evaluation, professional development, classroom management- every hat we wear. Recognizing the line between passion and emotion also requires an active process of periodic self-assessment and reflection.

<u>*Statement on Lifelong Learning*</u>

Lifelong learning is a key principal within all aspects of my career. Specifically, within the educational field, keeping pace with technological trends that not only impact the social and cognitive development of students, as well as technology that can support them in the classroom, is a crucial part of professional development and understanding.

I think the challenge of life-long learning as we grow professionally and chronologically is to resist becoming jaded. That is something that I don't think is discussed enough. When working with children and their families, the objective is to prepare our students for their futures. For me, I am angry about what I don't understand in education. Curriculum that teaches to the test, underfunded schools, inequitable access, children that are clearly 'left behind' despite what the policy suggested.

Due to my experience and passion for my craft I have recently been critical first, and open-

minded second, when it comes to education. That is not the attitude of a true life-long learner. In all honesty, what I expected in this course is 180 degrees from what I gained. I assumed that my opinions would be validated. What I learned and gained was quite the opposite. Technology in education not only has a place, but it is an area that can benefit students and educators in ways I had never considered. I had associated technology with the deficit of higher level thinking skills that I have experienced in the course of my career. Ultimately though I was wrong: it is policy not technology that is the problem. It is the way we underutilize the medium. To truly remain a life-long learner, it is essential to remember the person I was in my twenties: not initially skeptical, but a person who is curious and optimistic about the unknown. A person who considers everything with an open mind, and crafts opinion from a neutral starting point. Of course our experiences will shape perceptions, but a true life-long learner is always open to changing opinions. It is a natural selection of sorts: if you don't adapt creatively you will be left behind.

Lifelong learning is always on the periphery of my conciseness when it comes to my personal and professional evolution. Admittedly I have not thought about the development of own relationship with lifelong learning in some time. A common thread woven through all vocations is the necessity to evolve and stay current. Specifically thinking about technology, the evolution from the mid 1990s through the present has touched every aspect of society with unparalleled force and momentum. In order to develop within a career, it has become essential to become a life-long learner of technology and digital collaboration.

VI.   2015 - Data Based Planning

The most valuable take away from Data Based Planning was a deeper appreciation of formative versus summative assessment. Formative assessments are quick, effective, and allow educators to recognize gaps in understanding throughout the unit, versus just the mid and end points. Although I completed coursework over the spring of 2015, an unfortunate and unexpected knee break put the development of my final curricular unit was put on hold for a bit. The benefit: I was able to incorporate some of what I gained in Child Development as a framework for my curriculum design, which I believe made for a more meaningful approach to create *Boy in the Striped Pajamas* unit. The curriculum was rooted in daily essential questions, as well as Harkness discussions at several key points of the unit. Exhibits from the final project include the approach and overview of the unit, designed for grade 7 ELA students using MA Frameworks.

Approach to Curriculum Development:

When developing curriculum, I subscribe to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximately Development, it is essential that the bar be set between what a student is capable of independently, and what they are capable of with support. Stephanie Harvey, who I was serendipitously introduced to my first year teaching, has also heavily influenced my approach to curriculum content and delivery. Being challenged and finding success are not mutually exclusive. Classrooms that succeed encourage, inspire, acknowledge and challenge the individual student by meeting them where they are at, and helping them grow from there. Successful educators value the climate and culture of their classroom, as much as they value the content. The environment an educator, and school community, creates is essential to the student experience. What I know to be true: achieving what I have outlined above is not a pipe dream. I don't live on Walton's Mountain, and I'd rather have a root canal than sit through Freedom Writers again. Creating equability and access within education is not only possible, it is our obligation.

Unit Overview:

This unit is designed for grade eight ELA. Although Boy in the Striped Pajamas is rated at a reading level of 5.8, it is an effective novel for the purposes of this unit. Anchoring the unit with a book which is accessible and digestible for eighth grade students, allows the curriculum to explore the essential questions posed by making higher level connection through writing and discussion. Furthermore, because the level of prose in the book is easily digestible the curriculum unit can introduce a variety of fiction and non-fiction resources which support a deeper understanding of the larger historical context and sociological themes that surround the Holocaust and WWII. When I approach ELA curriculum I am always rooted in the 'text to text, text to self, text to world' connections students need to make to fully understand the 'why'. It is important to be transparent with students, to be explicit with them in explaining what we are doing and why we are doing it.

VII.   *2016 - Action Research for Educational, Professional or Personal Change*

Action Research is a method I will use moving forward in my career to explore

educational topics professionally and/or personally. Using a process of cycles and epicycles was

agreeable to my own learning processes, and I felt that it allowed me to be creative and reflective

while remaining 'on track'. My research centered around access to technology in the classroom,

and digital literacy of educators.

Excerpt from Action Research Final Report

During my time in the classroom, and with Steppingstone, I began to notice trends among students with whom I worked. I noticed that there was a sense of urgency which seemed to be omnipresent. The best way to describe it was a perpetual state of 'hurry up and wait'. Students would be downright puzzled when trying to approach questions with no 'right' or 'wrong' answer. Instead of taking a few moments to deduce answers to questions asked both in and out of class, Google would immediately be consulted like some sort of modern day oracle. And like many oracles from the ancient past, the first answer provided would be lauded as correct without an ounce of scrutiny or skepticism.

I have oscillated in my thinking for years now. I have never really tried to put them down on paper though. Some of the questions I have concretely identified as I have gone through the Action Research process are:

- *Is this just part of the life cycle of generational evolution?*
- *Am I now that age where I have inadvertently developed an ornery 'kids these days' attitude?*
- *Are we a species adapting our thinking processes to thrive in a digital jungle of our own creation?*
- *Has technology developed too quickly to appropriately understand how to wield it?*

VIII.   *2016 - Developmental Stages: Childhood - Adolescence*

Developmental Stages was undoubtedly one of the most valuable in my coursework, as I holistically consider my graduate studies. Adolescent development theory is an essential component in the discussion of radical change within public education and educational policy. Particularly, the work of Erickson, Bronfrenbrenner, and Piaget resonated with me, and brought me to a deeper level of understanding of how culture and society shapes adolescent thinking and learning. Studying Piaget's theory around equilibrium provided a compelling platform to consider the effect of our societal shifts on generally accepted adolescent development theory.

Excerpt from Critical Analysis of Piaget's Developmental Theory
Piaget's thoughts on the notion of equilibrium within his theories of development are problematic when viewed through the lens of my experience as an eighth grade ELA teacher. When considering his first notion of equilibrium, how a student rectifies disequilibrium is important. How a student brings assimilation and accommodation back into balance matters. When a student enters middle school, their social relationships develop and change due to a number of factors: size of the student body, variety of classes, the onset of puberty, and

growing desire for autonomy are among the most obvious. Consider this arguably common middle school social scenario: Let's say for example 'Amy' begins a new middle school after moving to another town. Amy has had a positive social experience thus far in school, and had a group of peers she considered her best friends. Her experiences have conditioned her to be immediately trusting of the students at her new school, as she hasn't had an experience, which would dictate otherwise, her schema. At her new school she initially approaches peer relationships similarly, assimilation. When Amy realizes something she shared in confidence to a new classmate has been shared with others, Amy understands that she can't approach relationships the same way she always has, accommodation.

In theory Piaget's conclusion about finding equilibrium within the stages of development is accurate and transferable into current times. However, the nuances of social development have an element that Piaget could not have anticipated: digital communication and social media. In my own middle school years, much of my social development, including finding equilibrium was a direct result of face-to-face social interaction and experience. Understanding and reacting to non-verbal communication is an essential part of development, specifically when it comes to social development. Applying Piaget's theories when analyzing equilibrium in today's middle school students provokes a number of questions for me: Would Amy have reached the point of accommodation in the same way if the social interaction she had experienced up to that point was digital? If that situation played out through a keyboard and across a screen as opposed to face to face: what is the impact on moral development for all parties involved? I have concerns about how today's adolescents' social cognition and quest for equilibrium are impacted by the digital nature of the time in which we live. Achieving successful assimilation and accommodation are inherently tied to face-to-face interaction; a child's ability to find social equilibrium may be at minimum changed, and at maximum atrophied, by exposure to digital and social media.

Piaget asserts that, 'The most complete equilibrium is achieved when formal operations bring fully reversible and abstract thought.' (Miller, Theories of Developmental Psychology, 67) The textbook definition of abstract thought does not seem to have changed much since Piaget's time, what has changed are the tools available and social environment with which children and adolescents procure information, and the social dynamics of peer relationships. If we were to compare how 'abstract thought' could potentially manifest itself in the classroom prior to the 2000s, and what it looks like today, it would be different. Arguing which manifestation is 'better' or 'worse' is a decidedly complex question to consider. As educators we are operating in an unprecedented time: Educational policy is driven by high stakes testing and data. Technological developments are unparalleled; perpetually changing, and most American children are exposed to a slurry of screens well before they enter a classroom. I wonder if Piaget's developmental stages are being met, but in a 'mile wide, and inch deep' sense.

There, to my knowledge, has been little to no research done which considers developmental impacts on children who are simultaneously socially and cognitively 'plugged in' from birth, and educated with a curriculum focused on quantitative not qualitative concepts. As educators I believe we are stalled in our own development, we are approaching our own schemas and trying to assimilate our traditional approach instead of recognizing how much our world has changed and accommodating accordingly. We can't go back to a

time when students would do most of their research at the library, or when social relationships were built primarily on face-to-face interaction with peers. What would ultimately benefit educators, and educational theory is to revisit Piaget's stages of development and approach our own theories and practices around curriculum, climate, and culture of a school accordingly. The old adage: 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it' springs to mind. It is essential as educators to identify what is broken. Is it an antiquated and arguably culturally obtuse theory, or is it a system that can't seem to adapt to the times in which we live?

IX.   *2016 - Anti-Racist and Multicultural Education*

Public education does have a long way to go when it comes to *true* inclusivity. I have many criticisms of No Child Left Behind however, it has at the very least, brought inclusion into the conversation in regard to serving all students. Inclusion is a term primarily associated with special education, but should also be a consideration in providing a truly multicultural curriculum for all students. The final paper for this course was a personal and insightful one. We were tasked with interviewing two people of different generations to critically explore how multicultural education had or had not evolved. Serendipitously, I interviewed two openly gay men who grew up in the same town 40 years apart, my uncle, and a former student who was about to graduate high school. It was also the district where I taught grade 8 ELA, so I had a preexisting knowledge of the climate and culture of the town. Growing up in an arguably sheltered suburban 'bubble' was a vastly different experience for my former student than it was for my uncle in the 1960's, and even myself in the 1990's. Connectivity creates inclusivity, and has changed how students interact and understand the larger world around them. Educators need to leverage this connectivity when possible, to ensure that students are able to contextualize, discern, and safely navigate our connected world so they can better understand themselves.

Why was the bubble more isolating for Michael and I as students of the 1960's and 1990's? Technology. The renaissance of smart technology and the Internet has poked holes in the bubble to let more light in. Don't get me wrong, the bubble is still present. However, the technological revolution has provided an outlet with which adolescents can explore and learn about the world and the larger global community. We can more easily shine light on injustice. Students who find themselves in the minority can find at least some support and community online. In the vein of curriculum, smart technology provides seemingly limitless resources to support inclusion and diversity within our classrooms. One thing I know to be true: our experiences in school are impacted by the time and place in which we live. We are in a time of change. The world is a lot 'bigger' today than it was in the 1960's and 1990's. It is far easier to expose racism and ignorance. It is far easier to access history that goes beyond the 'Eurocentric', white male experience. The hurdle we still need to jump is inclusion of true multicultural education within our curriculum. Mitigating racism and ignorance, and imbedding a truly multicultural approach is essential moving forward in public education.

X. 2016 -Human Service Policy

Through the core assignment in this course I was able to explore the the practical and ethical implications of No Child Left behind, and propose hypothetical ways to improve the policy. It is my assertion that NCLB, and more recently, Every Student Succeeds Act do not provide an adequate platform to prepare students academically, socially, creatively, and emotionally for success as they consider post-secondary options. A particularly salient moment in the development of my thinking centered around the digital literacy skills of students entering the classroom. Leveraging and incorporating methodologies around their existing skill sets could be a pivotal and beneficial shift in developing skills to navigate 21st century careers. Secondarily, leveraging the digital literacy of our student population to support more quantitative curricular frameworks potentially could free up time within the school day. Students would have more meaningful opportunities to explore critical and creative projects, and subject areas which have been left behind due to current policies.

Excerpt from Assignment #2: Analysis of the History, Ethics, and Outcomes of NCLB

Within the LTET program I have explored educational reform, underrepresented students, as well as and adolescent development. Effective educational reform will only be achieved when we address how our society and culture has evolved over the last twenty years. Humans have not experienced such a rapid evolution of technological advancements since the Industrial Revolution, and even that comparison seems to be apples and oranges. This is uncharted territory. Students are entering the classroom will a digital literacy skills set which did not exist 5, 10, 15 years ago. Students can navigate smart technology with ease, before they can write a paragraph, or master the multiplication tables. We can no longer ignore the scope and complexity of access and inequity. There is a place for data. The lesson of NCLB is that the data is not our students, that our students are far more than the subgroups to which they fall into. We are educating individuals, with unique personalities, experiences, challenges, and needs. NCLB's biggest misstep is that in trying to help all students succeed, we lost sight of what our individual students need, they became numbers, labels, and statistics and in doing so, the policy failed the students it had hoped to help.

<u>Salient Research & Reflections</u>

The goal of my research and final report was not centered around finding precise answers, connections, and conclusions to address my broad concerns within education. The scope of my interests and curiosity is far too broad to synthesize within this paper, what I have attempted through research in CRCRTH 692, is a deeper level of understanding with which I can continue to peruse moving forward. I could potentially spend the entirety of my career exploring the 'ingredients' needed to create an effective educational structure which accounts for the changes in how our society connects, communicates, and consumes information. Taking stock of the larger societal shifts is particularly consequential due to the very population public education serves. Schools not only provide an academic preparation, they are an essential component in the emotional and social development of students as well. I assert that public education will need to critically and creatively reprioritize, restructure, and redefine itself in order to best serve our students and our larger society. As I come to the end of my graduate studies, it is necessary to to try to 'close the loop' of my LTET experience through research. Essentially, through my research I sought a final analysis of my focus areas as a graduate student. There is a relationship between our schools, technological acceleration, and child development, and I will continue to seek out the connections throughout my career. The research, writing, and reflection I have done in CRCRTH 692 has been an important step as I begin to create a foundation for moving into the next chapter of my career in the field.

Surprisingly, there is still minimal long-term research addressing how evolving technologies, and cultural and societal shifts impact adolescent development and cognition. Although there seems to be a general consensus that research is warranted and overdue:

" Furthermore, the majority of experimental studies investigating possible links be-tween Internet use and cognition have been conducted on adults or undergraduate college students. In order to understand how near–constant access to the Inter-net could affect memory or the cognitive strategies of adolescents, future studies should include samples of younger participants. Finally, some concerns about Internet use have yet to be addressed in survey or experimental research. For example, we do not know how having near-constant access to the Internet, especially through mobile devices, might displace time left alone to one's own thoughts (e.g., on the bus or in a queue)…., early reviews examining the relationship between Internet use and social development focused on evidence from investigations of chat room or instant messaging activities (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009), whereas more recent re views have focused on evidence from investigations of social media use. While both older and newer reviews on this topic suggest that online behaviors involving offline friends have the capability of strengthening relationships during adolescence, newer reviews were able to integrate more evidence to suggest baseline social skills increase the chance for adolescents to reap the benefits of social media use (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014). Given the lack of older re-views on the topic of how Internet use affects cognitive development, the results of the current review could not be integrated into previous syntheses of the literature." (Mills, K. L. (2016)).

Research centered around adolescents and connectivity will be a necessary undertaking. Moving forward, outcomes and statistically significant findings around adolescents and connectivity will be crucial in creating meaningful changes in education. Until we begin to better understand the larger implications of accelerated change on our students, it will remain a challenge to determine how best to move forward.

Better understanding past perspectives and methodologies implemented throughout the evolution of our educational system can provide deeper understanding of the logistics, considerations, challenges, and innovations needed in the future. Looking deeply into past practice and policy to decipher any patterns or catalysts has, and will continue to, help shape my own understanding of the complex and multifaceted relationship between the system, politics, and structure as it relates to educating students. Until recently, the complexity of our system has organically developed and seemed to be on pace with the evolution of our larger society. An interesting adumbration seems to be that despite the cultural and technological evolution of our

society in a decidedly accelerated pace over the last several decades, public education remained in a decidedly 20th century mindset.

Of course there is a delicate balance at play here. Imagine a lathered up bar of soap. Hold it in your hand. The human mind allows us to gauge how tightly we must grip it. If the grip is not tight enough, it will slide through your hands. Gripping it too tightly, and it will be sent upward, over your slippery palm, away from your grip. Our system is much the same, it seems as if we are tightening our grip around the 20th century mindset and approach to education, instead of finding the balance, and recalculating the pressure of our grip to determine what will work. Why is it that public education is so far away from where we need to be in order to evolve in the 21st century? What do our current policies tell us about our larger society?

> *"More than a century ago, Emile Durkheim rejected the idea that education could be the force to transform society and resolve social ills. Instead, Durkheim concluded that education "can be reformed only if society itself is reformed." He argued that education "is only the image and reflection of society. It imitates and reproduces the latter…it does not create it" (Durkheim, 1897) Most mainstream proposals for improving education in the United States assume that our society is fundamentally sound, but that for some reason, our schools are failing. Different critics target different villains: poor quality teachers, pampered, disruptive or ill-prepared students, the culture of their families, unions, bureaucrats, university schools of education, tests that are too easy, or inadequate curriculum. But if Durkheim was correct, a society has the school system it deserves. Denouncing the poor quality of education is like blaming a mirror because you do not like your reflection." (Pezone, M., & Singer, A. 2003)*

Essentially this is a 'what came first, the chicken or the egg'? question. Considering the origin of influence between society and education is salient and one that is important to contemplate. If education is, in fact, a reflection of society, it doesn't say much of the value we place on the education of our youth. *No Child Left Behind* was recently replaced with the *Every Student Succeeds Act,* which was was touted as a vast improvement in public education policy. There are some shifts in the right direction: increased state control, 'opt' out clauses to address

criticisms over high stakes testing. Educational policy shifts should not primarily be about state versus federal control, nor should they be rooted in quantitative data of student performance. My criticism is that it is essentially trying to use duct tape to reinforce leaky cracks in the foundation. Societally, we are still addressing the problems of a 20th century educational system. We should be far beyond the high-stakes testing debate, and moving past a systemic structure that is the educational equivalent of Regan's 'trickle down' economic policy of the 1980's.

'A Nation at Risk', published in 1983 is well known among those in education and became a resounding rallying cry for drastic education reform and reprioritization. Essentially, the piece accurately predicted widening achievement gaps among students, and the need to explore how accelerated change could potentially impact American classrooms. 'A Nation at Risk' threw a proverbial gauntlet which challenged the system to ensure that students are prepared to not only compete, but to excel, as adults in the global economic community:

> *"History is not kind to idlers. The time is long past when American's destiny was assured simply by an abundance of natural resources and inexhaustible human enthusiasm, and by our relative isolation from the malignant problems of older civilizations. The world is indeed one global village. 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.....Part of what is at risk is the promise first made on this continent: All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself." (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1983)*

The concerns and issues raised in 1983 are as relevant today as they were over 30 years ago, and seem more urgent and consequential given the increasing pace of societal change. In my opinion high stakes testing and frameworks was *never* an appropriate answer to holistically gauge teacher effectiveness nor student understanding, but in a time of accelerated change it

seems increasingly antiquated and asinine. Public education must begin to focus its attention to

the changing way we access, ingest, and communicate information with the world around us.

Learning has changed, and we need to figure out how to address that within the classroom.

> *"Learners as little as forty years ago would complete the required schooling and enter a career that would often last a lifetime. Information development was slow. The life of knowledge was measured in decades. Today, these foundational principles have been altered. Knowledge is growing exponentially. In many fields the life of knowledge is now measured in months and years. Gonzalez (2004) describes the challenges of rapidly diminishing knowledge life, "One of the most persuasive factors is the shrinking half-life of knowledge. The "half-life of knowledge" is the time span from when knowledge is gained to when it becomes obsolete. Half of what is known today was not known 10 years ago. The amount of knowledge in the world has doubled in the past 10 years and is doubling every 18 months according to the American Society of Training and Documentation (ASTD). To combat the shrinking half-life of knowledge, organizations have been forced to develop new methods of deploying instruction." ...When knowledge is abundant, the rapid evaluation of knowledge is important. Additional concerns arise from the rapid increase in information. In today's environment, action is often needed without personal learning – that is, we need to act by drawing information outside of our primary knowledge. The ability to synthesize and recognize connections and patterns is a valuable skill. Many important questions are raised when established learning theories are seen through technology. The natural attempt of theorists is to continue to revise and evolve theories as conditions change. At some point, however, the underlying conditions have altered so significantly, that further modification is no longer sensible. An entirely new approach is needed." (Siemans, G. (2005))*

In October, I was fleshing out my focus and topic for my final paper as an LTET student.

'Radical shifts in education' was a phrase I kept coming back to in my journal for this course. I

kept circling back to it: What does that mean? What would it look like? In an entry on October

3rd, I wrote the following,

> *"Let's get away from the word 'education' for a moment. We need to prepare our students to successfully navigate and explore their experience intellectually, emotionally, critically, logistically, and creatively. Education, to me, has come to imply the 'reading, writing, arithmetic' mindset only, and students need so much more than that."*

This entry began an exploration into bridging the gap between the current focus on data

and high stakes testing, to a broader and more equitable focus which includes creative and

vocational pursuits on the cutting edge of innovation. I believe that introducing new voices into

the conversation, including members of the community served, as well as leading innovators across industries and fields, would be a necessary step in any process of change.

Early in the semester I played with the idea of schools being a community centered institution in a journal entry for CRCRTH 692, jotting down notes, creating lists, illustrating a school that will quite possibly, only ever exist in my imagination. Community as a cornerstone of schools and/or programs were not an entirely foreign concept professionally. Steppingstone was rooted in academic preparation, but equally as important was the climate and culture of the overall Steppingstone community. Although a program students attend outside of their school day, students and their families spend a significant amount of time with the staff during the 16-month placement component, and have a Steppingstone Advisor through their college graduation. A cornerstone of the foundational mission is to prepare students academically and emotionally for success. Most of the parents with whom I worked had never accessed college, were English language learners, had little understanding of the system and its resources, and/or lived below the poverty line. Providing resources to, and establishing genuine relationships with students & families increased student success, and created a sense of community across the organization. Conceptually, community schooling is a model used across the country. After journaling about the concept of schools being a community centered institution, I took to the internet to explore if and where a similar model is used. According to communityschools.org there are 278 community schools across the country at present. Moving forward this model is one which could directly impact the climate and culture of public education, and broader communities we serve. In a time of advanced connectivity, it is important that our students feel genuinely connected to the communities in which they live.

The most interesting discovery in my research for CRCRTH 692 was the model of

'Consensus Conversations', and the work of Simon Joss. A component of the coursework

involved reaching out to someone who has done work related to research for the final report. We

were not able to connect directly, but through e mail he shared journals he had written related to

consensus conversations. His work was centered around science and technology policy making,

but the model is absolutely applicable within public education.

> *"The last decade or so has seen something of a phenomenon in science and technology public policy- and decision-making — that of public participation. What is meant here by 'public participation' is, in a broad sense, the engagement in the processes of policy- and decision-making not just of the usual professional experts, policy analysts and decision-makers, but also a wider spectrum of social actors. The latter may include representatives of non-governmental organizations, local communities, interest groups and grassroots movements, as well as individual lay people in their capacity as citizens and/or consumers. This phenomenon has been manifest, at a practical level, in an increasing number of programs, experiments and initiatives that have sought to broaden the scope of policy deliberation and decision making through the involvement of different social actors in a variety of structural and procedural ways." (Joss, 1999)*

The Consensus Conversations model could have potential applications in the organizational

change needed in public education. Bringing all educational stakeholders to the table with

members of the community and industry innovators could provide a platform for effective and

sweeping change. It's a model I want to to explore moving forward as I continue to develop my

thinking about radical educational change.

Final Reflections

I certainly don't know all the answers, I'm not sure I know all the questions. However, there are some I am sure of…

- SMART technology has changed the way adolescents communicate, access and digest information, and solve everyday problems.
- For adolescents in the public system, use of social technology and continuous implementation of high stakes tests may impact students in ways we will not fully understand for some time.
- We are in a time of rapid change that deeply affects our culture, society, psychology and environment, which necessitates a reevaluation of K-12 education.
- Societal and cultural change is not something happening down the road, we are there. We must be bold and objective.
- Educators and administrators do not have the luxury of holding onto past practices that are outdated.
- Fear of failure hinders life-long learning.
- Teachers, by nature, are designers and creators, investing in teachers is an essential component of radical change.

Our students are smart, they are perceptive, and tuned into what is going on around them. What we choose to focus on in public education sends a message to our students about what we

value and how we define success in our society. The message being sent is that their scores define their ability, and determine their success. The academic year orbits around high-stakes testing like the sun. Implicitly and explicitly students are told that their academic ability and potential in life hinge on an annual test. Students should not have the mindset that academic success is data, and Annual Yearly Progress.

Failure is a part of life on many levels and varying degrees. Academically of course, but in day to day life: forgetting to water a plant, taking a wrong turn and being late for an appointment, interviewing for a job you don't get, realizing you've been walking around all day with your fly down. Moments all of us have experienced, and will likely experience again. They are moments of learning and humility. They are reminders not to take ourselves too seriously. The weight placed on high stakes testing, the message it sends about the concept of failure itself, has an impact on children and adolescents. Failure becomes something to fear, something to be defined by, something that is unacceptable. Classrooms should encourage students to take academic risks, despite the fear of being 'wrong'. Taking academic risks, thinking outside the box …only happen when a student is not afraid to fail. Success and failure are not mutually exclusive, there is not one without the other, and both are valuable lessons to learn. I assert that school is primarily where students should develop an ability to be resilient and mindful when faced with academic and social obstacles or setbacks. The only way to truly develop resilience, a student needs to be comfortable and confident when faced with obstacles and setbacks. Institutes of public education are a platform from which students develop far more than skills which can be quantified. Emotional and social development of children and adolescents is an integral component of the K-12 experience. As we continue to experience shifts in our larger society contributed to accelerated change, we should encourage our students to be bold, to be creative, to

be pioneers in uncharted territory. Radical shifts in education are necessary to set our students on

a course to be the innovators of tomorrow.

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