Voices of adolescents: A phenomenological study of relational encounters and their significance within the school setting

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Voices of Adolescents: A Phenomenological Study of Relational Encounters and their Significance within the School Setting

by

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DISSEPTION

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Eastern Michigan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies
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Dissertation Committee:
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother and father, Evelyn W. Hall and Anthony R. Hall, both of whom are now deceased. It is ultimately because of their sacrifices and support that this educational path was open to me, and for that I thank them both. Despite the fact that they were each taken from me far too early they continue to live on in my memory.
Acknowledgements

While the writing of a qualitative dissertation can be a very personal, and at times lonely, undertaking, there has in my case been a great deal of intellectual and emotional support from others which has made the final completion of this study possible. My heartfelt gratitude begins with an acknowledgement of my mentor and committee chair, Dr. Valerie Polakow, who for the past five years of my academic growth has been the embodiment of the "warm demander." Without her consistent support and intellectual guidance this work simply would not have been possible. I would also like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Sarah Ginsberg, Dr. Sylvia Jones, and Dr. Christopher Robbins. Both collectively and individually this group of educators has provided me with access to a degree of scholarly insight and practical guidance that I could scarcely have imagined would be at my disposal at the outset of this journey. In addition to benefitting from their ongoing support with regard to my research, these four individuals represent what I feel is best about the combination of scholarship, practice, and advocacy.

I would also like to acknowledge the faculty of the urban education PhD program at Eastern Michigan University. Along with its original coordinator, Dr. Robert Carpenter, they have all shaped a unique graduate experience for students: one that is focused on the intersection of modern schooling and the issues of poverty, health, and social justice. All the members of my doctoral cohort who shared this journey with me were also a critical part of this journey for me; along the way, they nourished my intellect with unique insights drawn from their own personal and professional experiences. In particular, but by no means exclusively, I would like to acknowledge the recently lettered Dr. Johnny Lupinacci and Dr. Carmen Stokes. You both
should know that you remain inspirational for me in too many ways to mention, and I am grateful that you both have been, and continue to be, a part of my life.

It is also appropriate that I highlight the critical contributions of my participants in this effort, all of whom gave of their personal time and allowed me into the worlds of their schooling memories with such authenticity and courage that I remain humbled to this day. As with the profession of teaching, one cannot truly be present as a practitioner unless one is willing to be changed by their experiences with students. So it is, I believe, with qualitative research. I have become a transformed and expanded individual thanks to the stories my informants have shared, and my hope is that those stories have been, to the greatest possible extent, faithfully represented here in the pages of this document.

To my family and friends, who have been both patient and unendingly supportive with me through the duration of this sometimes trying process, I say thank you as well from the bottom of my heart. The years which this journey consumed has seen significant changes in my life, some of which required accessing reserves of personal resilience I had not imagined needing, and not all of which have been pain-free—either for myself or for others that I continue to care about. I am thoroughly grateful to the people who have stood beside me with both patience and empathy amid these unexpected struggles; your selfless support and forgiveness will forever be a part of my memory, and will always be appreciated.
Abstract

This phenomenological study explored adolescent perceptions of affirming and disaffirming relational encounters within the school setting. The meanings students constructed about their interpersonal experiences with teachers, counselors, and support staff were examined in relation to Buber’s existential I-Thou relational encounter. In addition to the work of phenomenological philosopher Merleau-Ponty, existential educators Maxine Greene and Donald Vandenberg and the writings of relational- and care-oriented educators such as Nel Noddings also informed the conceptual framework of the study.

The voices of individual youth and how they perceive, attach meaning to, and integrate relational encounters into their understandings of the world around them are scant in the educational literature. Yet, as a social encounter, school is first and foremost a lived relational experience of consequence. The purpose of this dissertation, therefore, was to explore these lived experiences, to add student voices to the extant literature on relationality, and to illuminate how such experiences might mediate the lives and perceptions of students in schools.

An attempt to understand the lived experiences and meanings of students in connection with relational encounters was sought through the interview process. The four phenomenological dimensions—the temporal, spatial, relational, and corporeal—were utilized to further refine how these experiences were understood and felt by individual participants. Participants’ narratives of their school memories and recollection of lived experiences formed the core data of the study. Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse group of 18 male and female students in SE Michigan between February and May of 2013. A final group of ten diverse participants was selected to complete two total interviews lasting from 50-90 minutes. Interviews
were transcribed, coded, and interpreted using a flexible blend of multilayered models for phenomenological analysis.

Significant themes emerged from participants’ narratives, each of which is suggestive of the degree to which encounters with relationality can transform student perceptions of alienation and marginalization within the school setting. Themes included a) the power of individual relationships, b) the perception of mattering and marginalization, c) the perception of active support, and d) the value of voice. Implications for both theory and practice are discussed.
# Table of Contents

Dedication ......................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... iii

Abstract ............................................................................................................................... iv

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background ........................................................................ 1

Chapter 2: Methodology .................................................................................................... 19

Chapter 3: Davie and Dimitri ............................................................................................. 47

Chapter 4: Samina, Allie, and James .................................................................................. 62

Chapter 5: Alexander, Sallie, and Felicia .......................................................................... 83

Chapter 6: Devon and Kenya .............................................................................................. 100

Chapter 7: Themes from Participants’ Narratives .............................................................. 113

Chapter 8: "High-Stakes" Learning Reconsidered: Alienation, Connection
           and the Implications of Relationality within the School Setting .................................. 144

Chapter 9: Confirming Acts as Ethical Imperative: The Power, and Moral
           Obligation To Transform Experiences of Alienation within Schools ...................... 168

Chapter 10: Discussion, Limitations, and Recommendations for Further Study .............. 187

References .......................................................................................................................... 204

Appendix A ......................................................................................................................... 219

Appendix B .......................................................................................................................... 221
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Martin Buber’s seminal work *I and Thou* (1923) implores us to consider a relational imperative he argues is present in all of our lives. One central not just to human existence but to the ability of individuals to flourish: "I require a You to become," he wrote, adding that "all actual life is encounter" (p. 62). This dissertation takes the work of Buber (1923; 1957) as both a philosophical and existential starting point. For we are not only "condemned to meaning" as Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. xxii) asserted, we are condemned to meaning through our relationships with others. The study seeks to explore student perceptions of relationality: in particular, the importance relational encounters with adults may have held for them; it seeks to centralize student voice in the description of these encounters; and finally, it seeks to illuminate these meanings in conjunction with a search for larger interpretive and theoretical significance.

While Buber's philosophical writings did not focus specifically on the school as a context, his central assertion leaves no doubt about the potential significance of the relational dimension for the school as a setting. It may in fact be difficult to argue that the school is anything but a setting of immense social and interpersonal significance. Modern schools are the dynamic locus of countless and varied social and developmental experiences about which the student is likely to construct numerous meanings. That these experiences also occur at a time of profound growth—both in the student’s own identity as well as his relation to the larger world—only makes them a more critical area to explore. In short, there may be significant relational dimensions not just to learning itself, but to the student's sense of being amid the educational landscape; I therefore refer to this proposed relational dimension as the "educational encounter" after the existential tradition (Greene, 1978; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Vandenberg, 1971).
If we are to be committed to critiquing and improving the educational encounter, it is incumbent upon us to examine and interpret the perceived sources and descriptions of meanings students construct within it. This is particularly so given the pervasive student alienation occurring all too often amid modern schooling. Yet the school experience writ large is frequently one that leaves little room for consideration of the relational or existential. Buber would likely argue that, as a social encounter, school is first and foremost a lived relational experience of consequence; that is to say, within its relational context consequential meanings by students are constructed, interpreted, and re-constructed. In the broadest sense such encounters may contribute to feelings of affirmation or alienation, dignity or dehumanization, hope or powerlessness: ultimately, they may communicate that one is either cared for or disregarded.

However these messages manifest at the level of the individual, they likely do so as felt experiences that are significant in some way to their perceivers. It is argued as critical that we understand their implications for the nature of education. Therefore, a consideration of both the ontological and the philosophical nature of education within the lifeworld of the student were vital to the trajectory of this dissertation. Indeed, Vandenberg (1971) has affirmed the importance of struggling for this existential awareness among educators, arguing for attention to the being of students, for it is "In the being [of children] that the aims of education are to be sought" (p. 15). It is my hope that the results of this research will contribute, however tentatively, to a reemerging discourse about the importance of the relational dimensions within the student learning experience, and hence the student herself.

**Buber’s Confirmation: A Human Need**

In *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) William James asserted that:
No more fiendish punishment could be devised, were such a thing physically possible, than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof. If no one turned around when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met 'cut us dead' and acted as if we were non-existent things, a kind of impotent rage and despair would [before] long well up in us, from which the cruelest bodily torture would be a relief. (p. 294)

More than half a century before Buber would identify his confirmation construct, James wrote about the need for vital interpersonal human contact and affirmation. Stated broadly, confirmation describes a process of full and authentically communicated valuing of one person by another within the context of an interpersonal encounter; in so doing it acknowledges both their individual humanity and, just as importantly, their ongoing potential for growth and becoming.

As with the excerpt by James (1890), Buber (1957) also argued for the critical need all humans have for this kind of existential affirmation, the latter going so far as to argue that where confirmation was not present humanity in its fullest cannot be said to exist. As an expression of care, confirmation plays a central role in the communicated nature of relational theory (Buber, 1957; Mayeroff, 1971; Laing, 1961). However, while these concepts are well-explored within the empirical psychological and communications literature, there is a dearth of qualitative research about these phenomena in the educational literature.

**Significance of the Research Problem: The Confirmation Construct within the Learning Encounter**

In today's public school setting both student work, and the students themselves, are subject to increasing commodification (Apple, 2006; Giroux, 2001). Education and learning
within modern public schools have largely been shaped in ways that have the tendency to reduce the experience to a transactional encounter (i.e., one's hard work is done "for" a certification, securing the student a favored position in the labor force), or as a cognitive-technical encounter (i.e., a reduction of learning to various skill-sets and discrete facts). Amid this landscape schooling has also become steeped in what Ross (2002), Power (1999), and others have referred to as "audit culture." This is a perspective and set of assumptions which valorizes characteristics such as efficiency, accountability, and the primacy of quantitative outcome measurements. Evidence of this abounds in the United States. When schooling outcomes are considered in conventional policy discourse, for example, they are almost always discussed and measured in standardized test scores, student retention, and graduation rates. In fact, at the policy level there is an outright hostility to competing, non-market based conceptions of school purposes (see, for example, Duncan, 2012). In such an environment little systematic attention, if any, is paid to what Bloom (1976) referred to as the affective dimensions of learning; and even less to the ontological and relational nature of education argued for by others (Greene, 1978; Vandenberg, 1971; Rogers and Frieberg, 1994; Noddings, 1988).

Despite this trend research has shown that student perceptions of their relationships and, more broadly, of a positive and affirming sense of school community within the learning experience are indeed issues of consequence. This appears to be true not only for students’ cognitive learning, but also to learner dispositions toward school and to perceptions of their own self efficacy and growth (Schussler & Collins, 2006; Ostermann, 2000). Education is, of course, in part about cognitive learning and skill-building; but Buber’s philosophy would argue the importance of acknowledging the fact that such cognitive learning takes place within a critical, inescapable, and distinctly relational landscape. He would also argue that this is a landscape
which we must deliberately attend to as we grapple with the purposes and consequences of learning all environments. Continuing trends to partition and hierarchize learning from the learner, or to minimize the importance of the students’ being, may degrade and dehumanize not only the learning experience itself but more importantly the student. Among low-income and urban youth this recognition may be of particular significance. Indeed, a caring and confirming school environment in such settings may be a powerful ingredient for learning and student welfare as well as a potentially ameliorative influence against persistent student alienation and disaffection (Adler, 2002; Bosworth, 1995; McMillan & Reed, 1994).

Yet it is also true that recognition of the relational dimension to education must go beyond platitudes and oversimplifications: what some derisively call "feel-good learning." It has been argued by Bloom (1976) and others (Noddings, 1988; Rogers & Frieberg, 1994; Perrone, 1998) that there is nothing trivial about the affective dimensions of learning or school experience. Not only are students present in primary and secondary institutions along a spectrum of crucial junctures in their growth as individuals, that very development of one’s sense of self may be significantly influenced by their perceptions of interpersonal interactions encountered: in other words, identity is a co-construction that occurs between the self and the social world around us.

The importance of intersubjectivity and perceptions of this social existence is not merely a contention of existentialists and phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty (1962), Schutz (1967) and Buber (1923; 1957), however. It is also argued for in developmental psychology as well. "Appearances," Kegan (1982) notes, "are ultimate…how things appear [to individuals] can be the ultimate issue if meaning is derived from how others see us" (p. 200) [emphasis added]. Relationality, furthermore, does not stop at dyadic encounters with another, and thus neither do
the implications of recognizing the value of intersubjectivity and affirming encounters. When we ask, *What kind of relational dispositions enhance well-being among our students?* we are, in fact, asking a communitarian question as much as an interpersonal or psychological one. It is a question that by its nature thrusts outward into broader contexts, connecting us to Arendt’s (1958) struggle about what we choose to define as "public," to what Erickson (1968) referred to as "polis," and to what Greene (1978) labelled the "common project."

Exploring the student perceptions about the phenomena in this study should therefore be seen merely as a starting point. Once the importance of these perceptions are illuminated, the significance of infusing practices that contribute to confirming experiences can be argued for as an educational and ethical imperative—one that resides squarely within a larger social justice discourse relating to education. In contrast to the bulk of work on relational theory and education, however, this study focuses on the specific role that confirmation and disconfirmation may play as unique phenomena. Using a generative approach I attempt to understand how these constructs are defined within lived experience, and how students perceive their meanings.

**Research Focus and Questions**

The phenomenological orientation and methods embraced for the proposed study required a flexible and generative approach to understanding the phenomena under consideration (Munhall, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Such an orientation does not preclude the identification and use of a well-defined framework for inquiry. An attempt to understand the lived experiences and meanings of students in connection with confirmation and disconfirmation was sought through the interview process. The context of the four phenomenological dimensions—the temporal, the spatial, the relational and the corporeal—were each utilized to varying degrees in order to further refine how these experiences were understood and felt by individual participants (Munhall,
The participants’ narratives form the core of this study. Specifically, the in-depth interview, initially open-ended first, and then followed by a second semi-structured interview, was used. This is a process that Seidman (2006) has identified as crucial to understanding meaning. Finally, there was an attempt to utilize a clear but flexible focus on the process of qualitative exploration, best summarized by the following questions:

- What meanings described by informants appear to emerge from their relational encounters with adults in the school setting?
- To what extent, if any, do these described meanings resonate with those of other participants? That is, what interpretive patterns do (or do not) emerge?
- What implications do participants’ meanings of the phenomena in question have for better understanding relational implications of schooling?

**Generative Definition**

While constitutive definitions for confirmation from the communications and psychological literature exist (Laing, 1961; Sieberg, 1973; Ellis, 2002; Ellis, 2004), the purpose of this study is to explore the meanings of relationally significant experiences from the perspectives and voices of those who have experienced them firsthand. Buber, in his paper *Distance and Relation* (1957), highlighted characteristics which he viewed as central to any confirmatory encounter; yet his words must be seen as a guide rather than a blueprint, at least when the aim is a qualitative exploration. Thus while Buber’s work on relationality and confirmation served as the *contextual* basis for investigating the chosen phenomenon, any drift toward the utilization of his work to arrive at rigid definitions—definitions that could ultimately constrain my ability to understand the emergent nature of participants’ meanings—was avoided with deliberate effort. This approach is central to what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call naturalistic
inquiry, and was helpful in keeping understandings and interpretations generative. It also left room for interpretive adjustment and revision as the data were collected and analyzed. The map, as Korzybski (1933) so eloquently reminds us, must not be mistaken for the territory.

With these caveats in mind, to be considered "confirmatory" from the perspective of Buber, an encounter would likely include one or more of the following:

- A closure of relational "distance" with the Other (this is related to both the spatial and the relational phenomenological lifeworlds mentioned above)
- Manifest itself as a "genuine meeting": that is, as one that recognizes the other's being (or, who they are) as well as their becoming (or, their capacity to grow)
- Perceive and honor truth in Otherness (i.e., a recognition of intersubjectivity); the "other" in a given encounter may perceive the same thing or same reality in a different way than we do, but affirming the meaning their perspective holds for them is crucial for confirmation
- Be dialogic in nature; "genuine meetings" utilize conversation between participants as a manifestation of a practice that, according to Buber, is "essentially human" (p. 102).

No presumption is made that this list is complete; nor is it claimed that every confirmatory encounter must contain evidence of each of the aforementioned to constitute confirmation. Instead, a recognizable degree of one or more of the principles listed above is assumed to be pivotal in the experiencing of acts of confirmation; and, more importantly, is expected to be helpful in ultimately constructing understandings that are both theoretically sufficient and rooted in the experiences and voices of my participants.
Relational Theory

Relational theory (RT) constitutes a broad and amorphous field of thinking and inquiry; despite its cross-disciplinary and difficult-todefine nature, it nevertheless embodies both a backdrop and context for understanding confirmation. Furthermore, it is in a way the progenitor of confirmation. Thus, to understand the latter, some degree of familiarity with the former is critical. Considered from a wide-angle perspective, RT is a broad area of inquiry that, according to Ross (2002), encompasses, and is informed by, thinking from an array of disciplines and subdisciplines including: critical curriculum theory, feminism, ecology, developmental psychology, moral theory, a caring jurisprudence, and nursing. Without question, these fields have distinct areas of focus and modes of theoretical inquiry. But each also shares a common interest and value in the intersubjective meaning of experience, or what Ross (2002) more poetically calls "the space between us" (p. 416). That is to say, they are concerned not only with individual experience in and of itself, but more importantly with how our very sense of self is shaped by the ways in which we choose to define and relate to the "Other." In this ontology we are not, in fact, seen as separable beings, and our capacity to act ethically toward one another requires an acknowledgement of this fact. In the West in particular, where discourses that valorize individualism and notions of the defiantly autonomous "self" are a deeply ingrained part of the national and philosophical ethos, and where critiques of Western-style rationalism are typically found at the conversational and policy margins, encouraging an embrace of a relational perspective and its implications may be an especially difficult prospect (Noddings, 1984; Plumwood, 1997).

In this section I will begin by briefly sketching out the origins and shape of RT through the writings of Martin Buber, and attempt to summarize some of the field’s major theoretical and
philosophical underpinnings. The goal is not to provide a comprehensive description of RT, but rather to give enough context to understand what, broadly speaking, RT is, and why, by extension, confirmation may play such a key role within it. I will then move quickly to a consideration of confirmation and disconfirmation as unique constructs within in the literature, and explore how these phenomena were expanded and refined, post-Buber, in the fields of communications and psychology. Within this second section, I will also briefly consider intersections, influences and overlapping areas with broader theoretical literature. For instance, some feminist discourses and writing have both informed, and been informed by, RT (Gilligan, 1982; Martin, 1985; Plumwood, 1997). Also, exploration of how some of the writings of phenomenological thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty (1962), Schutz (1967), Sadler (1969), Vandenberg (1971) and Greene (1978) are in conversation with, and reinforce, not only RT, but the confirmation construct itself. This is a particularly salient trajectory, not only because phenomenology is the chosen methodology, but because RT, confirmation, and phenomenology have much to say to each other on a conceptual level.

Lastly, the limited research on confirmation in the area of education will be considered. As this research is principally quantitative and empirical in nature, and as it has been considered exclusively at the university level, an argument will therein be constructed for the present study: that is, a qualitative exploration of meanings of confirmation within experiences of the secondary educational encounter.

**Defining the Relational Space**

A fundamental tenet of Buber’s theory holds that our experience in the world is inherently a shared and interpersonal one. We therefore do not elect to experience the world as relational beings; it is instead simply the existential condition that we are thrust into. This
assertion in itself is not unique to Buber, of course. Other thinkers have emphasized the importance of the social dimension of our experience, doing so from various theoretical and empirical perspectives. Merleau-Ponty, for example, claimed in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) that we humans come to know ourselves through the reciprocal actions of others. In the area of Social Constructivist Theory, Vygostky (1962) centralized the importance of interaction in meaning-making and developmental growth amid the young. Schutz (1967) argued for a critical awareness of intersubjectivity as part of his description of the phenomenological attitude and his explication of the We-Relationship, writing that we humans are "simply born into a world of others," (p. 163) and that the world we experience at any given time is only to a very small extent of our own making.

Furthermore, symbolic interactionism defines the social dimension of meaning-making as one of its three central tenets for how people make sense of the world around them (Mead, 1967; Blumer, 1969). Acknowledgement and study of our inherently social nature, therefore, is in itself neither radical nor original. We are situated beings who struggle to establish personal meaning: but we are also enmeshed in, and affixed to, a world of experience with tangible others and objects (Heidegger, 1962). In arguing for the importance of both dasein ("being there") and mitsein ("being with"), Heidegger addresses the inescapability of this vital existential dialectic; in short, that our experiences are indeed "ours," but those experiences and perceptions are also fundamentally associational…they are in the world, and a critical dimension of this world is its intersubjectivity.

Buber’s (1923; 1957) philosophy resonates with this ontological perspective. His description of the relational imperative as one which rests squarely within critical existential space is one that characterizes it as both inescapable and indistinguishable from human
experience. In short, as a kind of first-order expression of human being. Buber's writings, furthermore, introduce both explicit and implicit ethical and moral dimensions to understanding our relational existence. Thus, because existence for Buber is inescapably interactional we must be deliberately attentive to the various ways, or modes, in which we navigate these encounters with the Other. In any human encounter, he argues that we must first and foremost be intimately concerned with the other’s being-in-the-world. Such recognition is the essence of the I-Thou dynamic described in Buber's (1923) aforementioned seminal work, a philosophy that pushed at the boundaries of existential notions of human relational experience.

The I-Thou and I-It dynamic deserves additional attention here, as the former dynamic always serves as the contextual basis for the experience of confirmation. Indeed, Buber’s relationality is slightly more essentialist than Heidegger’s, for, as mentioned above, Buber identifies what he calls the "two fold attitude," (p. 53); this is a view of human existence that asserts only two ways in which one can "be" in the world. These attitudes are characterized by the words I-It and I-Thou, both of which are fundamentally relational at their core. The former attitude describes the experienced world of objects, of "contents;" within this attitude we experience a kind of bounded, delimited relationship to some thing. Buber claims that this limitation is so because objects (unlike people or animals) consist in having been; they have no "present." In other words, their existence is limited or fixed rather than one in the process of "becoming," as in the case in a relation with a living thing. (It is important to note here, however, that people can also be regarded—reduced to—objects in a relational encounter). An authentic I-Thou relation is defined by a recognition of potentiality in the Other…by "reciprocity." In this sense it is by inherently an "unmediated" relational encounter: one where we as individuals are
open to our own transformation through genuine acknowledgement of an interaction with another.

Instead of having only a past, or a fixed nature (as objects do), when we say the word "Thou" (You) to someone in Buber’s philosophy, we are acknowledging an Other that has both a present and a future; it is an encounter that is defined by openness, reciprocity, and potential. Any experience where we open ourselves to this kind of intersubjective growth, therefore, is, at least potentially, an I-Thou encounter. This fact is highlighted by Buber's example of the tree, where he describes how one could, in theory, be "drawn into a [I-Thou] relation" with the tree; and how, in such a case, "the tree ceases to be an It" (p. 58). More importantly for the present discussion, not every encounter with another person is I-Thou by definition. It is possible to reduce such an encounter in various ways to the I-It dynamic, and to thereby reduce the person to little more than an object. The implications of this last point are potentially profound. In an existential sense, not only is the relational what we are "condemned to," but within it there are serious ethical and existential considerations about our interactions that deserve attention.

**Implications of the Relational Perspective**

A relational orientation, and particularly one with an existential-phenomenological influence, does more than simply ask us to acknowledge the "social nature" of our existence. It demands that we consider the ways in which our meanings, perceptions and well-being are interwoven with others, as well as with the larger institutional and societal patterns these things speak to. In this way a confirming approach to relationality situates itself as one way to help us interrogate and, perhaps, to puncture, some of the alienating and dehumanizing practices that we find within schools in the modern, neo-liberal landscape (Giroux, 2001; hooks, 1994; Noddings, 1992). These practices and institutional patterns, from the devaluing of collective action in the
public sphere, the rise of punitive "accountability" approaches to learning, and the promotion of zero-tolerance policies, are not present by mere circumstance. They emerge from very particular orientations and assumptions about the way the world "should" be, including not only what things people are expected to value (both individually and collectively) but also what "modes of association" (Dewey, 1916, p. 97) are themselves valorized. Thus a confirming orientation to relationality poses a possible counterbalance to modernity’s dark times and the related discursive practices that we find ourselves steeped in. It asks that we place the value of relational interaction between people at the center of our thinking, with an emphasis not, for example, on economic gain, but on the recognition and affirmation of the Other's existential value.

It is also possible that the foundations of social justice should begin with the recognition of an existential I-Thou encounter: one based not merely on notions of individual prerogatives, but on persons in relation as well. Such a perspective might be distinguished from more abstract definitions of rights that tend to be rooted largely in individualistic modes of thinking. Ross (2002), for example, asserts it is the very nature of abstract thinking which makes it "...one of the biggest enemies of caring..." (p. 408). As a direct outgrowth of the philosophical literature focused on the relational encounters and our existential nature, confirmation, by contrast, may hold potential for enhancing human well-being; furthermore, it may help to strengthen the many discourses on justice, on rights, and on equality in the educational encounter. This study will seek in part to explore the potential that such experiences have at the individual level, and what their implications may be for larger social and political practices in today’s learning environments.
Confirmation in the Literature: Buber and Beyond

As a construct, confirmation should be seen as complementary to, rather than distinct from, Buber's framework for understanding the relational encounter which he explicated in *I and Thou* (1923). As stated earlier, confirmation can, in the most general sense, be thought of as experiencing a full and authentic acceptance of one's self by another person. Such an encounter cannot happen at a physical or emotional distance, but occurs only when we enter into a relation—what Buber (1957) referred to as "genuine meetings" (*Distance and Relation*, p. 103). This is the ontological and intersubjective terrain where confirmation occurs: not in the expression of the attitude toward things, an attitude which is always limited by an assumption of means, but in the human desire to engage others in a way that is unmediated and open (Buber, 1957). It is in this space, he argues, where the self can be made "more whole" by the recognition of others (p. 103).

After Buber, confirmation as an area of study first emerges in the field of psychiatry. Laing (1961), for example, attempts to clarify the term's meaning by identifying behavioral modes related to confirmation. He argues such modes can vary and are demonstrable through a variety of physical manifestations: "through a responsive smile (visual), a handshake (tactile), and an expression of sympathy (auditory)" (p. 82). Laing also builds on Buber’s contention that confirmation is a phenomenon that varies qualitatively in every human encounter: it is not, in other words, "all or nothing." Most importantly, when one is confirmed by another in Laing’s view, she feels "endorsed," "recognized," and "acknowledged;" it is an experience, therefore, to be closely equated with love. Confirmation is also the obverse of what Laing calls *dis*confirmation, a term he introduces to describe varying forms of denying the Other. Some expressed modes of disconfirmation are attitudes such as "indifference" and "imperviousness."
There is a distinction here to be made between rejection and disconfirmation. Buber, for instance, argues that agreement is not always synonymous with confirmation. One can be disagreed with and confirmed at the same time. If a person rejects what another has to say, but in so doing limits the rejection to the statement at hand while simultaneously recognizing and acknowledging the speaker, then confirmation may still occur.

Laing’s work is credited with both refining and providing a conceptual framework for confirmation (Ellis, 2004), yet is principally in the study of dynamics within the field of psychiatry. Laing’s research was built upon by Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967), who characterize confirmation as the "greatest single factor ensuring mental development and stability" (p. 84), and who attempt to situate confirmation squarely in the field of communications. But the implications of confirmation (or its opposite, disconfirmation) are, of course, moral, social and psychological as well. It is likely a layered and complex phenomenon at the level of felt experience. Communication is merely the means by which it occurs.

Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) address the broader implications of the phenomenon in their recognition of what they call "metacommunication:" that is, the implied meanings found within every interpersonal encounter. Regardless of what is said at the verbal level between people, a "meta-message" is felt. It can be one of confirmation, rejection or disconfirmation, and despite what is said it is understood by the receiver to mean "this is how I am seeing you" (p. 90). It must be remembered that their work, *Pragmatics and Human Communication* (1967), and indeed much of the research on confirmation, is studied from within the positivistic paradigm. Thus efforts to conceptualize and define confirmation for study were addressed largely through quantitative methodologies. Yet this work, taken collectively, raises profound questions for qualitative and phenomenological inquiry, particularly if encountering
confirmation at the subjective level is as transformative as Buber and others argue. Understanding how such encounters are perceived and their significance to the perceiver is crucial to any holistic description of the phenomenon, and of its consequences for education.

Subsequent studies regarding confirmation, such as Sieburg’s Interpersonal Confirmation: A Paradigm for Conceptualization and Measurement (1973) remain largely situated in the empirical communications context, or that of family and interpersonal dynamics (Clark, 1973; Cissna, 1975). Strangely, however, there remains to this day a comparative paucity of research on confirmation in the field of education. The primary exception to this is Ellis (2000; 2002; 2004), whose focus has been on exploring and measuring confirmation as a quantitative variable in the college classroom in connection with learning outcomes.

Thus, what is mostly absent from this area of the literature is research which explicitly situates confirmation—or the lack of confirmation—as a qualitative phenomenon worthy of study. Schools, after all, are pervasive institutions where fundamental questions may arise about the degree to which those who attend them perceive they "matter," to others: teachers, counselors, administrators, even peers. This question may in fact have many dimensions, but it is arguably an existential question at its core. A question whose asking raises the possibility of a negation—that is, of a response that disconfirms individual student value, and in the process denies the kinds of possibilities for what one can become: the "pour-soi" that Sartre (1956) referred to in being for-itself. The relational ethic of confirmation as proposed by Buber (1923; 1957) and, more generally, by Noddings (1988; 1992), is therefore one that converges with existential inquiry, and lends itself to being studied and described qualitatively. Exploring it may aid educators seeking to interrogate and ameliorate encounters with the dehumanizing practices found all too often in modern school environments, particularly those in connection with low-
income and minority youth where alienation and disaffection from formal learning tends to be highest. This dissertation seeks to fill this gap in the qualitative research by exploring the phenomena of confirmation and disconfirmation with just such an existential and phenomenological focus. It explores these related phenomena as they are perceived by those who experience them, and investigates their possible connections with implications for schooling and education through the use of an existential-phenomenological approach.
CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative research approach with an explicit emphasis on the phenomenological orientation and methodologies as described by Hycner (1985), Munhall (2007), and Seidman (2006). The impact of one’s personal experiences has been identified as one of the common themes that often galvanize budding researchers toward the choice of qualitative methods (Silverman and Marvasti, 2008), and my personal history is no different. A potent educational encounter in my adolescence was an existentially transformative event that led me, much later, to existentialism and phenomenology—and to the qualitative method itself. What I read both affirmed and helped contextualize my earlier personal experience. It is for this reason that I concur with hooks (1994), who asserts that there are both liberatory and healing possibilities to be discovered within the study of theory. Yet I have also found reason in my journey to believe a similar potential exists within the domain of methodology. In learning about qualitative methods during my doctoral coursework I re-encountered and re-examined memories of my own experiences. I learned to explore what the concept of significance meant in connection with these experiences, and as a direct consequence I became increasingly drawn to the power of voice, agency, and the importance of our ability to narrate our own world.

Yet the choice of method is clearly about more than the reasons for a researcher’s personal attraction to a given research approach, however meaningful it may have been as a galvanizing force. It is also connected to the question of "fit" in critical ways that relate to one’s research: ontological, epistemological, analytical, and practical. Because the aim of this study was to explore how the perception of significant relational encounters may contribute to participant experiences of confirmation and disconfirmation within an educational setting, the appropriate methodological choice for this journey became phenomenology.
Phenomenology as the Qualitative Mode of Choice

Because I was encouraged during my doctoral studies to systematically reflect on the aforementioned schooling experience as part of a larger process of self-inquiry, I inferred a connection between the phenomenon of an affirming relational encounter and the trajectory of my own educational journey as an adolescent. The encounter marked a shift in my own adolescent thinking, one where I came to perceive my self-efficacy as a learner and my notions about school about as transformed in empowering ways. In short, the encounter with what I have now come to regard as the phenomenon of confirmation had a consequential and lasting impact on me. This led me to wonder, What meanings might other students who experience significant relational encounters construct? How, within the field of qualitative research, can I best come to know these meanings in rich and authentic ways? Phenomenology provides the potential for this kind of understanding, as it is intimately focused on describing, as authentically as possible, lived experiences from the perspectives of those involved with the construct being explored (Munhall, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

What confirmation and disconfirmation may "be" in any definitional sense, then, must be pursued by exploring them as phenomena experienced within the self-described inner-worlds of individuals. Use of the term "inner-world" here is not to suggest consciousness exists somehow apart from the material world in any Cartesian way. Indeed, Schutz (1967) and Merleau-Ponty (1962), among others, eschewed the division between interior and exterior worlds. Such a division, furthermore, flies in the face of a relational orientation toward being and experience. This is evident in part through the doctrine of intentionality, considered central to the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology, and which highlights this existential reciprocity. Reintroduced from the Scholastics by Brentano (1874), intentionality maintains that
consciousness is always consciousness of something. It is never a purely internal mind-state, but instead it thrusts or projects outward upon the world in which we are enmeshed. Mind, body, and experience therefore, are inextricably, that is *relationally*, linked (Greene, 1978).

Buber’s philosophy of relationality and confirmation, explicated in *I and Thou* (1923) and in *Distance and Relation* (1957) is concerned not just with interpersonal dynamics in a pragmatic sense, but in a very real way with what constitutes meaningful existence among people. Perhaps because of this existential layer to his writings I have been drawn to the school of existential phenomenology which itself deals openly with questions of being and existence. This is in contrast to the pursuit of a given phenomenon’s "essence" more commonly found in the practice of transcendental phenomenology (Roche, 1973). Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) focus on the importance of perception in lived experience seemed particularly salient. What do perceptions of affirming or alienating relational encounters mean for how students regard, experience, and "intend" (in the phenomenological sense) within the educational encounter? Can these experiences help contribute to theoretical understandings around confirmation and disconfirmation? And, What might these the answers to these questions have to say about how we can or should re-conceptualize key aspects of the learning environment? Herein lies the pursuit of "significance," which Munhall (2007) argues is central to the pursuit of phenomenology. This exploration seems particularly well-suited to a phenomenological method of inquiry, in part because of its philosophical orientations, but also because of its methods.

**The Qualitative Approach**

As both Hatch (2002) and Glesne (2006) assert, the exploration of meaning is the central characteristic of qualitative research. Such meanings are not disconnected from place and time, however; they cannot be separated from their contexts, but are in fact continually constructed
and re-constructed within various situational experiences. A qualitative approach presumes the socially constructed nature of understanding and of meaning; it should, when done well, place the narratives of its participants’ front and center. Qualitative inquiry, therefore, is both a philosophical orientation and a method, and was well-suited to help explore the chosen constructs for this dissertation. It requires that its theories be firmly grounded in the narrative material and its informants rather than determined a priori; it stresses the critical importance of understanding the meanings people create in situated contexts and through their own voices (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Geertz, 1973); and it requires that the researcher play a central, albeit disciplined and reflexive, role in the process of gathering as well as interpreting material (Seidman, 2006; Peshkin, 1988).

Because peoples' lives are experienced within emergent contexts, the qualitative approach to inquiry demands an emergent and flexible approach to such inquiry. Its objective is the careful analysis of observational and interview material, documents, and artifacts, found within emergent contexts. These data are then systematically analyzed with an eye toward the interpretation and illumination of meaning. Whereas a central aims of inquiry conducted within a positivistic framework are prediction, control, and replication, qualitative inquiry by contrast seeks understanding, meaning and interpretation. In order to achieve this in a credible fashion I have endeavored to strive for what Geertz (1973) calls "thick description" (p. 6)—that is, richly detailed material in narrative form, with a strong emphasis on the verbatim principle (Spradley, 1980). This is the kind of evidence that is most likely to equip subsequent readers with sufficient access to the lived worlds of one’s informants. It also should help create a firm enough footing for others to inquire about, challenge, and understand what meanings I have inferred from my
work. Without this kind of description, not only is the emic nature of the experience muted, but the potential transferability of the research to similar contexts is consequently undermined.

Any authentic understanding of the relational basis for confirmation or disconfirmation must necessarily focus on the self-described stories and experiences of informants themselves, and systematically explore such experiences through interviews to arrive fuller understandings of the meanings that participants create. Importantly, such qualitatively developed understandings can and should speak to larger social issues, ultimately pointing toward interpretive generalizations which may help us better understand some of the terrain regarding the potential intersection of relational and learning dynamics within today’s schools. This is what Munhall (2007) means when she refers to the "search for significance" (p. 154). A phenomenological orientation and approach thus provided an ideal framework for the present dissertation.

**Phenomenological Analysis**

I chose Hycner's (1985) approach to phenomenological analysis as a guiding methodological framework for this study. In particular, I found myself drawn to this method’s emphasis on the phenomenological reduction, especially as it relates to the identification of what Hycner calls units of general meaning. One of the helpful critiques of the related pilot study conducted in advance of this dissertation, *Exploring Participants’ Meanings of Confirmation and Disconfirmation in the Educational Encounter* (Hall, 2010), which was completed during my doctoral coursework, was that the earlier paper may have succumbed to an etic or deductive orientation despite my attempts to embrace a qualitative method. That is, enthusiastic about discovering the literature of confirmation and disconfirmation, I then set out to "find" examples of it within the words and experiences of my participants. Hycner's emphasis on the phenomenological reduction, combined with the focus on identifying units of general meaning
first, only then to be followed by units of relevant meaning later in the process, was one way I hoped to minimize the chances that this would recur.

Though the key principles Hycner explicated in the area of thematic identification and development were followed rather closely, I chose to remain open and reflexive to the approaches of other phenomenological thinkers’ methods as well throughout the material gathering and analysis phases. Qualitative research itself, as well as any findings that grow out of its application, is likely to be diminished by employing an overly prescriptive and rigid approach to one’s work. I have nevertheless described Hycner’s steps (bracketing, delineating units of meaning, clustering units of meaning, summarizing, and contextualization) followed by a précis explaining each one in greater detail. Where appropriate I have also highlighted modifications I made to his approach in the analysis phase of my work.

**Bracketing and the phenomenological reduction.** In her description of bracketing, Munhall (2007) characterizes the process as one where we "come to unknow" (p. 170) [emphasis added]. It is a disposition of reflection, self-inquiry and, ultimately, openness, the researcher adopts as part of the phenomenological attitude. The aim of this process is to achieve, to the greatest extent possible, an orientation allowing one to encounter the phenomenon in question as it truly is. Only from this posture can we attempt to represent phenomena and its meanings in authentic ways.

I entered into this process of bracketing in a multifold way, feeling both a sense of trepidation and a degree of skepticism about my ability to embrace this concept meaningfully. How does one "know" when she has bracketed sufficiently, after all? How does one ensure that it is not mere lip service to the idea of the phenomenological reduction that is being paid, in spite of sincere motivations? My answer to this was first to disabuse myself to the greatest extent
possible of the notion that bracketing was like arriving at a chosen driving destination. There is no sense of "I'm there, I've done it," to be found in this undertaking, after which one is freed to write or analyze without worry. Like qualitative inquiry itself, bracketing is an iterative and generative process; it is one that continues throughout the entire research endeavor; it ebbs and flows as the researcher—the "instrument"—engages in interviews, analyzes the narrative material, and grapples with the writing and interpretive process.

The reduction is in fact part of a uniquely embodied process (Sinari, 1965). It is not merely a mental exercise where we work to strip away all of our biases and presuppositions through sheer force of will (this is an unachievable and positivist-minded undertaking in the first place). As such, it was my responsibility to create the space for my own physical health and well-being, and not simply assume all that was needed was time to think or write—to "be intellectual" in other words. Our ability to be present and responsive to the experiences of others, to reach for the kind of "unconscious consciousness" required by the reduction, is predicated on balance in the body as well as the mind and the capacity to engage in the research process in a reflexive manner.

Lastly, I returned to my interview recordings and transcriptions on several occasions during the analysis phase, with an eye toward my own internal reactions and feelings during each encounter with the material. Principally, I was searching for what Peshkin (1988) called the "warm and cool spots," areas where my own experiences and feelings mingle and react with the material and/or the research process in particularly significant ways. Maintaining notes of these reactions in an ongoing research journal was a helpful part of this endeavor. Ultimately, I strove to conceptualize the challenge of the reduction as more of an ongoing traveling companion (occasionally difficult, always interesting), rather than a mountain to be scaled then forgotten.
**Delineating units of meaning.** I undertook to encounter and re-encounter the words of my participants through multiple readings of the transcripts. Hycner (1985) recommends this kind of saturation in the words of one’s participants to help first gain a "sense of the whole." (p. 281). I then worked to identify units of general meaning, which Hycner defines as "…those words, phrases, non-verbal or para-linguistic communications which express a unique and coherent meaning, irrespective of the research question" (p. 282). During this phase of the analysis, it was my intention to stay as close as possible to the words and inherent meanings of my participants—to "hover low" in the words of Geertz (1973, p. 21). In this way, I hoped to let the material take me where its meanings led, rather than impose my own interpretations concerning what was important or valuable from a research perspective. Similar to the line-by-line coding described by Charmaz (2008), my secondary aim at this stage was to closely and systematically examine the words of my informants for these initial impressions, with the eye toward the illumination of potential themes, and to make sure that any subsequent interpretations were firmly grounded in the material.

Once general themes were gathered, the phenomena under consideration were applied to these units of meaning to see if there was any degree of resonance with the focus for the study; that is, if important relational encounters occurred, and if anything about the significance of these experiences potentially illuminated confirmation or disconfirmation through what the respondents shared. Examples of verbatim that appeared to qualify as relevant units of meaning were distinguished by highlighting, to contrast them from the general units of meaning. Lastly, at this stage redundant units of meaning were eliminated from the list.

**Clustering units of relevant meaning.** The next step was to determine if there was anything common to the revealed units of meaning in anticipation of extracting themes from the
interview. Such commonalities may establish a relationship between illuminated meanings, helping to establish natural thematic "clusters" among them. To this end all verbatim-derived meaning units were numbered on a document, and initial themes were placed in the adjoining column. In a separate file, then, the number of total initial themes from the interview in question was listed, and next to each theme the number of times (and exactly where) in the interview the theme surfaced was recorded. This clustering provided a natural point of departure for the next stage of explication of the themes within a particular interview (and ultimately across multiple interviews, when such similarities presented themselves). Care was taken, however, to avoid imposing interpretive patterns where they did not exist. A continuous effort to engage with the phenomenological reduction, mentioned above, was attempted throughout, principally notating unexpected reactions and emotions that surfaced in my journal.

**Summarizing and seeking trustworthiness in each interview.** Writing a summary of each interview following Hycner’s steps was an attempt to authentically reconstruct the inner world of the informant’s experience in narrative format. It is also part of the dialectical process of interpreting experiential material; the researcher "zooms in" as it were on individual meaning units in the initial stages of interpretation, then steps back to adopt a more wide-angle perspective as she tries to reconstruct a faithful "sense of the whole" (Hycner, 1985, p. 291). This step provides further necessary context, Hycner maintains, for the continuing emergence of themes that are firmly grounded in the narrative material. However, instead of writing a stand-alone summary for each participant as he recommends at this stage, I found that my writing and interpretive style lent itself better to simply drafting out preliminary cases at this point, and including summary material as part of that larger initial process. Such holistic case writing (even in its most tentative stages) felt far more natural to me. It was my belief that each case could
always be revised based on feedback from competent peers and supervisors. Furthermore, whereas Hycner employs the term "validate" in connection with this stage of his process, I choose to frame the effort he describes at this juncture as the pursuit of trustworthiness, in keeping with the qualitative paradigm and approach to inquiry (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Where necessary I returned to the informant by means of phone or email, which provided me an opportunity for one type of "corroborative" check regarding thematic interpretations made up to this point in the process. Of the 10 final participants in this study, this kind of communication occurred approximately a dozen times during the interpretation phase. Giorgi (2008) is critical of this step, citing that such follow-ups invite risks including errors in judgment about meaning on the part of the informant, and can therefore potentially taint the interpretive process; a process that should (in his view) stand on its own disciplinary merits with the gathered data at hand. I take issue with this view, however. While it is true that such member-checks may present risk for thematic disagreement, they may also provide opportunities for deeper understanding, and create a more empowered and active role for the participants.

Furthermore, while the informant’s voice is and should be privileged and valued in qualitative research, such member-checks do not imply that informant perspectives on interpretations of their experiences need be accepted by the researcher unquestioningly. Therefore, I view member-checks, along with review of the identified themes by competent peer evaluators, as part of a larger effort to help to increase the study’s consensual validity (Eisner, 1991). In the case of my experience, member checking actually began at the time of the second interview. Each follow-up interview was conducted after a full transcription of the initial interview. Thus, I would arrive not only with clarifying questions and an eye toward gathering
additional narrative material, but also with the intent of sharing some of my initial impressions about what appeared to be significant experiences for the participants. This kind of informal and preliminary member-check was, I believe, a helpful way of establishing a reasonable degree of confidence as I moved into waters seeking units of general meaning.

Identifying general and unique themes across interviews: contextualization. The final stage in Hycner’s method is determining what, if any, themes emerge that are common to most (or all) of the interviews. Here again, I strove to remain cautious about the imposition of thematic patterns onto the material presented by my informants. Indeed, I found that there was a degree of welcome tension here between my two primary methodological experts, Hycner (1985) and Munhall (2007). The latter is suspicious of the inclination to identify thematic commonalities between participants, citing that it can lead to "collapsing or categorizing interview materials…. Each participant," Munhall cautions, "stands alone. The ending narrative does not homogenize 10 interviews but tells many different stories of meaning" (p. 179). Sustaining an awareness of the individual as what Munhall calls the "focus for meaning," is critical, even as I became aware of commonalities and distinctions in the stories of my participants.

In subsequent re-readings of the full transcripts and the selections of verbatim, I attempted to shift between Hycner’s exhortation to find a "sense of the whole" and perceiving the more discreet meanings embedded within particular verbatim excerpts. When this process was complete, my aim was to contextualize the discovered themes by placing them "back in their overall contexts, or [the] horizons" (Hycner, 1985, p. 293) from which they came. It is a way of re-considering the significance of the emergent themes in light of their situated contexts—in this case, the school environment. This was a crucial final step in the interpretive process, and one
that I found both challenging, amid the richness and detail of all the data collected, and intellectually rewarding, as I tried to wrestle with a growing sense of the material’s "gestalt."

**Additional Phenomenological Foci**

Also central to the phenomenological method is the critical component of "immersion," described by Munhall (1994) and Munhall (2007). The researcher must, in multiple ways, saturate herself in the literature, understandings, and proposed meanings of his chosen method as well as that of the phenomenon to be studied. To dwell, in other words, to the greatest extent possible, not only where the phenomena itself may be found (the words and experiences of participants), but also to strive to adopt a phenomenological rather than a "natural attitude." I sought in this endeavor to have an encounter with a method as well as with my participants, to "become the study," (Munhall, 2007, p. 168). Because the goal of the phenomenological attitude is to better know the lived world of the other, I do not regard this concomitant focus on method as one that devalues participants' voices in the least. The responses are critical to the process of understanding. This process takes considerable time and emotional investment on the part of the researcher (Munhall, 2007), but its importance cannot be overstated because of its centrality to later attempts to describe and understand the phenomenon being explored.

As mentioned earlier, as a researcher, I struggled to remain open to unexpected interpretations and meanings found within the material. In the case of this study, I considered those relationally significant encounters that may or may not speak to the phenomena of confirmation and disconfirmation), and indeed, even to the possibility that the phenomenon explored may not be identified as a significant issue present within the experiences of some or all of the participants. The process of bracketing overlaps with, but is not the same as, that of maintaining a reflexive subjectivity (Peshkin, 1988). Indeed, it may be viewed as much as a
philosophical orientation as it is a method within phenomenology. Bracketing should be seen as an ongoing challenge and process throughout one’s research, and in aid of this objective Wall, Glenn, Mitchinson and Poole (2004) propose how the reflective diary, which I discuss below, can be utilized as a tool to help the researcher strengthen their capacity for practicing the epoche.

**Challenges in the Representation of Voice, Researcher Positionality, and Critical Reflexivity**

Geertz’s (1973) cautionary anecdote on the interpretation of winks vs. blinks, first described by Malinkowski, reminds researchers of the inherently slippery undertaking that representing the worlds, and words, of others, presents. It is within this context that a key challenge of qualitative research emerges: that of recreating—as faithfully as possible—the most accurate description of others’ experiences one can. Within this process lies potential for even well-meaning researchers to do harm by unintentionally misrepresent what we encounter during the material collection phase. Attention to language and words, to what is omitted and included, is vital, so as to minimize the chances we misconstrue or wrongfully attribute meanings to actions. The input of competent peers can be helpful in this process, as can member-checking, and also the use of a systematic approach to those things which tend to trigger our own filtering processes—maintaining a journal for reactions and thoughts after interviewing takes place, for example. Such influences are often linked to what Peshkin (1988) calls the researchers "warm and cool spots" (p. 21)

Peshkin also (1988) argues that a researcher’s failure to recognize the impact of subjectivity throughout the course of his or her research is problematic because subjectivity operates throughout the entire process. Our subjective experiences shape how we see, encounter, and react to the world, and contribute to positionality as we engage with the research process and
the worlds of others. My intent was to discipline this subjectivity through systematic self-
reflection and targeted peer feedback and evaluation, not with the aim of suppressing the
subjective (an impossible, and indeed undesirable, task in the interpretive paradigm), but with the
aim of increasing critical reflexivity. Ultimately, it is with the application of this reflexive
awareness that allowed me to minimize the "muting" of the emic voice, an ever-present danger
as we seek to represent the lives of others authentically (Peshkin, 1988). I viewed it as one of my
central challenges throughout the study to attend to this as systematically as possible, hopefully
achieving Geertz’s (1988) delicate balance between what he called "author-saturated and author-
evacuated" (p. 9) prose.

Data Collection: The Narratives

My research took place in the southeast Michigan area, specifically the region in and
around Detroit. This was for two reasons. First, this area was my home and, until recently, the
place I continued to work part-time as a teacher in Detroit-area schools. Focusing my research in
this area provided a level of strategic and practical convenience that was difficult to ignore.
Second, the entirety of my career in the public schools (a total of 12 years in three different
districts) in and around Detroit provided me with a network of contacts that I utilized as I sought
to gain access to participants. In addition, I contacted several agencies in southeast Michigan that
serve youth in areas such as foster care, halfway houses and homeless shelters, and adult
education organizations. Southeast Michigan also has other demographic advantages that are
worth considering, most importantly a diverse class, ethnic, and cultural makeup which resides in
a relatively small geographic area.
Participant Selection

Hycner (1985) contends that in addition to the selection of method, the choice of participants should also be driven by the phenomenon itself. I therefore sought to explore the descriptions of potentially significant relational educational encounters with current and former high school students. Snowball sampling was employed as the means of identifying additional participants. Initial recruitment took place by utilizing my own network of contacts and relationships in the public schools, but also was aided by the help of long-time colleagues and community members who maintain extensive contacts in the public and charter schools and communities in the southeast Michigan area. An emphasis was placed on securing access to a participant list which demonstrated, to the greatest extent practicable, racial, class, and gender diversity. It was hoped such diversity would strengthen both the credibility and transferability of the findings contained within this study. The participants ultimately chosen were from both urban and suburban settings and were diverse racially and with regard to gender. However, the selection process created a pool of informants that was somewhat less diverse with regard to socio-economic status. All informants with one exception, Felicia, described the circumstances of their upbringing with terms like "poor," or "lower class," or they implied as much through less explicit comments.

The number of participants for the dissertation was between 12-20, and a smaller group was identified for second and possible third interviews. After interviewing 21 total informants, a subgroup of 10 was ultimately chosen. Rather than set a fixed number of informants, I chose the criteria of redundancy (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2008) to determine the number of final interviews to include. This is in keeping with an emergent, flexible
approach to qualitative research—a characteristic seen as both faithful, and central, to its practice (Glesne, 2006).

Student informants were all between 18 and 21 years old, and were either in their senior year of high school, recently graduated from high school, or had completed their degree through alternative methods (e.g., G.E.D. classes). In my view it did not seem necessary to interview younger participants in order to secure rich and authentic descriptions of the phenomena to be explored. Indeed, I anticipated that interviewing slightly older and more mature participants (in contrast to, say 15-year-old informants) might provide more richly textured and varied descriptions. Lastly, the restriction of the participants to those 18 years and older helped avoid some of the attendant risks associated with conducting research alongside what would otherwise be categorized as a vulnerable population by virtue of age alone. On the other hand, I did have some initial concerns about this approach as well. In particular that participants who had a few months (and up to a year or more) distance from their secondary experiences might suffer from somewhat obscured recollections, and/or be comparatively more susceptible to inadvertent distortions. With the slightly older participants, however, I discovered that their remembrances of high school were usually quite vivid, and the most powerful experiences they encountered more vivid still. Furthermore, in the case of particularly significant encounters which I anticipated would likely become part of the final study, there were often many questions related to such incidents over the course of the two interviews and follow up correspondences. This provided an avenue for me to return to the narrative material and see if such memories were described consistently.

After identification of potential candidates, selection began by contacting the student/former student by phone whenever possible to introduce myself, to explain in general
terms the purpose of the study, and to answer any initial questions they might have if they appeared interested. When a candidate chose to participate in the study, a contact visit (Seidman, 2006) was arranged at a convenient public location where I explained the purpose of the study, summarized the extent of their anticipated participation, answered additional questions, and provided them with an informed consent document. In most cases, a phone call served to make the potential informant feel comfortable, and our first actual meeting served as the point at which they signed consent documents and thereafter we conducted our initial interview.

**The Interview Process**

The open-ended interview, followed by a second, semi-structured interview, constituted the core material for this study (Seidman, 2006). Phenomenologically-oriented interviews may be used to help gain a richer understanding of a human phenomenon, and to illuminate a particular experience’s meaning (Munhall, 2007). For the present study each informant, with one exception, was interviewed a minimum of two times. Though a third interview was deemed as a potential necessity, two interviews seemed to suffice for emic sufficiency (an exception to this was "Alexander," who was only interviewed in-depth once). Each interview was between 45 and 60 minutes in length and was digitally recorded, the files of which were password-protected on the recording device. During the interviews I took sparse notes in the form of jottings to mark salient moments in the participants’ narrative as well as my reactions to what they shared. Interviews were conducted at locations that provided the maximum possible convenience and comfort for participants, with a concomitant focus by me on locations that did not detract from the integrity of the interview process (e.g., noise level, likelihood of interruptions, etc.). All participants were given the option of selecting their own pseudonym at the conclusion of the first interview; most declined to do so, leaving me to choose the majority of them at my discretion.
In his discussion of rapport, Seidman (2006) characterizes interviewing as a potential example of an "I-Thou" relationship vis-à-vis Buber, one that verges on the concept of a "we" but does not quite cross that boundary. My goal in this process was to thread that proverbial needle: using location, an affirming disposition, and the habits of purposeful listening in order to help create a level of comfort and trust with the respondents. Second interviews were utilized to fill out background information on the participant; in order to clarify and explore points made by the respondent in the first interview; to follow up on potentially emerging themes in greater detail after initial thematic coding; and to illuminate possible connections between participant observer material and interview material.

Transcription and Interpretation

I created Microsoft Word files for all interview material. All such files were copied for backup purposes using password-protected cloud storage, and remained password-protected throughout the transcription, interpretation and write-up phase of the research process. Anonymous backup files were also stored on my personal computer only: one desktop, one portable laptop, and one external hard drive. I was the only person with access to these files through the course of the study. I transcribed all interviews personally. No third-party transcription service was utilized. While this was at times trying, I maintain that, for me, it constituted an important part of my personal and interpretive connection to the narrative material. In listening to the pauses, emphases, and intonations of the participants as I transcribed, I feel it kept me "closer to the data"—that is, closer to the words of my informants—and its many nuances. I hold with Denzin and Lincoln (2002) that the qualitative researcher is best seen as a "...bricoleur, a maker of quilts" (p. 4): that is, one who makes use of the various tools of interpretive inquiry to yield rich understandings of meaning. These understandings should reflect
the layered, complex, and irreducible nature of human experience; they should also be firmly grounded in the interview material (Charmaz, 2008).

The phenomenological orientation demands a reflexive and open "instrument" in the researcher; its demands transcend merely exclusive attention to "methods," however (Munhall, 2007), and instead require transformational processes and habits of mind on the part of researcher: "decentering," for example, is the deliberate effort such researchers must embrace in working to un-know what we think we know. This is critical for open exploration of the life-worlds of our participants and our chosen phenomena. The terrain of phenomenological inquiry is not entirely bereft of guideposts, however—as Munhall (2007) proclaims to her readers: "We have methods!" (p. 146). Giorgi (2008) cautions the budding phenomenological researcher against casting too broad a methodological net, lest she inadvertently draw on conflicting approaches to phenomenology, some of which are "irreconcilable." I have attempted to take this caveat to heart and in part for this reason chose Hycner’s (1985) process for phenomenological interpretation of interview material for the purposes of this study.

**Establishing trustworthiness.** The qualitative phenomenological undertaking embraces the socially constructed nature of reality and the layered nature of human experience (Glesne, 2006), and it furthermore recognizes that its interpretations are constructed understandings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). But saying this is not to suggest that the research process is merely a sail without benefit of ropes at its end, fluttering about in whatever direction the wind happens to blow. Lincoln and Guba (1985), for example, identify the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability to help authenticate findings gleaned through the qualitative research process. Geertz’s (1973) exhortation for "thick description" (p. 9) also speaks to trustworthiness, and is critical for claims to transferability (one must have adequate details about
the phenomenon and its context in order to suggest it may ‘transfer’ to similarly described contexts). I strove to pay particular attention to both of these aims in the hope it would render the words, and the worlds, of my participants in vivid enough detail for subsequent understanding and critique. Prolonged engagement with the narrative material is another way to help corroborate qualitative findings. In pursuit of this, I attempted to "dwell" and do "significant wandering" within the narrative material as Munhall (2007) advises, but tried to do so in a systematic and deliberate way as I searched for meanings embedded in my participants’ experiences (Hycner, 1985).

When reconstructing the narrative material itself, I attempted to pursue trustworthiness by ensuring referential adequacy and including the triangulation of material by exploring the phenomena in question from multiple perspectives in order to increase the study’s structural corroboration (Eisner, 1991). It is hoped that the subsequent descriptions of participant meanings, and confirmation and disconfirmation, were thus rendered all the more richly, and that thematic interpretations were concomitantly strengthened as well. The use of audit trails is also seen as essential to establishing the trustworthiness of qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2007). My interview transcripts and interview notations along with my reflective journal and a written record of how material was gathered and subsequently organized, helped to ensure an adequate audit trail for later consideration by competent peer evaluators.

**Ethical Considerations**

No research is free from the risk of potential of harm, even when it is conducted thoughtfully and with concern for the participants in mind (Magdola & Weems, 2002). From the decision regarding what to research, to the interpretation, write-up, and dissemination phases, the risk of harm is never something the researcher can dismiss as an issue she has "dealt with."
Indeed, the potential for harm within the qualitative domain, reliant as it is on delicate relationships between researcher and respondent, as well as nearness to the intimate lived worlds of others, may in some ways be even greater than positivist-oriented inquiry (V. Polakow, 2010, personal communication). This is not only due to the vulnerabilities that can be encountered as memories are shared through ethnographic or interview methods, but also to how such memories are re-presented by the researcher.

**Mindfulness of the Potential to Harm**

The silencing or misrepresentation of voice and experience is but one form of potential harm in qualitative research. I have also striven to remain aware of the inequalities of power and privilege as well, particularly given the importance of the researcher-respondent association mentioned above (Magdola & Weems, 2002). The implications of these relationships were attended to as carefully as possible. My goal was to build rapport and trust through all levels of the communicative process, but particularly in face-to-face interactions, where there is an explicit emphasis on the comfort of the informant and the need for a trusting and respectful atmosphere. In particular, exploring experiences of disconfirmation were a concern as such encounters can include recollections of moments of degradation or dehumanization in varying levels. Remaining sensitive to the emotional dynamics of exploring these recollections with informants was a responsibility I did my best to take seriously. In pursuit of this I remained prepared to temporarily pause, or to suspend interviews entirely, if it appeared necessary for the comfort of the informant, and furthermore to provide counseling services from a list of contacts if particularly painful memories emerged.

Furthermore, writing about moments of alienation, dehumanization, and disconfirmation as experienced by my informants within the larger context of schools I take to be a political act
by definition; one which puts the narratives of participants in moments of vulnerability in stark relief, and opens them to potentially public inquiry. Even for the careful researcher, opportunities to do unintended harm abound in such circumstances. Strict attention to additional issues raised by Magdola and Weems (2002), in particular focusing on the maintenance of full participant anonymity and informant-rights, cultivating a sensitivity to the ethical and political dynamics of relationships developed and the contexts in which they are explored, and continually returning to question "how may I be harming my participants?" was therefore critical. In so doing, I believe that I have done what Van Manen (1983) asserts is the only thing one can truly achieve in the area of the qualitative enterprise: reducing the harm we may do to the lowest possible levels. Keen and persistent awareness of the inherently unequal dynamics present in the research process, and a commitment to reflexivity in regard to the researcher role may ultimately ameliorate occurrences of potential harm.

While all informants were 18 years of age or older, I strove to be attentive to a number of issues that could lead to unintended harm, particularly within the dynamics of the interview relationship (Seidman, 2006). The sharing of painful memories in connection with perceived experiences of disconfirmation has the potential to place the respondent in a highly vulnerable emotional state, and I tried to remain sensitive to avoid subordinating their feelings and humanness in pursuit of a research goal. Disciplined attentiveness to the I-Thou interview orientation (Buber, 1923; Seidman, 2006) and an intersubjective orientation (Munhall, 2007) assisted me in this process.

In addition to actions the researcher can take to protect participants from harm, there are guidelines for ethical and responsible practices in research defined by the American Psychological Association, as well as the Institutional Review Board (Human Subjects Review Board).
Committee) of Eastern Michigan University. Compliance with these guidelines in the latter case was monitored and regulated not just by the Institutional Review Board itself, but also by my dissertation chair and dissertation committee members to ensure the safety of participants.

**Informed Consent**

Key among the ethical considerations in research is that of informed consent, which establishes a record of voluntary participation on the part of informants in a study and clarifies the nature of the researcher-respondent relationship with regard to matters such as compensation, material dissemination, participant anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time. My informed consent document was approved by members of my dissertation committee as well as by Eastern Michigan University’s Human Subjects Review Committee. I thoroughly reviewed informed consent documentation with my participants at our initial meeting, inviting and answering any questions they had, and strove to ensure they not only signed, but also understood, to the greatest extent possible, all consent documentation prior to our first interview. Participants were all given a copy of the consent form for their own records.

**Limitations and Reflections**

Regardless of how one determines to study a given phenomenon there will always be limitations present in the method chosen. Creswell (2002) highlights two such concerns for the process of storytelling as the central means of material gathering in the qualitative method. He notes that there may be unintended distortions and areas where authenticity in participant retelling could become an issue. Even for the participant who has lived his/her experiences first-hand (to say nothing of the researcher who is yet one further step removed) the act of narrating one’s past is itself a reconstruction of previous events. In this sense, it is incumbent upon the researcher to remember that all such reconstructions are susceptible to various limitations:
selective memory, personal biases, outright forgetfulness, etc. Retrospective accounts, in short, do, to some extent, alter the original experience. But such an acknowledgement does imply that the narration of subjective experience is without methodological or interpretive value. In writing about the challenges of representing voice in oral history research, Errante (2000) refers to voice as the "articulation of identity" (p. 17), and reminds us of the dialectic nature of the interviewer-informant dynamic. She exhorts researchers to bear in mind that both the remembering and the telling of one’s story in an interview are "…themeselves events, [and] not only descriptions of events" (p. 17) [emphasis added]. The interview is therefore an act with numerous implications—i.e., political, ethical, methodological, and existential—and should ultimately be framed and approached this way.

As a researcher it was my aim to remain open to the very real possibility of these nuances and to be both reflexive and rigorous in my attempts to understand and interpret the narratives of my informants as credibly as possible—particularly during the analysis phase of the research. Yet despite this awareness, I maintain that it was equally important for me throughout this study to assume a basic level of coherence and authenticity to the stories my participants shared. In the end, qualitative research, and the phenomenological orientation in particular, centralizes the importance of meanings constructed within lived experience; it identifies language as the way in which we narrate and organize that inner world (Munhall, 2007); thus, a researcher stance which by default assumes distortions and inauthenticity in participants’ stories would be hostile both to those participants, and to the qualitative undertaking more generally. I contend that it is possible, in short, to take the voices of informants seriously while also utilizing methods that help reconstruct their stories in holistic and systematic ways.
Reflections. Perhaps like all researchers who embark on a qualitative journey and who remain open to its potential for personal growth and transformation, I was at times overwhelmed, intimidated, and exhilarated by the interpretive process. For me, in times of frustration and uncertainty I returned not just to the specific steps in Hycner (1985) or Munhall (2007), but to notions that I had encountered in my doctoral preparation (both in writing and from faculty), which I came to think embodied the larger spirit of qualitative research. Stay close to the data, or "hover low"; be as true as you can to the stories of your participants; beware of author intrusion in the reconstruction of events; value an emic approach to understanding; seek meaning in individual experience, and so on. These phrases may constitute mere distillations of ideas that remained resonant with me as I approached this study. But when I encountered difficulty, self-doubt, and even trepidation (and I did), I found some solace in returning to these condensed representations of larger ideas.

It is also quite important how this process is framed in our thinking and our words. I was not merely standing apart from and "examining" data. I slowly became a part of the narrative material in question, interacting and engaging with it both through the interview and subsequent struggles to interpret and reconstruct it. In short I had become enmeshed in Errante’s (2000) "event in itself," and my awareness of the challenges and responsibilities of this fact was never far from my mind. In the end, the word "reflexive" returns to me as being of importance. Because this dissertation was a follow up to a pilot study I had completed in my advanced qualitative methods course, I had the benefit of some hindsight with regard to things I wanted to both embrace and avoid. With regard to the latter, I struggled with a sensitivity to, and concern about, imposing preconceived patterns of significance or etic interpretations on my participants’ experiences.
Yet despite this, I knew that I came to the process with my own sensitivities—proclivities, even—to ideas within the literature and my own experience that were meaningful to me. (Such realities were, after all, what had initially inspired me to pursue this qualitative project to begin with!) As the "instrument" in this type of research, however, we cannot render ourselves blank slates prior to beginning our inquiry. This is an observation that is seen not only as self-evident within the interpretive paradigm, but in fact as desirable in the pursuit of phenomenology—a complete reduction is an impossibility (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Van Manen, 1990). In an attempt to remain reflexive, I found myself checking, rechecking, and checking again my participants’ verbatim in order to be as certain as possible that my larger interpretations were credible. In some cases, their words were explicit and made this process relatively easy; in others, they were not, and I had to look more closely and interpret with even greater caution.

By contrast, I sought throughout my endeavors to embrace the sense of joy and wonder that I experienced when I worked on my pilot study. At and subsequent to that time I came to view the practice of qualitative research, and phenomenology in particular, as a hopeful, inspiring, and ultimately transformative undertaking. No matter how intimidated I might have been at various times about the process of dissertation writing in itself, I worked to remain centered on the narratives of my participants and what their subjective experience had to teach not only me, but potentially, others as well. I concur wholeheartedly with Munhall (2007) who writes that "There is optimism in phenomenology" (p. 206): particularly in the embrace of the world of human experience as a reality which is not predetermined or prescribed, and bearing witness to this fact in a way that affirms and celebrates individual dignity. The qualitative method has placed me in the fortunate position of being able to do just that.
Significance and Benefits of the Study

Munhall (2007) argues that phenomenological interpretations of the meanings of experiences which our informants share with us provide implications for change: in short, central to phenomenology is what the author calls a "search for significance" (p. 154) [emphasis added]. I embrace this perspective, and hope that the findings of this dissertation do more than simply add to the academic literature on relationality. Strengthening and expanding the conversational spaces within which reformers are pushing back against today’s audit culture in the public school domain is critical. Such efforts are approached from various philosophical and pedagogical orientations, from project-based learning reforms that centralize student interests in instruction, to social justice-oriented discourses that connect pedagogy to larger issues of equity and anti-discrimination. I am hopeful that an increased attention to relationality can become part of this broader reform (or, perhaps resistance) movement, and that this dissertation will contribute to that effort. The present dissertation may help to more firmly place qualitative, phenomenologically illuminated understandings of confirmation and disconfirmation within the present literature on education. But I am also hopeful that its findings can be incorporated into wider discourses at the level of "practical" school reform.

Conclusion

Recognition of the relational terrain in our public schools is far from a trivial matter, and if Buber (1923) has indeed identified a phenomenon of significance in his confirmation construct, then it is incumbent upon us to consider the meanings students assign to such experiences. Doing so, in my view, requires a careful attention to the existential orientation toward education argued for by Maxine Greene (1975; 1978), Vandenberg (1971) and others. A deeper understanding of the shape and texture that these meanings take for students amid their
learning experiences can enrich our discourses, not only those focused on "schooling" in the narrow sense, but more broadly, on education. An existential and relational orientation toward schooling would represent a fundamental transformation in the discourses and discursive practices which now dominate. While this dissertation does not claim to lay the grounds for such a shift in the broad sense, a clearer understanding of how confirmation and disconfirmation may be contributing to this existential terrain, described through lived experiences of the participants, is one piece of that larger conversation. Exploring the perceived impact of these twin phenomena in the lives of students can only enrich the way we think and speak about both the purpose and practice in the schools.
CHAPTER 3: DAVIE AND DIMITRI

Both less than a year out of high school, Davie and Dimitri each described significant relational encounters and experiences as they considered their years in secondary school. In each of their experiences their identity as gay, African American males contributed not only to multi-layered struggles within their school and home environments, but also to their crystallizing sense of identity as it took shape amid this persistent isolation and frequent hostility. While their individual stories are unique, each shared recollections of encounters with various forms of judgment, harassment, bullying, and—significantly—intermittent actions that were perceived as deeply affirming from adults within their respective learning environments. Their joint narratives present a picture of schools, both public and charter, which are rife with the potential for, and enactment of, disaffirming and alienating encounters; but also as sites where the perception of care and active support by adults can be both sustaining and transformative to young learners as they navigate social and personal difficulties.

Davie

Born and raised in a small community along Detroit’s west side, Davie, at 19, studies cosmetology at a local institute. He recalled his secondary school experiences as "rough," and "never smooth." An only child, Davie was raised by extended family and attended school in early adolescence within the city’s limits. After his family later moved, he experienced his secondary learning environment in an outlying suburb of Detroit, a place he remembered as being a "better neighborhood." The meanings and impact of his experience as a gay, African American student quickly surfaced in our interviews, as he describes a period of isolation that grew out of encounters with bullying and harassment:
It made me not wanna go to school, cause I couldn’t—I couldn’t talk to my teachers or certain staff about it, because they had their own agenda. And sometimes expressing how you feel about certain things, you are afraid of how people will accept it, or what they’ll say, or are they gonna judge me or not help [me]. It’s like, how do I tell a teacher or counselor that I don’t feel good or safe?

Throughout our interviews, Davie—tall, thin, and smiling readily—spoke with clarity and insightfulness about his experiences and their effects on him. He describes himself as a "people person," as someone who "likes to get some type of interaction." This was not only a statement about his personality in general, but also appeared to be related to his perception of what kind of learning environment had been most helpful to him—both academically and in terms of feeling personally comfortable within a given classroom. Davie also articulated what appeared to be a clear and deeply rooted sense of what things were right and wrong in the schools he attended, as well as what things were needed in order to make schools safer and more affirming places for students. Dimitri’s narrative shared this characteristic as well, and both illuminated the pervasiveness of harassment and bullying—not only at the hands of students but of teachers. After highlighting the fact that such harassment and intimidation does not always have to be physical, Davie, in response to a question about what had made school so "rough" for him, shared that he was "bullied more than anything."

Such intimidation and bullying appeared to manifest itself most commonly in the area of verbal harassment and similar micro-aggressions. For Davie, this kind of harassment extended to adults and teachers as well, giving rise to some of his more memorable, though unpleasant, interpersonal encounters with staff. One such set of encounters centered on Mr. Canfield, Davie’s 11th grade math teacher. In addition to the perceived absence of care in Mr. Canfield’s
It was embarrassing. He [Mr. Canfield] would pull me to the side and there would be comments made, specifically. I felt like he was picking on me. Maybe if I was learning something in his classroom, or if we had that type of relationship as me and my previous math teacher did. Maybe I would feel differently. But it was like, you already don’t assist me. You say what a horrible job that we’re doing, or that I’m doing. And then you wanna tell me that I should "tone it down" or whatever. No. That’s unnecessary. You should be focused on why I’m failing your class. Not what kind of shoes I’m wearing tomorrow.

Davie’s perception of his teacher’s intent clearly mattered to him, as did the type of relationship and interpersonal dynamic he encountered. He described Mr. Canfield’s instructional style as "hardcore," adding, "I didn’t feel nurtured by him in any way." Hence, the perception of an absence of care extended to learning encounters as well. When asked to describe such interactions in more detail he remarked it was a "go in and sit down and get to work" environment. And if he or another student did not answer a question accurately, the response Davie recalled was along the lines of "nope, that’s wrong—next" instead of "let me help you, let me assist you…what are you not understanding?" For Davie, Mr. Canfield’s classroom was a toxic mixture of disconfirming experiences, one which had a direct impact on his attitude toward the subject matter (which was one he traditionally struggled in and did not care for). Despite having a previous math teacher in the 9th grade who supported and inspired him in math, he recalled "[not] really having a passion for math after that [the experience in Mr. Canfield’s class]."
Even graduation did not mollify the judgmental and shaming gaze of Mr. Canfield, however. Davie remarked on a chance encounter he had with the teacher at a CVS in the months following the completion of his senior year. After sharing that he was going to school for cosmetology, Davie described Mr. Canfield as entirely negative. He had the "worst things to say," Davie recalled, adding:

He said I would always be broke...that [I] just want to do hair with "those queens." I was like, never mind, I don’t even know why I spoke to you. Because, we’re in a public setting now; I graduated. And you just have no encouraging words, you know? Nothing. You just blew me out the water once again, and I’m not even your student anymore.

"If Their Teachers Are There to Support Them, it’s Gonna Get Done"

When asked about his most memorable negative and positive experiences in high school, Davie’s narrative went to teachers like Mr. Canfield. Though he clearly experienced harassment and judgment from fellow students as well, and these encounters were significant by his own account, it is nevertheless telling that the most vivid encounters he shared were the interactions with adults. When asked if it was any different when he experienced this kind of treatment from staff as opposed to students, he responded that it "made me hate school. I didn’t want to hear anything like that from anybody, especially from staff."

Yet as potent as these negative and disconfirming adult encounters appeared to be for Davie, he also shared vivid memories of relationships with adults who actively cared for, connected with, and confirmed his presence in school. As a counternarrative to the kind of experiences he endured with Mr. Canfield, these moments appeared to be equally, if not more, potent, in their effect for Davie. So much so that when he described what quality should be front and center in every classroom, he responded emphatically that "school is not prison," and that "it
should be warm and caring all the time." Everyone, Davie maintained, should be "nurtured regardless of who they are."

Mrs. Kelly appears to have been just such an instructor in Davie’s estimation. Also a math teacher, but in direct contrast to Mr. Canfield, she was described by Davie as someone who was "very caring." He went into more detail about the way Mrs. Kelly approached her class:

She came to us with this attitude of, "I want to help you…I want you to really learn and grab an experience just from being in this classroom." I feel like she really wanted to show us that, [we] may not feel loved, or experience someone teaching [us] the right way somewhere else—but I want to personally show you that I’m here.

For Davie, Mrs. Kelly’s class was characterized in part by a lack of judgment and shaming. He recalls that she never put her students "on blast," by needlessly embarrassing them in public. Yet he also recalled her academic expectations and a sense of purpose while in her classroom. "There was never a dull moment," he noted, "after we got done doing a certain assignment, there would be something else. But it was very upbeat all the time. If was very consistent." It is worth noting that Davie (only a year out of high school) described Mrs. Kelly’s high expectations in connection with her general disposition of care and supportiveness, possibly suggestive of a dimension of teaching which might be labeled as "caring through competence."

The perception of confirming acts and care for Davie, however, was about more than particular encounters where such affirming behavior was directed at him specifically. Its presence or absence was part of an overall sense of the school "environment" which he articulated throughout the interviews. This perception was not merely observational, but rather normative, and demonstrative of a sense of clarity about injustices at the hands of fellow students and teachers, and about the way things "should be" within the school. He highlighted this point
by mentioning that his occasional disinclination to go to school was not always due to disconfirming encounters:

I feel like sometimes, throughout being in school with teachers…not being so enthused about teaching, not really showing they care, it kind of makes you not wanna go to school. I would actually skip school because I just didn’t want to go. It wasn’t always because I was being bullied by somebody. I just didn’t want to get up and go because, we’re not gonna learn anything anyway…. So it just made it feel like it’s a waste of time. It’s like, Why am I sitting here?

This sentiment appears to be anything but excuse-making, adolescent shiftlessness, or any of the other labels that are so cavalierly utilized in our prevailing youth discourses today. In Mrs. Kelly’s room, in fact, the pacing and high expectations were remembered fondly: "it was never a relaxing day, it was always upbeat and [we were] always doing something." An environment that lacks confirming encounters, one where students may feel alienated, or, worse targeted, may indeed do serious harm; including one where students perceive a generalized absence of care and/or passion connected with enterprise of learning in and of itself. Davie’s experiences seem to bear this out, and it is epitomized by one of his more terse phrases early in the interview process: "When you go beyond, we go beyond." Teacher investment in the general welfare of their students, in their existential presence, and in their learning all appear to matter greatly—and certainly they did for Davie.

The words of Davie suggest the impact interpersonal encounters with adults in the schools can be both profound and long-lasting. Particularly memorable was an unpaid school liaison, Ms. Garrett, who intervened at critical times on behalf of Davie. In describing these interventions, even Davie’s non-verbal communication seemed to confirm his fondness for Ms.
Garret’s acts of kindness. He smiled consistently and became especially animated when sharing his stories of her. On one occasion he described how she found him struggling in an English class, not due to an inability or unwillingness to complete the day-to-day work, but because of a project which he was having difficulty with that, due to its value, was going to have a disproportionately large impact on his grade. Ms. Garret took it upon herself to set up a meeting with the teacher after talking to Davie:

[Ms. Garret] wasn’t getting paid, [but] she was there at our school, working, hands on. And she took me to the teacher and explained to the teacher everything that I talked to her about. And she actually worked it out to where I didn’t have to do some of the work. I felt like that was amazing. First of all, you’re not getting paid. But you care that much to help me out?

When asked if this was his only encounter with the school liaison, Davie hesitated for a moment and then confirmed that it was not. He described how after the situation with the English teacher, Ms. Garret had once again acted on his behalf:

I don’t know if I should be saying this, but she actually took me to the cosmetology institute where I go now, so I could get my interview. Because I didn’t have a way. My mom at the time didn’t have a vehicle. And my dad lived all the way on the other side of town. It was more like a cry for help, and she was there. So that just kind of inspired me.

This last point made by Davie is a critical one, and something that he elaborated on in the second interview. I had inquired what impact Mrs. Garret’s actions may have had in connection with the feelings of isolation he had mentioned earlier, and he replied that "it made me more comfortable to be myself around other students." When invited to clarify this, he added, "Well, if [she] help[ed] me or I can talk to [her] about anything, then [maybe] I can talk to my counselor." What
Davie appears to have been describing was a kind of ripple effect in the area of trust with regard to others, caused by this moment of active support and confirmation. Whereas before—that is, prior to the actions of Ms. Garrett—he maintains it would have been far more likely he would have kept to himself, despite the severity of the dilemma he was facing. He concluded by adding that "It’s just awesome when someone’s there to actually listen and give their input, and help if they can."

While Davie appeared quick to minimize his own hardships on more than one occasion (noting that a lot of students "go through more things" than he did, for instance, and characterizing moments of bullying as "annoying") his experiences nevertheless point to significant meaning-making around issues of support, judgment and caring. His choice of words in describing the type of relational behaviors that were most significant and affirming to him ("nurturing," "bonding," a need for "some type of interaction") was both explicit and purposeful; and he was equally clear about the kinds of interpersonal behaviors that worked to erode or destroy not only his interest in a subject, but internal motivation to attend school generally. Additionally, as mentioned above, Davie had an equally lucid sense of where his schools had failed him and what kind of dispositions teachers should embrace that could have made him, and potentially, other students, more positively disposed to their learning experiences. For urban students in particular, caring was vital, and Davie was emphatic on this point:

I think that is so critical because, especially where I come from in the urban community...a lot of kids...they have a lot on their plate before school. School is not the main priority. It’s about a quick fix to try and get some quick money, or to try and provide for my mom, or my brothers and sisters, or be the man of the household. So that’s what I mean by [teachers] should go over and beyond. Because I feel like a lot of
times [teachers] knew that a lot of students didn’t care. So it’s like, well, if you don’t care then I don’t care. But it’s not supposed to be like that. Why are you a teacher if you’re not caring only because I don’t?

**Dimitri**

Dimitri’s memories about and experiences of his secondary education were suggestive of an oftentimes difficult journey. One in which the terrain he navigated could be alienating, judgmental, and frequently outright hostile. Dimitri was far more explicit regarding his encounters of student-to-student harassment in connection with his sexuality, and for him, the importance of a perception of security and safety ran throughout both of our interviews. Taken together, the experiences of these two participants do not paint a flattering picture of the school climate for LGBTQ students, either in relation to fellow students or to staff. Interestingly, both of them tended to characterize the harassment and bullying that they endured (almost exclusively verbal for both) in ways that had the effect of minimizing it. To the extent that this perception—that "real" bullying or intimidation require some form of physical assault—is accepted, it belies a troubling pattern. One that could very easily mask painful and pernicious stories beneath a self-imposed veneer of what constitutes bullying and what does not.

Dimitri was in his final weeks of high school when we met for our first interview. While his mannerisms are gentle and frame slender, he possesses a commanding baritone voice that is often striking when he laughs or speaks with conviction. He was raised by his grandmother in a suburb just outside of Detroit, one that he was swift to describe as a "negative environment, all around." Violence and the threat of violence in the neighborhood, principally in the form of gunshots and drugs, were vividly recalled by Dimitri. "It was hard to escape," he added, noting that on one occasion he remembered seeing a newscast that his community had suffered "five
shootings in five hours." Some of these instances he recalled were even on his street and involved family members.

Dimitri’s experiences with regard to safety, or, more accurately, the lack of safety, extended to the majority of his schooling recollections. Like Davie, he endured bullying at the hands of fellow students, stating that "I kinda got…not bullied, but—as far as verbally, speaking-wise, you know? ‘That fag.’ And I’m used to that." He added that some teachers were also "negative because I was gay." Indeed, Dimitri recalled that most of his teachers did not give him what he called "an education feel," and asserted that the majority of the teachers at his first high school "really didn’t care." As previously mentioned, however, Dimitri was far more vivid in his description of harassment and intimidation by fellow students than Davie was, noting that his experiences with this kind of treatment began very early in his schooling, because other kids could discern his sexuality due to his "aura" or how he walked:

It [being a gay, African American male in schools] was torture almost. Even from elementary I was sort of picked on. As I grew older in middle school, it was the worst. I ate lunch in the bathroom. It was a strong impact as far as negativity and little slurs like "That fag!"

Dimitri was clear about the impact that this kind of treatment had on his learning, though it was not the only thing he noted which "robbed" him of his education. In particular, the first high school he attended had an atmosphere that was "chaotic," and had "no real security." The classrooms he described were often overcrowded, prone to student-on-student violence, and even student to teacher violence (he recalled a fight between a student and the school’s principal). Not surprisingly given these influences Dimitri felt it was "impossible to get an education," despite feeling as though he "could have been an 'A' student."
"You Gotta Have a Voice"

As with Davie, adults that Dimitri encountered in the schools too often did not provide the kind of solace he both sought and deserved, and in fact they would sometimes contribute to his humiliation by adding their own judgment to an already toxic social environment. Yet for Dimitri, these instances appeared to have the added impact of making him feel even less safe than he already did. He recalled one instance which was illustrative of this, the frustration evident on his face (and in his voice) at the time he shared it:

It was a security guard....I think I was having an argument with this boy, and he [the security guard] laughed. Like, he thought it was funny instead of doing his job—‘cause it was fittin’ to escalate to a fight. He just laughed, you know? I think I had long hair at the time, and he said something [about] my hair....It was just a bad vibe ‘cause he was laughing, and you’re supposed to be an adult and do your job, and make the student feel secure.

Instances such as this contributed to Dimitri’s sense of being "silenced," which he said was most profound in the 7th grade—a time when he recalled enduring severe depression and even considered suicide. This sense of isolation and alienation within the school environment was exacerbated by the perception of a near-total lack of security. Nevertheless, not only was Dimitri adamant about the need for having a "voice" when such encounters happened, he, like Davie, was explicit about the kinds of behavior and treatment that students had a right to expect from teachers charged with their care and learning. One such incident occurred in the final minutes of one of his math classes with his teacher at the time:

I was talking to some friends of mine and [the teacher] butted into the conversation, which kind of irritated me. He was talking about being gay, [and] how you can’t be born
gay. Which, you know, is unprofessional. So...that kind of angered me a little bit. How can you say—how do you know if that’s true or not? So I said to him, "How do you know that?" And he said, "It’s in the Bible." Stuff like that. Well, the Bible doesn’t apply to everyone. It was just, you know, sudden for me. I didn’t expect him to say that.

Despite characterizing instances such as these as merely "irritating," Dimitri was quick to point out that these moments of judgment were particularly painful when they came from staff. "It’s just worse coming from an adult for me," he added, noting an additional concern about this kind of adult behavior perpetuating hurtful student behavior as well: "I think…some students are gonna agree with the adult, or go with the adult’s decision. Say I had a different opinion on that [topic], now no one’s gonna hear it. They’re just gonna hear the teacher’s opinion."

Dimitri’s experiences are suggestive of a very precarious and exhausting balancing act, one where his desire to "have a voice" must at times have had to be weighed against the kind of outright intimidation (from authority figures or fellow students) that can lead to that very same silencing—including threats of physical reprisal. This tension was evident in Dimitri’s narratives, where, with regard to the teacher’s comment about the Bible, he claimed he was "not the arguing type;" while in other instances, such as hearing a fellow student say she would "beat her child if she ever found out he was gay," Dimitri chose to assert his voice with alacrity. "I talked to her. I wasn’t gonna take it lightly, you know, of course I’m gonna say something to you."

"She cared about her students’ education and their needs." As with Davie, the impact of adults in the school environment from whom he did perceive an affirming sense of support and concern was significant. For Dimitri, his memories of Mrs. Walker appeared to epitomize these characteristics. Though he encountered her early on in his secondary education,
Mrs. Walker’s impact seemed to be profound. Dimitri recalled her classroom as one that felt "secure" and "comfortable," and made a direct link to her personal qualities as being responsible for this. He described her as "firm, but you could come at her with anything." When asked to elaborate he returned to the notion of security, adding: "There wasn’t gonna be anything going down in her room. Like if I was arguing with a student, she would step in and say 'That’s not gonna fly.' "

Mrs. Walker also demonstrated an existential concern about her individual students as well, however. Dimitri recalled her addressing him personally in a supportive manner, reassuring him that circumstances would improve regarding the treatment he was enduring in connection with his sexuality. "She was very positive," he added. "She would say, ‘If you have any problems you can come see me after class…you don’t have to come now.'"

The most vivid memory of Mrs. Walker for Dimitri concerned a student whom he recalled was regularly shunned and shamed by his classmates:

She had a rough life, you know, as far as parents and stuff. And they [the students] was [sic] talkin’ about her. She smelled really bad, she didn’t wash up, and she wore the same outfit every day and the students were really mean to her. And Mrs. Walker would see that and say, ‘Go sit by her.’ And she made sure she got soap and even got her an outfit of clothes. She actually went out of her way to help a student, which she didn’t have to do.

When asked what he thought his experiences at Central High would have been like had there been an entire staff of Mrs. Walkers, Dimitri replied that he thought it would have made a "huge" difference, going on to say that the students would likely not have been as "negative and chaotic" if they had encountered more teachers like Mrs. Walker. This does appear to speak to the impact that Dimitri perceives Mrs. Walker had on the classroom, and perhaps to the impact that she had
on him. That impact was summarized emphatically toward the end of the second interview, where he reflected on what encountering Mrs. Walker had meant to him on a personal level amid the turmoil of his middle school years:

It meant a lot. It was part of me maturing, seeing there were actually people out there who actually cared. Stuff I didn’t get from home I got from her, you know? Empowering words, uplifting words. She did make an impact on me. There was so much going on, but she did make an impact.

While the level of affection and esteem Dimitri held for Mrs. Walker appeared to be unique among his school experiences, there were other teachers whose actions were perceived by him as significant. One teacher at his first high school was given credit for being "firm" and "professional" with the students, and ensuring that there was no harassment tolerated in his classroom. At the outset of his junior year, Dimitri transferred to a new high school, which he described as being "warmer" than Central. He noted how small things like facial expressions and tone of voice, which were more pleasant at the new high school, can be meaningful, even making what he called a "big difference. When you’re greeted with a smile, you can go to the teacher and feel more comfortable. To ask things not only about schoolwork, but also personal things…like guidance."

**Conclusion**

The narratives of Davie and Dimitri illuminate experiences in their secondary school years that were often difficult and painful. For both, the near ubiquity of a sense of judgment by peers as well as adults, was significant, and mentioned on numerous occasions both explicitly and implicitly. Harassment and bullying were persistent for both of them as well, creating a climate that tended to both isolate and marginalize them for their sexual orientation. For Dimitri,
these experiences were exacerbated by a near complete lack of safety in his learning environments (at least until his final two years of high school, after leaving his first high school). Yet both of these young men did endure despite these hardships, graduating successfully despite often hostile school climates in both their cases. Both also encountered adults who took the time to advocate for and support them, not merely as students whose job was "to graduate," but also by demonstrating what each appears to have perceived as investment on a more personal level as well. The meanings that both Davie and Dimitri built around such encounters suggest the impact of perceiving confirming actions by adults can not only be significant to the individual in the immediate sense, but lasting in their impact as well.
CHAPTER 4: SAMINA, ALLIE, AND JAMES

The narratives of Samina, Allie, and James suggest that with meaningful support and encouragement, it is possible for schools to be sites that both empower and affirm their students. These participants’ experiences highlight the central and transformative impact that a single instructor’s relationship can have on individual self-perceptions. Not merely self-perceptions regarding efficacy as a learner in a given academic subject, but also self-concept in the broader sense—that is, as it relates to a student’s becoming as an individual.

Both Allie and Samina emerged from working class families where they were the first in their family to attend college. Both are also "success stories” in the conventional schooling sense of the phrase. Each of them at the time of their interviews was enrolled (and indeed flourishing) at a university in southeast Michigan, Samia as a Junior and Allie as a sophomore. Each also articulated aspirations for graduate work, and a clear sense of long-term professional purpose. Yet Allie and Samina’s individual narratives also reveal complex personal histories that are layered with unique struggles: struggles that both of these resilient young women have to a great extent overcome, but that nonetheless call into question any notion of "inevitability” in their present achievements and circumstances.

James’ narrative also highlights the potential for profound meanings in connection with such affirming adult relationships. Raised by his mother in a subsidized housing complex on the edge of Detroit, his encounters with adults who demonstrated authentic concern for his welfare appear to have been instrumental in his ultimately finishing high school. His narrative suggests that secondary school—a place he generally described pejoratively as being run like a "business”—was an institution that tended to alienate and contribute to feelings of invisibility.
James' story illuminates the significance of a caring orientation and the impact of active support by adults in the school setting.

**Samina**

Ebullient and articulate, Samina, at the time of our interviews, was entering the final stages of her work for a bachelor’s degree. She expressed hope of following up her education by pursuing community-based work with local and at-risk youth. Of Arab descent, Samina was born into a Muslim-American family that she described as "troubled" and "broken." When asked to elaborate, she went on to describe significant emotional and verbal abuse at the hands of her father, with whom she could not "ever really recall a positive time with." Because Samina’s mother was always the one providing for the family (which included a younger brother), the parental influence she had the most contact with during her childhood and adolescence was her father: "He was always around physically, but not always emotionally or mentally in any supportive ways. He was more of an emotional abuser."

Samina was quick to identify school as a place that provided something of a solace for her from the difficulties she encountered at home, noting that she would shelter herself "...by being involved in schoolwork." School, she added "...was always kind of a go-to zone for me; [it] was my outlet. It was my escape from all the troubles...." From the earliest years of her secondary experiences, Samina not only maintained a high grade point average, she consistently involved herself in after school activities, and also volunteered to assist teachers in any way she could. Initially, this experience was one where she found receptiveness and "support" from staff, but not necessarily any unique or special "connection" that allowed her to unburden the tremendous weight she was carrying:
Some of my other teachers...they were supportive of my choice. I want[ed] to do extra work, I like a challenge, so they were supportive in that aspect. But they really didn’t know what was going on at home either.

Samina did recall a school counselor, however, whom she credited with picking up on her demeanor. Because her father would drop her off at school each morning, Samina would have to endure the verbal abuse he would subject her to prior to entering the school building. She recalled:

I would have to hear things my father would tell me in the morning, so I would be upset.

And [my counselor] would notice that. A lot of times she would ask me, "What’s wrong? I know something is upsetting you." I felt comfortable around her, so I became able to share these things and [with] her knowing [them].

For Samina, this initial encounter with support from staff members at her middle school was crucial. In addition to the counselor she recalled a teacher who had also been supportive, allowing her to stay after school and function as a kind of "teacher’s aide" so that she could minimize the time she would have to endure with her father at home in the afternoon and evening. Before leaving middle school Samina was recognized at the graduation ceremony for her outstanding academic work and being an "outstanding student" as well. The combination of support from individual instructors during these years and, ultimately, the recognition of her individual value at her graduation ceremony, were of great consequence. It provided the foundation for an emerging counter-narrative to what she was used to experiencing in her home life, one that maintained she "mattered," that she had potential and worth, not just as a student but as a person:
Seeing that those teachers cared. They were supportive without wanting to know, or pushing me to tell them what was going on. And it showed me, having them believe in me and them recognizing me at graduation—it showed me I have potential that I was never told at home. They really made up for that by giving me chances and giving me opportunities.

"She Was Down There With Us…Going Over Things, Breaking Things Down"

Samina went on to attend Kingston, a small public high school where "everyone knew each other" and "the teachers especially knew the students well and developed relationships with them." Even at the outset of her descriptions of the school as a whole, she was quick to emphasize the sense of community and the impact of the close student-teacher relationships that she experienced there. Front and center in her description of the individual classrooms was also this perception of affirming interpersonal encounters with staff. She describes most of the classrooms at Kingston as "warm" places, and added that the teachers there "would bring in their personal experiences…they would show you that they had all the confidence in the world in you." Considering the pernicious and frequent verbal abuse she was enduring at home, it is perhaps no surprise that these affirming interactions with adults at Kingston were remembered by Samina as having such a significant effect on her.

Without question, however, it was Mrs. Kendall, Samina’s world history teacher, whose impact she felt most profoundly. From the outset, her characterization of Mrs. Kendall and the way she approached her classroom responsibilities was telling. Samina emphasized that Mrs. Kendall was "always nice, always encouraging" and that she "didn’t talk down to us…she talked to us." Additionally, the way in which Samina perceived the issue of proximity in connection with Mrs. Kendall surfaced several times. Mrs. Kendall’s desk, she said, was "set up at an
angle," where she was "kind of in front of us, but also a part of us as well." Though she emphasized that Mrs. Kendall was always very professional, Samina viewed this teacher as someone who would "bring herself down to our level," who was "down there with us." This characterization stood in stark contrast to a government teacher that Samina later described, who "didn’t sit down with us. He would just sit in front of the classroom."

This notion of proximity appears to have had significance for Samina, conveying a notion of personal investment and support from the teacher, and communicating a sense of solidarity with her in the learning process. For Samina, when teachers are perceived to be learning along with her, or "down there with us," it helped affirm something for her that went beyond conventional learning. "It showed they have a passion for teaching, and that they genuinely care about their students. They really see their students. Not just as students, but as individuals who are growing and who are finding themselves." As will be seen in the next section, this perception of proximity and its meaning also had importance for Allie in her encounters with a significant teacher.

Though she only had Mrs. Kendall as a teacher for a single semester, one of the organizations that Samina was closely involved with was also sponsored by this instructor—and this fact was crucial in providing the opportunity to develop what for Samina became a vital, formative relationship with an affirming adult role model:

She noticed that I would volunteer a lot for the activities, ‘cause it was based on volunteering and raising money to build schools in Third World and developing countries. She learned about my home life that following fall. She would help me through a lot of it. You know, somebody I could go to; somebody I could talk to; somebody I felt wasn’t gonna judge me.
The sense of emotional safety that Samina appears to have felt in the presence of Mrs. Kendall helped her, eventually, to become more open with this teacher about her struggles at home. But it was not only the perception of sympathy and acceptance from this teacher that proved critical for Samina’s growth and sense of self-efficacy. Mrs. Kendall was a teacher who also held high expectations for her students, who pushed them to do their personal best. "She was an amazing teacher, but she was also a hard teacher. She want[ed] you to succeed. Even if she had not made that connection with you, she would still push [you] to give their best, to give 100%.

"You can do this. You’re gonna get through this." Throughout high school, Samina remained involved in extra and co-curricular activities and organizations, and did so while sustaining grades that placed her near the top of her class. While she admits to drawing strength and a sense of accomplishment from school, it is not difficult to imagine the kind of strain this level of achievement can place on someone of any age, let alone someone in adolescence. In addition to the stress arising out of the verbally abusive relationship with her father, Samina was forced as a consequence of her mother’s "constant" work schedule to take on the responsibilities of primary caretaker for her younger brother. The challenge of juggling all of these duties eventually proved nearly overwhelming, as she recalled a period during her junior year that she almost gave in to a growing sense of exhaustion and frustration. Mrs. Kendall, however, proved instrumental, and Samina recalled her intervention at this "breaking point" as one of the critical turning points of her adolescence:

[Mrs. Kendall] told me to pick my head up, and that I was gonna get through this. She said that she had no doubt in her mind that I will be somebody one day—that I will be a successful individual. And that really stuck with me. Cause at my breaking point, she told me to suck it up. Get over it and do it, because I have the power and potential to do it. It
was a very positive moment in my life. And her saying that she believes in me 100%, and that she knows I’ll be somebody one day--it really encouraged me. It kind of made my heart melt. Like, I love you so much for believing in me. But she also made me believe in myself. And she made me not walk away from everything just because things weren’t right at home.

Samina credited Mrs. Kendall as both an inspiration and role model, but her words also suggest a deep and affirming personal connection that had impact on her crystallizing sense of self. Her experiences with this teacher are indicative of the degree to which active support and a caring disposition can impact students; not only in terms of their learning, but also (and perhaps more importantly) with regard to their perception of their own efficacy and self-image. Mrs. Kendall appears to have created not only a classroom environment that was supportive, but had the capacity, at least in the case of Samina, to forge meaningful relationships with students that confirmed their individual value. In short, Samina’s perception was that she "mattered" to Mrs. Kendall; and as a teacher, Mrs. Kendall cared enough about Samina to perceive her not just as she "was," but as she was becoming—as she "could be" in other words. Now moving successfully toward the completion of her undergraduate degree, a thankful Samina described an unexpected reunion with Mrs. Kendall when bringing her little brother into his high school for orientation:

I walked in and I saw her, we—we just made eye contact from across the room and she ran over to me and we hugged—had a hugging moment. And she—we, we talked about how I’ve been and what I’ve been doing with my life. And she said I know you’ve been doing great things.
Allie

Like Samina, Allie, now midway through her undergraduate studies with a focus on education, is also dedicated to pursuing a profession involving the empowerment of youth. When considering her own school experiences retrospectively Allie speaks with conviction and clarity. For her, the links between what she encountered as a secondary student (both positive and negative) and her choice to pursue the profession of education are often explicit. Raised in a working class family with three siblings, Allie describes her upbringing as having been on the "lower side" of the economic spectrum. She recalls moving several times during her adolescence to different communities and states, and maintained that these transitions contributed to a sense of rootlessness that made her adolescence difficult: "We jumped around so many places," she shared, adding, "I didn’t feel like I belonged anywhere. I didn’t really have an identity, and I definitely didn’t have any voice."

For Allie the memories of struggle and the desire for self-sufficiency at an early age were significant factors in her upbringing. She recalls feeling as though the odds were stacked against her. Her parents had married young, and then divorced when Allie herself was still young. "We raised ourselves pretty much," she shared; and though she went on to say she now views this fact as ultimately a positive part of her later development, it was also clear that the related challenges these experiences posed were both potent and significant. "There wasn’t much hope," she said, matter-of-factly, adding:

I knew from the beginning that none of us were going to go much further. There wasn’t gonna be any money for college. I mean, I was one of four and my parents were [living] on opposite sides of the country.
In conversation Allie speaks passionately, reflectively, and with philosophical depth as she considers her own schooling experiences and their implications. The self-descriptions of her struggles with profound degrees of self-doubt in connection with her early adolescence were sometimes difficult to square in the face of the confident and committed young woman she has become. Yet the precariousness of her circumstances—the knife’s edge upon which her journey seemed at times to be balanced—surfaced on numerous occasions throughout the interviews. Despite revealing that when younger she assumed she "would never go to college," Allie also described the circumstances that may have helped open the space for her to see learning as an empowering experience—if such encounters were nourished meaningfully. As a child she recalled playing "teacher and student" with friends, adding, "That look in somebody’s eyes when they finally understand something…it’s addicting." When I inquired what, for her, had ultimately made school empowering, she replied: "It’s exciting to open your mind to new things. I think in me it triggers [a] sense of self-worth."

For Allie, the transition to a sense of deliberate ownership over her own learning and, more broadly, of school as an empowering place, came initially through a personal connection with books:

I just started paying attention in English classes, thinking what I wanted to be. And I always tried to imagine being something like a doctor...something that would make a lot of money. ‘Cause I thought that’s what you had to do. And I just remember reading and reading and reading. Just reading all these different points of view. And I thought, I feel so much more empowered. I slowly started to build my confidence as a student and as an individual.
Despite this increased sense of efficacy in the area of English and reading, Allie recalls being very reticent about her academic potential in other areas. Science was one such area. "My brain is not a scientific brain at all," she remarked casually, "I just don’t function that way—it’s very hard." Allie brought this sense of nervousness into her 9th grade biology class, where she met Mrs. Daniels, a teacher who would have a lasting and profound impact on her. Her relationship with Mrs. Daniels developed against the backdrop of what was for Allie perceived as an increasingly deteriorating environment at Western High.

"She Interacted with Us as an Equal"

When asked to share a particularly memorable classroom experience, Allie was swift to raise her relationship Mrs. Daniels. A teacher at Western High, the first of two high schools Allie attended, she described Mrs. Daniels’ classroom as "warm and welcoming," and her demeanor as "the epitome of approachable." When she was asked to expand on what the word approachable meant to her in this context, she thought for a moment and responded:

You were never scared to speak to her. You really believed there was no such thing as a stupid question. I think a lot of teachers give a certain vibe if they’re approachable or not and it’s definitely a big thing with the relationship between a student and a teacher. It’s more of a warm feeling, [and] it makes a world of difference to know that type of teacher you can go to with anything.

When reflecting on her time at Western High, Allie’s experiences with Mrs. Daniels stood out as both uniformly positive and unique. She had fond memories of her initial semester at Western, but noted that the school as a whole began to suffer from serious problems, adding, "…the longer I stayed, the worse it got." By the time she had completed her second year, in fact, Allie had decided that she needed to seek out a "…different mode of education."
Mrs. Lennox, whose classroom she characterized as "cold," was raised by Allie as a counterpoint to what she encountered with her biology teacher. Persistently seated at her desk at the front of the class—a location Allie described as "her little space,"—Mrs. Lennox would "…dictate to us with one hand what she wanted us to do." A favorite phrase of this teacher’s was, "boy, you stupid," a phrase Allie remembered her often directing at students in front of their classmates. Allie went on to describe Mrs. Lennox as a "mean," "lazy," and "ineffective" teacher. Furthermore, she was one who routinely embarrassed and humiliated her students. This included Allie, who, presumably due to being regarded by Mrs. Lennox as one of the "smart kids," she would regularly require to stand up and explain to the class the meaning of chapters they had just read in various novels.

Not surprisingly, the kind of humiliation and mistreatment Allie encountered in Mrs. Lennox’s class is something she characterized as both painful and difficult. She recalled being "…angry at [Mrs. Lennox] for being so rude to me in front of the whole class." She also was explicit about the kind of lasting impact that such public embarrassment at the hands of a teacher can have, even if it is unintentional. "Never, ever, ever…hint that a student is totally wrong. Never say, ‘no, that’s not how it works.’" When asked why she added, without hesitation: "You cut off connection with the students. I’ve been told numerous times "Oh, no, no, no. You’re not getting it!" Then I don’t raise my hand anymore…I don’t talk anymore." For Allie, this kind of public shaming not only damages the learning process itself, it has an impact on the kinds of relational connections she perceives as most conducive to her feeling safe and supported in such learning environments. Once that sense of trust is ruptured in such a way, she was silenced. Asked to recall her worst memory from secondary school, Allie described an experience she had
with a long term substitute. Having finished her work early, Allie said rose from her seat and walked over to the where the teacher was seated to turn it in early.

I walked over to where [the teacher] was sitting and turned in my paper. And she stood up in front of the entire class, and ripped up my paper. She said "I don’t accept early work," and then started laughing and told me to go sit down.

Despite disturbing negative experiences such as these, Allie’s recollections of Mrs. Daniels are suggestive of a significant and transformative relationship: one that had a lasting and consequential impact on her. Nervous about the biology class, she recalls approaching Mrs. Daniels the first day. Mrs. Daniels reassured her that things would be okay, and that she would slow it down for her to make sure she got it. "Throughout the entire semester, I met with her after class almost every single day," Allie recalled, smiling, "She would go through almost the entire lesson with me over again, and put it in more simple words...." Throughout her descriptions of the time she spent in Mrs. Daniels class, Allie was keen to emphasize the sense of support and warmth that she perceived from this teacher, as well as the impact the relationship had on her both personally and academically. Indeed, when asked what her most significant memory from her entire secondary school experience was, she did not hesitate to answer:

I think the most memorable thing was getting that passing grade in biology class. I felt like I conquered a beast...that I could conquer any class if I put my mind to it. [It] sounds kind of funny, but that thing that parents tell you when you’re younger—that "you can do anything you put your mind to." In that moment, when I got that grade I knew it.

Like Samina, Allie chose words that were suggestive of the importance of the spatial dimension of her encounters with Mrs. Daniels. That is, proximity was a phenomenon she perceived as having confirmatory value. Allie noted that Mrs. Daniels was rarely ever in front of
the classroom "dictating to us" (as Mrs. Lennox did); instead, she was "...always in the middle somewhere, immersed." Allie added that Mrs. Daniels was a very "surround me" type of teacher that everyone seemed to gravitate to. Visitors to the classroom, she noted, would often have to spend a moment and "...sift through the students to find her." Clearly, for Allie, the value of the warm, affirming, and judgment-free environment she encountered in Mrs. Daniels class was significant for her. When thinking about what kind of teacher she wants to become, she draws an explicit link between the things she saw and felt with Mrs. Daniels and her own professional aspirations. She desires, in short, to "care" about her students in a similar way.

"We’re learning and we’re growing, and if you give us the room to do that, we can grow even more." The deteriorating environment at Western High convinced Allie change was needed. Becoming her own advocate, she sought out and transferred to a nearby "middle college" and there, was fortunate to encounter a far more positive learning environment. In thinking back on the transition and some of the circumstances at Western High that had galvanized her to make it, she remarked:

High schools are turning more into factories. We’re not teaching anybody anything, we’re just getting them to respond how we want them to our questions. They don’t have room to grow, that room to think. [Students] are just told "I need an answer now." The way I see it, we’re just producing students. I just imagine little kids like on an assembly line...you’re just preaching at these kids as they go down the belt. They don’t have the tools to do anything other than keep their head down and do what they’re told.

At her new school, Allie discovered a profound sense of empowerment in the contributions she was able to make to classroom dialogue. Her voice, in other words, was felt to have value. "It broadened my entire world," she said of the experience, "that my opinion mattered, and it’s
gonna be heard." As with Samina, this recognition held deep significance for Allie. When challenged to think of what, as the product of so many years of traditional "factory" schooling, had helped her critically interrogate the very system she was in large part a "product" of, she answered: "When [a teacher] sat down [with me] and said, ‘Well, what do you think?’ That broke me off the assembly line."

As in the case of Samina, the implications of this kind of interaction can extend far beyond a discrete learning encounter; instead, it may reverberate far more deeply within the learner’s sense of self and self-worth. Allie’s narrative and the words she chose to describe it appear to confirm this notion quite explicitly. The care, support, and recognition she felt in the presence of Mrs. Daniels, and the profound sense of achievement that grew out of her earning high marks in her biology class, had transformative and long-term implications:

[It] showed me where I can be in the world. Not where I see myself fitting in in the world. It was the opposite of that. What Mrs. Daniels allowed me to do makes me think I don’t have a "place" in the world. I can grow to wherever I want to grow. I can do whatever I want to do. I can be whatever I want to be.

James

Soft-spoken and possessing a warm disposition, James, of Hispanic origin, was raised approximately twenty miles outside the city of Detroit, principally by his mother, whom he describes as having been "very loving" to both him and his five siblings. Indeed, in contrast to the childhoods described by Allie and Samina, James' recollection of early adolescence is replete with memories of parental care and affection from his mother and of a sense of familial togetherness generally. "That’s the thing with family," he remarked at one point, "there was always someone there." James, like the other two participants whose narratives are presented in
this section, also attended more than one high school. Though he did not successfully graduate from the first one, he ultimately enrolled at an alternative program for adult education; there, he attended adult education classes until he earned his diploma, an accomplishment he is proud of and which he credits Mr. Williams, the counselor in question, with helping him achieve. James was quite vivid in his descriptions of the school he spent the majority of his secondary years at—a place whose climate, by and large, he found deeply alienating.

"I like to know People, and if You just show Me Your Job, that doesn’t tell Me a Single Thing about You"

James was quick to characterize his impression of Brookhill, his first high school, as "larger," a place that felt "impersonal." Asked to describe what about Brookhill felt impersonal, James instead answered by highlighting what he viewed as one of his own personal dispositions: "I’m more of a people person," he said, adding, "The whole atmosphere kind of felt really negative to me." Now almost 20 and planning to re-enroll after a lapse in post-secondary coursework at a local community college, James looks back on his time at Brookhill largely critical of both the school climate, and—at times—of himself. After matter-of-factly characterizing himself as having been a "slacker" in high school, he emphasized that things had not always been that way: "I had been working hard up until high school but for some reason when I got to high school I was like, I don’t really care. It wasn’t a good choice, but it happened." James noted that his mom, while supportive and affectionate, did not pressure him to perform well academically. "My mom was very loving. But it was more of a ‘If you’re a good, warm-hearted person—if you’re kind, that’s what’s more important’ type of thing." James' father apparently displayed more concern about his grades, but since he "wasn’t around much, it wasn’t really enforced."
James frequent description of Brookhill as "impersonal" constituted much more than just a minor institutional shortcoming or a passing annoyance. He points out that though he never encountered any bullying while in high school, and indeed claims he had few distinctly negative encounters at all, the mere absence of these things was not sufficient for him to feel connected to the learning environment:

Just the fact that I didn’t have anybody there doing the opposite either, it was like, well...I could go somewhere where it’s more pleasant, more warm...[where] I know that person genuinely does want me there. That kind of stuff is very important to me.

For James, this lack of affirming encounters in the school environment seems to have contributed to a general perception of school, and by extension, learning, as largely emotionless, perfunctory experiences. School was a place that alienated. But in the case of James this was not because of the combined trauma of particular interactions with adults and fellow students. Instead, it was because of a general sense of failing to matter as an individual. James, in fact, highlighted this feeling on more than one occasion during the interviews, noting that he could (and did) walk both in and out of the building during school hours "to see friends" without being noticed. Asked what kind of message this conveyed to him, he responded, "As a human being...you can pull from that that feeling of being invisible or undesired or unappreciated. But as far as an institution, I guess it feels like they truly don’t look after people."

"There’s Not Really True Emotion Behind What’s Done"

Overall, the lack of human connection James experienced at Brookhill had significant consequences. While he does not directly attribute his characterization of the school as impersonal with his eventual departure from Brookhill prior to graduating, it does not seem too much of a stretch to consider James an example of a "push-out." Despite this, there were for him
a small number of instances where interpersonal encounters with staff were both critical and consequential. The quality of the relationships he had with his instructors and the connection this had to his learning were points that James made explicitly and early on in the interviews. "I noticed when I truly have a relationship with the teacher," he said, "I work harder."

James recalled experiences with two coaches as an example of this dynamic. Both coaches were involved with the wrestling team, which James was a member of; and both coaches he also had as classroom teachers in different subject areas. Yet his experiences with and perception of Mr. Briggs and Mr. Morgan were starkly different. James sensed a casual disregard from Mr. Briggs, a distance and apathy that seemed to echo his characterizations of the school as a whole. "You know when you get that vibe that somebody doesn’t like you, and doesn’t even want you there," he said of Mr. Briggs, "It felt like he didn’t want to have to deal with me…like I was being taught by him simply because he had to, but if he had a choice he’d rather just get me out of his class." When asked if he could recall a particular incident that stood out to him, he added:

I remember one of the other members of the team...I didn’t have a lot of money. One of my shirts was kind of raggedy looking, and he said something to me about it. And Mr. Briggs, the way he dealt with it—it really didn’t feel like he cared.

James described himself as the kind of person who "likes interaction," and "teachers that takes an interest [and] that genuinely are teaching you." Mr. Briggs, however, proved to be the exact opposite of this description, and the kind of imperviousness he encountered from this teacher was not without classroom and learning consequences. When describing the impact this had on his perception of Mr. Briggs’s class, James said:

You already don’t like me, and I don’t feel like being here and trying to do this work when you have a negative depiction of me in the first place. It just felt like, [he] doesn’t
really care what happens to me, if I do or don’t learn…so this is the kind of stuff I’m not really fond of.

James’ experiences with Mr. Morgan, however, were a stark contrast to those with Mr. Briggs. Also a wrestling coach (a duty which this teacher apparently shared with Mr. Briggs), James remembers Mr. Morgan as a coach and teacher who took notice of him on both a personal and an academic level. Because of this, James was more invested. "I didn’t really want to mess up in his classes much because he was a good coach and a good teacher, and I respected him, and wanted to show him that I could work hard." In one instance, James encountered Mr. Morgan in the locker room after a wrestling workout, and the coach inquired (as he had done, according to James, on other occasions) why he didn’t show up to school more often. In these exchanges, James perceived care and concern from Mr. Morgan, rather than judgment, regarding his welfare:

[Mr. Morgan] went out of his way to do stuff that you don’t get paid for: stuff that you don’t necessarily need to do. [Teachers] don’t have to talk with the students. It’s not a necessity. You’re not gonna get a bonus. It’s something you do out of the kindness of your heart…it showed me that he was a kind person and that he truly cared what I did in life—and I appreciated that.

For James the recognition he received from Mr. Morgan was perceived as significant. As with Samina and Mrs. Kendall, a perception of the act of being "seen" (that is, valued) by an adult who had his respect was a potent experience with affirming consequences. Such acts, according to James, "…let you know you’re there: that you’re not just some kind of seat filler." Amid an otherwise alienating, "impersonal" environment, it is easy to imagine the impact such encounters can have. An entire "staff of Mr. Morgans" may, in fact, have provided the kind of
connectedness that made all the difference for someone like James. Instead, he fell through the proverbial cracks of his first school, and nearly out of school altogether but for the intervention of a caring staff member.

With inadequate credits to graduate due to missed days and poor marks, James did not return to Brookhill. He was quite explicit, in fact, about how he would still be without his high school diploma today had it not been for the intervention of Mr. Williams, his counselor at Brookhill. "He had really been nice to me throughout school," James recalled, "he had given me rides home because we didn’t have a car, and he was just a good person in general—despite my lack of effort in school." As with Allie and her experiences with Mrs. Daniels, James perceived patience and care from Mr. Williams rather than judgment. Though meetings with the counselor were infrequent given the school’s size, James characterized them in ways that suggest he perceived only support in the encounters. In contrast to the classroom teacher who callously and publicly asked James, in front of other students, "why he even bothered coming to school," given his spotty attendance, James was quick to note that Mr. Williams always seemed helpful:

Whenever he would meet with me and talk with me...he didn’t really attack me [about] my grades. It was more like, "Maybe we could get you this class in order to make up for what you did here." So it was more helpful. I didn’t even have a class with him; I didn’t even see him every day, but he showed me that he cared about my education and if I got done.

Despite the fact that James was no longer a student at Brookhill, Mr. Williams took it upon himself reach out to him at home. He urged James to take advantage of a program of adult education classes offered at a nearby high school (James was now over 18) which could help him earn his diploma. Mr. Williams had a contact at the adult education department he had already
talked with, and informed James that he had already arranged to have them to waive the enrollment fee due to his family’s low-income status. "It was just very kind, the whole thing," James remarked, adding:

Knowing that he went out of his way, I didn’t want to let him down. It’s like, Okay, I’m getting a second chance here and I can’t blow it. I need to do this, and I need to do this because he went out of his way to help me.

James ultimately completed the adult education courses and earned his diploma, along the way receiving periodic phone calls from Mr. Williams to see how he was doing. "It was so worthwhile to know that he sees that I meant it when I said I wanted to try." When asked how important Mr. Williams’ actions were to him on a personal level, James identifies the kind of support and care his counselor showed him as crucial, even going so far as to identify it as a kind of professional and moral imperative for staff members:

You have a strong hold on something that can greatly influence people. I guess I’m coming from the perspective that, if you can do something to better the situation, you kind of have an obligation to, like, put your hands in and try to make things better.

**Conclusion**

Allie and Samina are both resilient, thoughtful, and committed young women. Both emerged from circumstances of significant pain and struggle in their home lives, and each (in her own, unique way) found a degree of empowerment in their respective learning environments. Importantly, both Allie and Samina also recalled the particular impact that a small number of teachers had on them as a consequence of the relationships they developed and the kind of confirming experiences they encountered. However, the lasting influence that these two teachers did have on them is unmistakable and unequivocal.
For James, the impact of the support and recognition he received by Mr. Miller and his counselor, Mr. Williams, was no less significant. In a school environment that he felt largely invisible within, the confirming experiences he encountered not only created spaces for him to feel cared for on a personal level, but, in the case of Mr. Williams, helped him earn his degree. The intersection of care and confirmation with a person’s subjective experience seems in the cases of these three participants at least, to transform a learning environment into a place where meanings run far deeper than mere subject matter.
CHAPTER 5: ALEXANDER, SALLIE, AND FELICIA

The voices of Alexander, Sallie, and Felicia further illuminate the role that relational encounters in the school setting—both those that affirm and those that alienate—can play. For Alex, Sallie, and Felicia, the perception of their voices being authentically heard, the belief that their individual presence in the classroom was recognized and respected, and the confidence that their learning experiences would be free from judgment and humiliation, was crucial. Alexander, like James in the previous chapter, finished his secondary education through non-traditional means after coming precariously close to not returning to school at all after the 9th grade. As with James, Alexander also found support in the midst of this crisis from a caring adult within the school system, an intervention that had a profound a lasting impact on him.

Felicia’s experiences also speak to the importance of one’s voice, and, indeed, one’s presence, mattering. Her narrative reveals the stultifying effects that encounters with judgment and humiliation at the hands of teachers can have on a student. As we will also see in Alexander’s story in this chapter, Felicia’s narrative suggests just how consequential perceptions of a hostile learning environment can be—not only to academic engagement, but to deeply felt notions of safety and comfort within the classroom setting on an individual level.

Sallie’s experiences also suggest the degree to which having one’s voice affirmed through caring interpersonal relationships is central. In her descriptions, she reveals in compelling language the ways in which the perception of her ability to relate to her teachers played a powerful role in her ability to connect with and trust them. Like both Felicia and Alexander, Sallie’s narrative highlights how the perception of a caring connection with teachers could transform the learning experience for her; just as encounters with judgment at the hands of
adults could poison, sometimes irreparably, the always-present interpersonal dimension of the student-teacher dynamic.

**Alexander**

Now in his early twenties and pursuing a degree in nursing, Alexander, tall, genial, and of Hispanic descent, gives the impression through his manner of speech of a thoughtful and deliberative young person. He described the memories of his learning and relational encounters in high school with clarity and conviction, despite the fact that he only attended public schools for one high school year, his 9th. It was clear that some of the interpersonal experiences which transpired there remained meaningful to him to the present day, however, nearly a full decade after they occurred. Originally raised in Detroit along with his older sister in a single parent household, his family moved to one of the city’s nearby suburbs as he prepared to enter middle school. For Alexander, the transition from middle to school to senior high was one that, while intimidating, carried symbolic significance for him: "It was a scary process, going to high school," he said, adding:

I remember going there the first day and feeling lost. You know the masses. It was the first time I was actually doing anything on my own. And, it was like a fear that kind of turned into an emancipation [sic] almost, because for the first time I was doing something without a parent.

Alexander characterized his transition into high school as one linked to a newfound sense of self-determination. Despite his initial impression of the school as overwhelming, not only because of its size, but because it was "…kinda dark…which made it scary," the experience was simultaneously empowering. "For the first time in your life, you’re in control. It was freeing."
"If You’re Gonna Talk with Us, then Talk with Us"

The perception of empowerment and self-determination was more than something linked to his newly minted status as a high school student, however; for Alexander, it was a felt experience: one that individual teachers could apparently either reinforce or vitiate largely through the ways they chose to interact with him and the other students around him in class. When asked to describe a classroom and teacher he remembered favorably, Alexander was quick to mention Mrs. Jamison. Despite having her for a subject he didn’t care for, English, his memories of this instructor, both her classroom and interpersonal style, were telling. "I was always bad at English class," he recalled, "But with [Mrs. Jamison’s] class, the way she taught you it felt like you weren’t actually doing schoolwork…it was almost fun, almost effortless to do the assignments."

For Alexander, the qualities that made Mrs. Jamison’s class, and her as a teacher, so memorable, were primarily about the relationships she was able to forge with her students. But it was also about the type of environment she helped create for them in her classroom. "…She was real nice," Alexander remarked, adding:

Her approach to teaching made you feel like you were participating rather than just being taught. She let go of the reigns of the class, and it felt less like her teaching us and more like a discussion, which gave it that feeling of being present in something.

Alexander explicitly linked this perception of being "present in something" with the degree to which he felt respected and recognized by Mrs. Jamison. Similar to the experiences of other participants presented thus far, this teacher was perceived by Alexander as one who worked to collapse the power divide that often exists between adults and students. "Instead of standing in
front of us," he emphasized, "she would sit with us like we were in a group discussion. So it brought the feeling of being around your peers. [It] was like she was more down on our level."

Alexander went on to say that Mrs. Jamison was keen to incorporate the interests and individuality of students into her lessons. Thus, it was more than merely having a voice that felt affirming for him; Alexander had what seemed to constitute concrete evidence that his experiences and interests mattered to his teacher.

By contrast, Alexander’s description of his biology instructor, Mr. Saunders, and the kind of atmosphere encountered in his class, was strikingly different. Despite an initial characterization of Mr. Saunders as a "good teacher," Alexander went on to share details about this instructor’s approach that made experiences with him more alienating in nature. "You get in there and…sit down and you get ready to take notes. It was just pretty much you were just almost like you were giving up the reigns." In Mr. Saunders class, he further said, there "wasn’t any interaction. You didn’t feel close…you didn’t feel like you could count on him really. So it was less of, like, an involvement [or] relationship between him and the students."

For Alexander there were implications to the differences between these two teachers and their respective interpersonal styles. Alexander was explicit about this. Mrs. Jamison was someone who worked not only to incorporate the voices of the students into the actual work they did in class, but who made an effort to be "...more on our level." In doing so she helped decrease his anxiety about the class, despite the fact that English was a subject he not only disliked but that typically made him uncomfortable. Alternately, not being what Alexander called "open" to the students—that is, not listening to them, not recognizing them—had equally profound consequences in the classroom of Mr. Saunders. "If you’re not being open, you’re not really
being supportive," Alexander said matter-of-factly, "you’re doing what you think is right [and] you’re not gonna connect with the students."

At the end of his 9th grade year, Alexander discovered that his family would be moving back to a residence within the city limits of Detroit. Recollecting his reaction at hearing this news he described a sense of "panic," adding:

You know, I grew up in Detroit as a kid. But in my teenage years I was always in the suburbs. And so I didn’t really want to go back there, it kinda scared me. My older sister went there and she experienced violence.

Having shared his situation with Mrs. Jamison, his English teacher put Alexander in touch with one of the guidance counselors at the high school and insisted that he speak with her. Powerless to affect his mother’s decision to move back to the city, Alexander had in fact resolved to drop out of school and not return. Recalling his meetings with the counselor, he added that she "understood I didn’t want to leave. And she allowed me to any time I needed it just to come down and talk. And sometimes I wouldn’t say anything, I would just sit there and have a moment." This support would ultimately prove critical for him. When asked to describe what, on a personal level, the space created by the counselor had meant to him, Alexander was quick to respond:

…The fact that she said anytime I need to, [I could] just ask the teacher and come down.

It felt like there was somebody really there, no matter what just come down. It felt like someone was really listening to me.

Though he had resolved not to attend school in Detroit, Alexander remembers the counselor urging him to not to just drop out altogether but rather to try another approach that would still allow him to earn his degree. While he did effectively drop out after being forced to
leave the high school he was familiar and comfortable with, Alexander nevertheless was able to complete his secondary education by means of non-traditional methods. Indeed, he credits his ultimate decision to enroll in GED coursework (more than a year later) with the some of the affirming experiences he had at his only public high school; and specifically, with the support and encouragement he encountered from both Mrs. Jamison and his guidance counselor. The fact that "it felt like someone was really listing," he maintained, "like someone was really there…that actually helped me out. It got me thinking I should try my GED classes." Smiling when he recalled the ultimate decision to return to his education, Alexander, almost as if still surprised at the outcome, added, "…so I took [the courses], and I passed."

Alexander, like nearly all of the participants in this study, was very specific about the kinds of interpersonal and dispositional qualities that he believed were most meaningful to him (both as a student and as an individual) in his encounters with his teachers. For him, the perception that his presence and his voice mattered, that they were of consequence to the person at the front of the classroom, played a critical role in the meanings he constructed in the classroom. Asked what was most critical for teachers to consider, Alexander highlighted the importance of these qualities: "You must listen to the students. Not [just] treat them as your students. Build consensus." Considering how close he came to falling through the proverbial cracks, it is not surprising that part of his reflections focused on the potential impact such connections can have. A teacher's failure to affirm and connect with her students could have consequences that go far beyond instruction: "You have those students who drop out," Alexander said, "and you might have been that one person who could have kept them in the classroom."
Felicia

Felicia was raised on the outskirts of Grand Rapids in an upper middle class area she characterized both as "suburbia" and as racially homogenous. Each of her parents are degreed professionals who, she said, "grades were very important to," particularly her mother. Unlike the other participants, concerns about money were not something Felicia recalls ever having an issue during her childhood: "I wouldn’t say that we were really, really well off," she remarked early in our interview, "But money—it wasn’t really a problem. So, I was really fortunate for that."

Felicia was the oldest participant in the study at 22, and is now approaching the final year of her undergraduate work. Though she speaks with less certainty than some of the other participants about the ultimate direction of her professional aspirations, she is convinced her ultimate professional direction will be in the areas of public or community service on some level. Of mixed racial heritage with one parent of Asian and one of white descent, Felicia is soft of voice and chooses her words carefully, often pausing at length to consider her responses.

When asked to describe the high school she attended, Felicia recalled her secondary school as being a "very good academically," (she favorably described the extra support she received as a special education student, for instance) but also as one which was "sheltered" and lacking diversity. From the outset of her recollections during the interviews, Felicia also highlighted an awareness of herself as biracial student in a largely white school district. The teachers, she added, tried to promote the notion of diversity, but "…there was only so much they could do." On the whole, her memories of the instructors at Carson appeared to be positive, though it was clear early on that not all of her individual encounters were such. "The teachers were really approachable and really helpful—which was good," she began, "But a few did come off as kind of arrogant." For Felicia, the perception of judgment and embarrassment at the hands
of teachers who she described as being "in your face" appeared to be linked as well as particularly significant. One such teacher, Mr. Wells, she encountered in a science class.

He was very monotone, and sometimes he would go around the room and just ask people random questions about the material…and if you got the question wrong he would kind of put you down. He would just keep saying "Oh come on, you know the answer, just give me something. I felt like he really put people on the spot, which...I didn’t really like.

I felt really uncomfortable with that, mostly cause I’m a shy person.

As she shared more, Felicia said she recalled having "a lot" of in your face teachers at Carson, though she also made it clear that Mr. Wells was, by far, the worst in this regard. She perceived his cajoling as being "sarcastic," and mentioned that on several occasions she felt "pushed" by the sound of his voice. This kind of treatment was consequential for Felicia, particularly given her shyness. "It’s hard for me to speak up in class," she noted. "I feel like if I do give a wrong answer, or if I say the wrong thing, don’t insult me or do anything even mildly insulting. It’s already hard enough for me to speak up as it is." Mr. Wells, however, routinely crossed that line in class. "I felt like he was pushing students too far," she recalled, "that he enjoyed seeing us get embarrassed…I felt like I was being tortured…like I would be a turtle going back into its shell."

"She Wanted Us to Talk…I just Felt More Safe There"

The experience in Mr. Wells’ class stood in contrast to the kind of treatment Felicia encountered in the classroom of Mrs. Washington, who she described as someone who was more "open" to her students. Every class with this teacher began with a discussion, Felicia recalled, adding, "She wanted us to talk." As it was a world history class there were opportunities to study and discuss a wide variety of topics, and Felicia remembered an instance when the class was addressing Middle-eastern culture. Some of the students in the class were "smirking," she said,
or using "…some type of non-verbal behavior that said they weren’t taking it seriously, or that they didn’t need to learn it." Rather than ignoring the behavior, Felicia recalls Mrs. Washington addressing it directly, announcing that such behavior "was not going to be tolerated." This incident had the effect of making Felicia feel safer. "Even though it was an open class and we could talk about anything, she still let them know there was some behavior she wasn’t going to tolerate."

Mrs. Washington encouraged participation in a way that Felicia felt her voice mattered in an authentic way. Furthermore, in addition to remembering her as someone who was "approachable" and "friendly," Felicia never got the impression that she was in danger of being judged or embarrassed by this instructor. "She just always seemed happy to have people talk, especially people like me who didn’t really talk all that often." Her 9th grade math teacher was also able to encourage contributions in a way that minimized anxiety for Felicia. Despite the fact that she, like Mr. Wells, was often "looking for particular answers," and, indeed, at times they would have to solve equations in front of the class, Felicia "never felt as if I was being put on the spot, or judged." It is important to note that the distinction between how empowered to contribute, and indeed how valued, Felicia felt in Mr. Wells class, and how she felt with Mrs. Washington, appears to be a difference predicated largely on the interpersonal styles of these two instructors. Mrs. Washington was "friendly" and "approachable." Whereas Mr. Wells was one of the teachers Felicia describes as being not just "in your face," but also one whose relational distance between the students hampered her ability to open up more in his class. Thus, Mr. Wells was "monotone," and "intimidating." In fact, Felicia counted him among the teachers she remembered who were "cut-and-dry," that is, an instructor who seemed, by her reckoning, to be less personally invested in their students. "[It’s] like, ‘here’s the material’" she added, mimicking
a dismissive toss of her hand, "But they didn’t really—it was really just like ‘homework, quiz.’ It was [a] ‘do it on your own’ type of thing." Clearly, for Felicia there is a relational dimension of consequence to her school experiences, and the quality and type of those encounters are mattered not only to her sense of efficacy, but to her sense of self-worth.

"It was nice to hear her try to lift me up." It was in what was called her "tools course," however, a class designed to help build academic skills for students, that Felicia first encountered Mrs. Witherspoon. Over the course of two years Felicia says she developed a "good relationship" with her, adding that "…she was always very supportive of me." Felicia recalls Mrs. Witherspoon first taking an interest in her when, in the days leading up to the start of her 9th grade year, Felicia noticed a class on her schedule that she shouldn’t be enrolled for. Taking the initiative herself to walk up to the school and ask to have her schedule changed, she encountered Mrs. Witherspoon, who, she recalled, "…was really impressed with me, that I took the initiative and went to the office myself." When asked if she recalled how hearing this praise made her feel, she answered:

I don’t know—I thought that that was really nice to hear. Somebody else saying, Wow, that is kind of a huge deal for a 14 year old just to do that themselves, and it shows that they really care about their education.

Like the other teachers she remembers in a favorable light, Mrs. Witherspoon appeared not only supportive but as someone who valued the opinions and feelings of her students. Felicia recalled one method this teacher used in the 9th grade to ensure that her students’ perspectives were taken seriously. "She’d have these little slips of paper where we could write any of our thoughts or feelings we would have on the top of it. And she would write a response [back] to us on the bottom."
The message this conveyed to her, Felicia said, was that Mrs. Witherspoon was "more genuinely interested in what we were feeling." Particularly because this was in the 9th grade, and students were new to the school and likely to be feeling anxious, Felicia viewed this act as a significant and affirming one. It helped convey to her that Mrs. Witherspoon was an adult who could be trusted. Felicia, who often felt like she "didn’t belong anywhere," was nevertheless able to talk with Mrs. Witherspoon often over the years. Not only about school, but "about personal things as well." As was the case with Alexander, knowing that she was valued at the individual level and having had a judgment-free connection with this teacher was meaningful for Felicia. "It was important," she said, "I mean, I loved my friends to death, and my parents too. But I felt like there were some things I just couldn’t talk about with them, and I felt like I could come to her with my problems."

**Sallie**

Sallie can recall being pushed to do well academically by both her parents, and also remembers particularly vivid support and encouragement in this area from her mother, who was chiefly responsible for raising her. Growing up both in and around the Detroit area, Sallie, like Felicia, navigated her self-described status as a bi-racial student as she attended a total of four different high schools during her secondary school years. Of mixed racial heritage with a white mother and black father, she felt as though she was often forced to navigate within two worlds throughout her high school years, attending schools that varied in racial demographics from mixed, to mostly white, to predominantly black. At the time of our interviews, she had recently graduated and was planning on attending a two-year college for a nursing degree. Small of frame, with a bright personality, Sally appears confident and thoughtful, smiling and laughing often and easily.
One of the things that Sallie remembers most vividly about her adolescence is the degree to which her mother, who had Sallie when she was still in her teens, shared her own struggles and choices in conversations with her:

She made it clear the mistakes that she made. It wasn’t a secret. And she told me, ‘You don’t want to be in this situation.’ I knew her growing up and being a teenage mom…was hard for her. And me dealing with that, and seeing the process she had to go through, it was like: I don’t want to be in that situation. I want to graduate and go off to college.

Sally’s mother was her primary caregiver during her childhood, with additional support from her grandparents and her aunt, who also lived with them during Sallie’s adolescent years. When asked to characterize her childhood she said it was “good,” adding that she recalled frequent interaction and play with the adults in her household: "I remember my mom and my aunt playing games with us. It was never like, ‘You know what, go to your room.’ It was never nothing like that. They would just always interact with us."

"We Don’t Know Anything about You, So How Can we Relate to You?"

Sallie had numerous experiences across a diversity of schools during her secondary years. At one point, her family moved from within the city limits of Detroit to an outlying suburb that constituted a starkly different experience for her, both demographically and in terms of the kind of schooling she encountered. What was consistent, however, was the way Sallie characterized the types of interactions with teachers that had the greatest impact on her. Central among these descriptions was the importance of her ability to relate to her teachers, and to do so in ways that went beyond mere instructional interactions. It appears that, for Sallie, a key part of her ability to experience this connection revolved around the issue of voice within the classroom. She described one teacher who had a particularly significant impact on her, Mrs. Bookman, who
Sallie recalled "not liking at first" because she was so hard on the students, but ultimately who she built a relationship with. "I love that lady now," she said, adding:

She talked with us…asked us how everything was going. You know, just conversed with us. And if anyone really needed help, she would help you. Some days she would spend the whole entire class time just talking to us, just conversing. But she wasn’t the kind of teacher that was like, "Hey, okay, everybody do what you want to do on this day." If we were talking that day it was everybody having a discussion.

Feeling as if her voice was valued was significant to Sallie, and to the way she perceived her learning encounters with Mrs. Bookman. When asked to describe how this teacher went about making students comfortable to speak up in class, Sallie responded with little hesitation:

"Well...she had a relationship with each student. Not just one or two. She had a relationship with everybody—even if it was just a little relationship."

Mrs. Bookman was a young teacher. "In her mid-twenties" by Sallie’s recollection, and this may indeed have contributed to her perception of her as the kind of person—and the kind of teacher—that she could relate to. But it was clearly more than merely an issue of age. "She understood us," Sallie contended, "because she told us about the things that she did in high school. And [she] told us, like, nobody’s perfect…she said [that] she got bad grades in high school, and stuff happened." Mrs. Bookman appears to have been able to create a kind of interpersonal balance in the classroom that Sallie recognized and appreciated. She was a "cool" teacher, but, according to Sallie, one who you could go to and "talk about things that were extremely personal" without judgment. But she was also someone who the students respected. She still "had discipline," Sallie said, adding that "everybody knew not to take things too far with her."
What Sallie describes is arguably a form of recognition as well. The kind of message conveyed to an adolescent when a significant adult—teacher, counselor, parent, etc.—seeks to actively understand and affirm their subjective experiences. In an educational setting this kind of interpersonal recognition may contribute not only to the student’s sense of general comfort, but also the degree to which they feel valued during the learning process. "I feel like teachers can be good teachers. But they have to be able to relate to us," Sallie maintained. "You can understand the work we do, but to be a good teacher you have to be able to understand the students. Understand what they go through, and be respectful about how they feel."

"Teachers have to care." Not all of Sallie’s experiences were so positive. Mrs. Bookman was a teacher at one of the schools she remembers more fondly, Hillside; but she also attended Eddleson High for one year, a place she recalls being a far more alienating and hostile environment. Though Hillside and Eddleson are not far from each other geographically, Sallie was quick to point out that Eddleson was "a black school," whereas Hillside was racially "mixed." Most of her struggles at Eddleson came from the difficulty she experienced in navigating her status as a bi-racial youth in the midst of judgment from fellow students, nearly all of whom were black. "I’m bi-racial," she said matter-of-factly, "I was raised around white people. But I mainly went to school with black people." Sallie’s dilemma was one of an adolescent caught between two racial worlds. She had one foot in both of these worlds, but felt as though she belonged fully to neither, and this perception contributed to feelings of marginality: "I would just feel like, if I hang out with white people I was too black for them, and if I would hang out with black people I was too white for them."

While most of the judgment that Sallie felt for her year spent at Eddleson came from the students, she was explicit about the staff as well. In addition to the work not presenting a
significant intellectual challenge, the lack of connection with her teachers at Eddleson was something she remembered as palpable. "I couldn’t relate to my teachers," she said of her time there, "…we couldn’t relate on a personal level." Despite having few specific encounters with staff that she recalled as negative at Eddleson, the dearth of meaningful interpersonal experiences was nevertheless significant for Sallie. "There wasn’t really any connection between the teachers and the students. It was just come to class, do your work, and leave."

One incident at Eddleson did stand out. Chemistry was a particularly difficult subject for her, and Sallie recalled approaching her teacher for help about a particular lesson. "I was paying attention in class," she emphasized "...and I just didn’t get it. And I asked her, ‘Can you help me?’ And she just started yelling "you need to pay attention!" She didn’t understand that’s what I was doing." A second attempt by Sallie yielded only similar recrimination and dismissiveness, with the teacher saying she had "[explained] this already" followed by her admonishing Sallie that she "should have asked questions." Incidents such as this can have profound consequences. As we have seen in earlier cases (e.g., Allie, Dimitri), the educational damage—and by extension, the interpersonal damage—can be severe. In Sallie’s case this was true as well. When asked how this abrupt and public outburst of judgment made her feel, she said "angry," noting that what teachers are supposed to do is help students. That connection had been severed, however. Asked what impact this had on her relationship with the teacher and her learning in the class as a whole, Sallie was unequivocal: "I was like, ‘I’m not coming to you for help.’ Because she was either gonna judge me for not knowing, or [for] not trying hard enough."

Sallie speaks with conviction and clarity about the need for connection with her teachers, as well as the importance of a perception that they are passionate about both their subject matter and who they are teaching it to. "If I have a connection with you," she said emphatically, "it
means I’m comfortable with you. And if there’s no connection, you can teach me anything you want, but I’m not gonna learn it as well.” The linkage she describes here, this bond Sallie highlights between the quality of relational encounters and her disposition toward learning, is suggestive of implications for well-intentioned educators. Clearly, Sallie wants to know her teachers are professionally competent. But she also wants to feel valued, recognized, and affirmed. Her teachers need to have a committed interest in her well-being in addition to her education. "I automatically feel like my teachers should want the best for me," she says, "And by not wanting to [get to know me], you don’t care. And you don’t want the best for me by doing that."

The desire for Sallie to see the human side of her teachers, it could be argued, speaks to a larger desire—a longing, even—for the kind of confirmation that comes most potently through significant relational encounters. She wanted teachers to be both "professional and personal;" or, to put it another way, competent and caring. In her case, an important part of being able to do this was connected to the degree to which she saw her teachers as "real people"—in other words as relatable human beings. As Sallie put it: "I want to know somebody has made mistakes. If you’re so perfect then you can’t relate to me...you can’t help me when I need help. ‘Cause I feel like they’ll judge me." We will see this issue surface again in one of the two final narratives presented in the next and final set of cases, in the words of Devon.

**Conclusion**

The narratives of Sallie, Felicia, and Alexander highlight just how critical—and how layered—the phenomenon of voice can be to students. For each of them, there was an existential component to their experience of being heard by teachers who cared. This kind of recognition is of central importance to affirming relational encounters, and it entails not just the perception that
one is able to speak, but also that one is also heard in a way that matters to others. In classrooms where such an interpersonal dynamic was present, each of the participants found their learning experiences subsequently enhanced; and in each of the classrooms where they did not, there was a diminishment in the perception of care and connection which mattered to them both personally and academically. Finally, as with many of the other participants, most pernicious were encounters with judgment, humiliation, and disregard from adults who were ostensibly there to help nurture their learning and growth within the school environment.
CHAPTER 6: DEVON AND KENYA

The final two narratives, those of Devon and Kenya, add a degree of complexity to how meanings are built around relational encounters—both those that affirm and those that disaffirm. Each of these participants clearly describes the importance of perceiving support and care from their teachers. Yet in contrast to the other participants, Devon and Kenya’s interpretations of what constituted affirming encounters (and what it means for a teacher to "care" in a general sense) also diverged somewhat from the other informants. A critical component in Devon’s relational encounters appears to have been his perceiving a sense of authenticity from his instructors. For Kenya, the definition of care in connection with teacher encounters seems to have been closely linked with a different perception: the degree to which she sensed the teacher’s passion for the subject matter, and the extent of their dedication in helping their students learn and become passionate about that subject as well.

Devon and Kenya, both African American, each spent a significant portion of their adolescence growing up within the city limits of Detroit. For both this was followed by a move to the surrounding suburbs, a transition that for each occurred near the beginning of their respective high school experiences. They each remained students in the public school systems up to and including the point of their eventual graduations. Despite the differences with the other participants in the way they seemed to construct meaning around confirming and relational encounters, Devon’s and Kenya’s narratives remain suggestive of just how potent experiencing active support and care within the classroom can be.

Devon

Now 19, Devon has a disarming, easy-going mannerism and is reflective in conversation, a trait characterized in part by the deliberate pauses he sometimes takes before responding to a
question. Though money was scarce for his family during his adolescence, he described generally fond memories of his childhood in Detroit, both in school and out. He emphasized this fact early on in the interview process. In particular his perception of a sense of community and self-determination in his early adolescent years was explicit:

[In Detroit] it was pretty much I could walk to school you know? And I loved it. I felt independent. One block over [was] grandma’s house, then one block over from there I’m home. It felt good—it was a blessing of a sort.

Devon went all the way through middle school in Detroit until his mother, who worked for the county in a position outside the city limits, ultimately moved the family at the end of his 8th grade year. Thinking back on the teachers he encountered in junior high, Devon was unequivocal, stating that they "never mistreated us," and going on to add that they helped put life into perspective for him, "broadened my horizons, you know? There’s a lot more past Detroit."

When asked if any classrooms or teachers stood out for Devon prior to his moving out of the city, he smiled and mentioned Mrs. West, one of his middle school teachers, without hesitation. "She took care of me," he said, "When I did good she was the first to reward me. She helped mold me into who I am today. Not only did she discipline me, but she was like an extended member of the family." Devon described Mrs. West not only as a teacher that "cared," but as a capable but fair disciplinarian when she needed to be. "She was on my neck," he said with a laugh. The perception of a strong sense of investment in his well-being from Mrs. West was evident when he recalled the order in which he would receive admonishment when he was being "hard-headed." "I would get in trouble in that order: Ms. West, principal, grandma, momma, dad—in that order." But, importantly, Devon added that the punishment from Ms. West was never felt unjustified or unfairly imposed. "She ain’t never did me dirty like that," he said.
Mrs. West was a teacher whom Devon remembers as being genuinely concerned for not just him, but all of her students. "She looked out for a lot of my friends, too—everybody in the school." He describes her as being older than many of the teachers, and perhaps this contributed to his sense of wonderment at just how active she was throughout the day. Again, laughing at the memory, he recalled seeing her all over the school building when she was not teaching, "She was in the cafeteria, she was in the hallway. She’d be like, ‘What are you doin’ in the hallway?’ How can you have this much effect on the whole school," he added, "and you only teach one class?"

Mrs. West appears to have been approachable and supportive in a way that Devon viewed with significance. "She was an adult," he said, "but you could conversate with her as a friend." In the classroom, Devon recalls Mrs. West taking an active role in attending to each student. "It wasn’t just like one person or one half of the classroom, she would go around to [talk with] everybody." This combination of approachability, trustworthiness, and care is one that Devon identified as crucial to his ability to feel safe, and learn, in the classroom. Mrs. West’s observable investment in the welfare of not just himself, but of Devon’s friends—and indeed the students generally—was something he clearly found lasting and meaningful. Even though his experiences with Mrs. West were nearly a decade ago, he characterized the impact she had on him in unequivocal terms:

Mrs. West was my girl. I would walk to Detroit for Ms. West. If she called me today and was like, ‘Devon, I need you to come to Detroit,’ [and] my car was down, I’d be like, shit, it’s gonna take me a minute to walk there, but I’ll walk there! When somebody that’s not family take care of you like that, it sticks to you.
"If You Don’t Share, I Can’t Trust You"

For Devon, the impression left by his experiences with Mrs. West was that of a caring, supportive, and genuine teacher. In short, of an adult who, by her interpersonal style and commitment to the well-being of her students not merely as students, communicated to Devon she was someone who could be trusted, and whose voice deserved to be listened to. Such was not the case with his other encounters, however. After his family moved from Detroit, Devon transitioned to Ryerson High School, a place that—by and large—he had a positive impression of. "They [Ryerson’s staff] really come together when I first came there," he recalled, "They had figured out an outline when it comes to me. And they had basically made the transition good for me."

But when asked to describe a classroom or teacher he did not remember positively, Devon shared his experiences with Mrs. Kensington. In this encounter, however, it was not the experience of feeling targeted or directly mistreated by the teacher that was significant to Devon. Instead, it was his inability to trust Mrs. Kensington, a suspicion that grew out his perception of her as someone who was inauthentic, that was significant to him—and this despite the fact that he characterized her as someone who "cared" about her work. "She was a nice lady," he added, "but her nice was not genuine at all. If you [met] her, you’d be like "that’s a nice lady." But it wasn’t genuine." Devon’s perception of this lack of authenticity seems to have grown, at least in part, out of the fact that Mrs. Kensington appeared to him as someone who was "always happy." Her decision (or inability) to share a greater range of her personality was evidence to Devon that she was not someone to be trusted. His recollections of her, however, also contained acknowledgements that suggested a degree of nuance to his memories of this particular teacher. When pressed for more details about how Mrs. Kensington came across in interactions with him
and the class, he responded: "I mean, she cared about us, don’t get me wrong. She was a good woman. But...how do we learn that it’s okay for things to be wrong, and to share with others if you can’t do that with us?" This stood in contrast to his memories of Mrs. West, who would let her students know when she was upset and angry with them ("…just don’t cross her," he had remarked of Mrs. West). When thinking about Mrs. Kensington’s unassailable positivity, however, and his inability to trust her as result of it, he commented

You know, it’s okay to be upset. If a person is always happy...if they can’t express anything besides happiness, how do you know who they really are? You can’t begin to love somebody if you don’t know what upsets a person.

There were clear implications for this lack of trust for him as a student, Devon maintained. His ability to trust an instructor as a person, to sense that they were both caring and authentic, mediated the degree to which he felt able to engage with the material they presented in class.

If you don’t share, I can’t trust you. It might seem like I [just] don’t care, but if I don’t trust you I can’t listen to anything you say. I’ll listen enough just to pass the test, but I won’t retain the information—none of that. [But] if I trust you, I can remember.

As with some of the other participants, Devon’s description about the kind of interpersonal qualities that were most crucial to him were connected to the sense of academic investment he recalls for those classes as well. The teachers’ roles, then (for Devon, and others in this study) were ones that related to their subject matter, but also shaped by, the ways they interacted with the class; the ways they constructed safe and affirming environments for them; and the ways in which they nurtured (or failed to nurture) relationships that communicated that message of mattering to the young people they taught.
Devon did not himself admit to encountering specific instances of mistreatment at the hands of adults in the schools he attended, but he was candid about the kind of things that could diminish an otherwise positive learning encounter. "You don’t judge people," he said when asked to reflect on this, adding, "Like, ‘Devon did this…he came from a bad neighborhood, he don’t know how to act.’ But you don’t know me." Furthermore, the kind of sudden, unprovoked attacks by adults that both Allie and Sallie described in their respective narratives, is something that Devon felt "can really destroy the environment." Not only on a particular day, but to the extent that, for him at least, the desire to even attend the class at all is put into jeopardy.

"He wasn’t born with a stamp that says ‘teacher’ you know." The ability to relate to and feel supported by the adults in school was vital to Devon as well. Mr. Scott, a history teacher whom he also encountered at Ryerson, was an example of this for him. Devon recalled Mr. Scott as "one of the most authentic people he ever met," adding "and you could trust him." The teachers promise that if you misbehaved he would remove you from class, but that the next day would be a "new day," was something that Devon remembers quickly testing. Returning the day after being kicked out, Devon found himself greeted at the door by Mr. Scott as if nothing had happened the day before. To him, this, communicated a sense of reliability that was meaningful to him: "He had the option to make things hard for me," Devon recalled, "but he didn’t. He was just like, all right, you back—it’s a new day. So I was like, all right, I can trust this guy."

Like Sallie in the previous section, being able to perceive his teachers as human and flawed appears to have contributed to Devon’s ability to trust them, and to learn from them more effectively. This was a quality about Mr. Scott he particularly appreciated, as the teacher was up front with them about both the mistakes he had made and the things he had done to recover from
them. Asked why this mattered so much to him, not just as a student, but as a person, Devon used the analogy of him being asked to write a paper on a personal topic by a teacher to explain:

If you understand that people make mistakes, you’ll be willing to listen to what my paper has to say. If you seem as if you never made a mistake, [then] you know what you’re looking for—you’re looking for the same thing in every paper.

Hence, the perception of a teacher as someone who works to share his/her humanness and fallibility is associated not only with the ability to “relate” to them, but also may speak (for Devon, at least) to a sense of anticipation of possible acceptance or judgment by them.

Mr. Scott was someone Devon felt, and experienced, active support from. Mr. Scott would "sit down with" him to help explain things if Devon was struggling with a topic. And the fact that Devon perceived that this support was not merely a function of Mr. Scott’s responsibilities in the classroom was significant to him. "I would catch him in the hallway after class," Devon recalled, "or even in the teacher’s lounge, if the door was open. And I could be like, ‘Hey, Mr. Scott, I don’t get this.’ He would help you, not just in the classroom. And he would put it in a way you could understand it.” As with some of the other participants, the notion of proximity was also raised by Devon in several comments where he described Mr. Scott as willing to "sit down with us [students]" or "sit down with me." His classroom was a place where work "got done" but Devon also perceived a critical sense of connection and trust with the teacher. "He’d sit down and talk with us. He wasn’t one of those teachers who asked how I’m doing just because he was getting paid to ask it. He would sit down and laugh with us."

As with the other participants in this study, Devon’s experiences with the teachers he felt were supportive and affirming appears to have had an impact that goes far beyond the immediate, educative purposes of the encounters. Encountering teachers such as Mr. Scott and
Mrs. West left a lasting impression on Devon. And crucially, when he speaks about his memories of them, he does so in language that illuminates the existential impact they both had on him as a young man. "He…[and] Mrs. West showed me that you can trust people. Not only inside their classrooms, but in other aspects."

Kenya

Kenya, who had recently graduated from high school at the time of the interviews, is the second oldest of five siblings. Like Devon, she spent a significant portion of her youth growing up within the city limits of Detroit. Despite the differences she experienced between the city and the suburbs, Kenya nevertheless maintained that she has really "lived in the same place her entire life." When asked to elaborate on this observation she described her parents as being very protective of her and her siblings: "We weren’t allowed to go places, so we kinda stayed in the house the entire time" she said, "and [when we moved] here it was the same thing." Kenya is taller than average, and though she does not smile often her soft-spoken demeanor is both polite and friendly. In contrast to the other participants in the study, Kenya spoke about her secondary schooling experiences more clinically at first. Asked if she had any classrooms that have been particularly memorable in the course of her four years at Henderson High, she replied: "Not really. Pretty much all my classrooms I go in, do my work, and get out. I don’t really have any ties to any classroom...."

Despite this Kenya characterized her school, which was a new building the district built in her 10th grade year, in stark terms. "It kind of feels like a prison in there," she said, adding that it didn’t feel as "warm" as her previous high school did. "There’s a lot of things we’re not allowed to do." Kenya elaborated on this point, highlighting the fact that all the doors, which are alarmed, lock, and that the students’ movements were, in her perception, carefully controlled.
They [built] these patios for eating," she mentioned, "but we're not even allowed to go out there. So it's really restricted." Despite this, Kenya maintains that the "teachers at Henderson were good: it's the administration that makes it feel like a prison." As was the case with Devon, Kenya was at pains to recall instances where she felt as though she had been the subject of direct and personal mistreatment by adults during her secondary years. However, when asked about what classroom she remembered most favorably, Kenya was quick to identify her biology teacher, Mr. Engelhardt.

"He Put Himself on the Same Level as We Are, Like We’re Learning Together"

Kenya was unequivocal about her definition of a caring teacher. For her, an instructor who cares about the subject—that is, one who is truly passionate and knowledgeable about it, and who supports his students in their learning—is what was most important. Mr. Englehardt appears to have been just such a teacher. Asked why she thought she responded so positively to his style of teaching and interacting with students Kenya was quick to respond:

Because, not only does he teach his subject…he’s really passionate about his subject. He’s really passionate about his work. He lives biology. He’s also a horticulturist, so he even does plant biology. He just really loves what he does, and he likes teaching—which is really good.

By all accounts Kenya is a self-motivated and serious student, having mentioned taking several advanced placement classes throughout high school, of which Mr. Englehardt’s class was one. Nevertheless she highlighted the importance of the interpersonal as well with regard to this teacher’s instructional style, noting that he often "put himself on our level." Kenya maintained that for her, this kind of interaction was meaningful. "I think that was really helpful. To not so much be teaching us, but helping us learn…if that makes sense?" As expressed by previous
participants, Kenya viewed Mr. Englehardt’s ability to reduce or collapse the distance between student and teacher—that is, to build authentic rapport—as helpful, even affirming. Indeed, when asked what personal (as opposed to instructional) qualities this teacher had that she felt were most important, Kenya remarked that he was "infinitely patient," and also raised the absence of any perception of judgment from him. "He’s very understanding and he doesn’t have any sort of superiority complex like other teachers do," she said, adding, "If you ask a question, he’ll never make you feel like you should already know the information."

But Kenya also recalled Mr. Englehardt’s instructional style as well, and for her, this appears to have been equally important. "He doesn’t really lecture…we more so discuss? So it’s like a back and forth in the room, instead of him standing there teaching." When questions were raised, Kenya noted that Mr. Englehardt never just "gave" the student the answer. Instead, they were always encouraged to search for it, either by looking it up or asking others, and then invited to return to him so they could "talk about it." Mr. Englehardt, she recalled, pushed the students to think topically, and then to search for answers and explanations on their own, always followed by discussion in which he would take part. This was significant to Kenya, who appreciated being empowered to think on her own and to think authentically about the subjects she encountered. "I’m not really in school to take tests," she said. "The grades part of school isn’t really what’s important to me. I’m here to learn more than what I knew when I came into the classroom." A lot of her teachers, she commented, were dismissive when she asked questions that were "too in depth," and responded by telling her that such inquiries were essentially superfluous because they "wouldn’t be on the test."

"I think he would have taken off his teacher hat." Though Kenya struggled to remember times when she encountered direct mistreatment at the hands of her teachers, the
notion of support and its importance was raised in connection with Mr. Englehardt. She recalled a time during her junior year when she was feeling particularly depressed. "I don’t know. I was just really depressed my junior year," she said, "I don’t know why though." Her course with Mr. Englehardt had been in the 10th grade. But when asked if she thought having Mr. Englehardt as a teacher during this period where she was feeling isolated might have made a difference to her, she was thoughtful for a moment then replied:

I think so. He might have been able to help because I think he would’ve taken his teacher hat off, and put on his person hat…I think he would have pulled me aside and talked to me about what I was going through. He would have done that.

When pressed to explain why she thought this, Kenya went on to describe the qualities of care and support that she recalled seeing in Mr. Englehardt. "Well, whenever we’re doing our own work, and you even have a hint of an expression on your face like you don’t understand," she said, "he’ll just come over to your desk and ask you if you’re okay." Kenya thought about this further and recollected a time that Mr. Englehardt had, in fact, inquired after her well-being once. "I was just really, really, tired," she said, "and he asked me ‘Kenya, are you okay?’ And I said ‘yeah.’ And then…when I was walking into my 4th hour he asked me again, ‘Kenya, are you doing all right?’ So that’s why I think he would have done that." This act, she admitted, appears to have had a degree of existential value to her. "Yes," she said, in response to whether or not his reaching out this way had meant something to her on a personal level. "Yes…because we live in such a busy world. People don’t usually stop to notice things about a person." She went on to say that she is usually good at hiding her emotions, and "So the fact that he even noticed it because of that, shows that he must have been paying some attention to detail. And people don’t usually do that today."
Despite her initial observation that she didn’t have "ties to any particular classroom," it became increasingly clear that the kind of investment in his students which Mr. Englehardt demonstrated on both a personal and a professional level was, in fact, meaningful for her. "If you ask a question and he doesn’t have time to get to during the hour," she said, "he’ll stay after school just so he can answer the question for you." Ultimately, Kenya characterized her experiences in Mr. Englehardt’s class as the most memorable she had throughout her secondary years. While she was not as explicit as some of the other participants were in describing their affirming encounters, it is difficult to see how her encounters with this teacher could be seen as anything less than significant.

"A good teacher will want a student to care about the subject." Like the other participants in this study Kenya was explicit and articulate about the most helpful qualities teachers can possess for her learning. And once again, as a counternarrative to the prevailing discourses which often portray youth disparagingly, often assuming they eschew hard work, are self-absorbed, or, worse, prone to violence, Kenya’s story offers a clear rejoinder to these assumptions. Thus, Mr. Englehardt was passionate and supportive as a teacher, yes, but he was also a "stickler for the rules." She describes his class as one where work was collaborative and where students were empowered to speak, where learning the subject was important, but the students—if Kenya’s story was typical—were seen as active participants in that learning, not merely receivers of predetermined wisdom. "A good teacher," Kenya remarked, "will want a student to care about the subject. And [they’re] patient enough to sit there with the student until they understand it enough to see what’s amazing about it."

Furthermore, despite her contention that she "got along with her teachers," Kenya was nevertheless specific about the toxic effect she believes that disaffirming encounters can have on
learning. The teachers who swept aside questions she had as being irrelevant because they weren’t going to be "on the test," was an example of this. When a teacher’s approach suggests that they are impervious to the needs, interests, and curiosity of their students, it can rupture the interpersonal environment, making it harder for authentic learning to take place. "If you have a teacher that pretty much already has prescribed what you should know," Kenya said, "and you’re met with animosity when you don’t know [the answer], it discourages from asking you asking other questions." In other words, when the relationships are damaged, the potential for learning is damaged as well.

Conclusion

While their narratives diverge somewhat from those of the other participants on a thematic level, both Devon and Kenya’s stories illuminate important meanings, particularly about the intersection between learning, the perception of care, and the need for authenticity. Both informants experienced encounters with teachers which helped them feel affirmed and cared for, and both of them explicitly linked their learning to the ways that these teachers conducted themselves in their interactions with students. Neither had experienced school as a persistently negative or disconfirming aspect of their lives, but both recalled the ways in which their learning—and growing sense of self—were enhanced by encounters with caring adults in the classroom.
CHAPTER 7: THEMES FROM PARTICIPANTS' NARRATIVES

The narratives of the ten participants in this study reveal both complexity and nuances in students’ experiences in connection to relationality, but they also illuminate a number of significant themes in common regarding the immediacy and importance of relationality in the educational encounters of those interviewed. While the theoretical and philosophical literature of relationality is resonant with these narratives in a broad sense (Buber, 1923/1957; Schutz, 1967; Noddings, 1988; Noddings 1992), the comparative paucity of exemplaric and experiential narratives is a historical limitation of this very same literature. Listening to the participants’ stories, therefore, should illuminate and expand our understandings of new layers of significance with regard to Buber’s I-Thou imperative—and to the significance of relational encounters to adolescents more generally.

It seems clear that for each of the informants their perceptions of reciprocal relationships with teachers were of consequence. They influenced not only aspects related to individual achievement, as in the case of Kenya who was motived by the passion of her science instructor, but also by contributed to broader notions of student self-perception and personal growth, as was the case with both Felicia and Samina. The perception of existential worth to their teachers, as we saw with Alexander and James was also crucial, as was their feelings of learner efficacy through empowerment and voice as we saw with Allie. While the perception and description of what constituted affirmation, confirmation, and care, differed from case to case, the common threads to be explored in this section point to a possible horizon of broader interpretive conclusions which may have significance not only for theory, but also for practitioners and schools.
The Power of Individual Relationships

The impact of affirming, interpersonal relationships surfaced numerous times in this study. The contexts in which these experiences occurred were varied; in some cases, as with Dimitri and Davie for example, the significance of relationships was encountered in parallel with abiding concerns about their safety while in school, and with a sense of marginalization they endured at the hands of their classmates as well as instructors. In others, such as Allie and Samina, the relational experience became meaningful in conjunction with a growing sense of self-empowerment and ability to navigate, as well as overcome, both personal and academic hardships. What seems to be consistent, however, is the transformative impact that these individual relationships had for the participants who encountered them, both in regard to how they perceived their own learning, but also in connection with how they viewed themselves.

The impact individual relationships appear to have had for the participants in this study speaks to the potential for an affirming existential experience within the relationships forged in learning environments; one that situates the person encountering them as "mattering," and being of abiding significance, to another. The experiences below resonate with Buber’s (1957) concept of "genuine meetings" which is describes the closure of both spatial and interpersonal distance between two individuals. This has the effect of locating the experiencer socially, through the perception of belonging and being of value to another. It is also evident from the experiences of Davie and Dimitri that it can provide at least some meaningful counterweight to encounters with marginality and exclusion.

For Dimitri school was a place that was overwhelmingly negative, largely due to what he perceived as a lack of safety and security in both the classrooms and the hallways, and often related to his marginalization as a gay, black male. His encounters with many of the adults in the
school environment (for example, the security guard who laughed at him rather than help defuse a situation in which Dimitri was being harassed and which nearly escalated to a physical altercation) and the interactions he had with them did not offer him any reprieve. Thus, it was the experiences he had with Mrs. Harris, whom he remembered fondly, which stood out clearly to him as someone who genuinely "cared" about her students. He recalled being able to talk to go to her "about anything," and that she was both supportive and reassuring about his sexuality. Amid the harassment, belittling, and intimidation that Dimitri encountered (particularly early in his secondary years), his recollection of the impact the relationship this particular teacher had was profound. He contended that his experience with her not only helped him feel better about himself and "do better" in her class, but that it showed him there were people out there who valued him as a human being, and who could be trusted. In other words, the affirming nature of the relationship had consequences for how Dimitri perceived future interactions.

Similarly, Davie identified this sense of isolation and marginality as one powerful enough to "[make] him not want to go to school." Like James, he spoke more explicitly about the need for developing a relationship with the adults in school, of "bonding" with teachers, in order to feel comfortable and to maximize his learning. Davie also identified a teacher’s capacity to be "constantly nurturing" as perhaps the most crucial professional quality they can possess. Despite encountering specific instances of harassment by teachers, it seems that Davie’s ability to perceive his marginalization as a surmountable circumstance, rather than one which doomed him to isolation, was itself significantly aided by a small number of adults who took the time to establish a meaningful individual relationship with him. Furthermore, the impact of just one adult (for instance, his math teacher, Mrs. Ryan) taking the time to support and affirm him may have had a kind of experiential ripple effect; because, in his words, "if you helped me, or if I can
talk to you, then maybe I can also talk to my counselor.” Rather than close himself off because of the negative encounters, Davie, in an act of resilience and defiance, used confirming experiences (Mrs. Ryan, the school liaison who advocated for him by driving him to the Aveda institute) as a kind of counterweight to a largely alienating school environment.

For both Davie and Dimitri, the memories of interpersonal encounters with adults that contributed to feelings of isolation and dehumanization were profound. In Dimitri’s case, such encounters exacerbated his broader experiences with the lack of safety and security throughout most of his secondary school years. It was also important to him, however, that teachers do more than just ensure civility between students—or in the class generally. Dimitri was also explicit about the degree to which faculty could make him more comfortable through their own relational dispositions. Thus an ideal environment for him was one where security and personal warmth were both present, and he identified tone of voice, friendly facial expressions, and having a "good personality" as crucial for his ability to trust in a classroom. Negative interpersonal encounters with teachers "hit home" he remarked, and reinforced the idea of school as one more place that was not "secure." The impacts of these encounters became so bad that Dimitri struggled with thoughts of suicide, until he slowly learned to "not care" about them by building up his "immune system," phrases that suggest that dissociating and disconnecting from the ongoing trauma was one of the avenues available to him for survival.

Memories of caring relationships in the midst of a disaffirming environment, including toxic encounters with other adults, also carried lasting significance for Davie as well. While he was not as explicit as Dimitri about the lack of physical safety in his secondary years, it is clear that Davie was made to endure at least some adult interactions that were both belittling and judgmental in nature. Overall, he remarked, school was not a "warm and caring" place to be, and
he identified later in the second interview the chief thing above all else that teachers need to do is "care." His encounters with the math instructor, Mr. Canfield, which were consistently judgmental, are suggestive of the impact that such a relationship can have. Indeed, the perception that teachers were largely unable to relate to him in genuinely nurturing and caring ways—and instead contributed to the sense of personal isolation and judgment he felt as a young, gay male—were nearly enough to marginalize him from the entirety of the learning process. The presence of affirming adult relationships, what Davie called "bonding," was a crucial counterweight to these experiences; and as with Dimitri, it demonstrated that some people were worth trusting and opening up to, and this fact had a significant impact on both of them despite their disconfirming encounters.

Samina’s experience with Mrs. Kendall provides further insight about the degree to which relationships have the power to transform a student’s perceptions in ways that are profound both in the immediate and lasting sense. For Samina, it was more than merely noticing acts of sympathy regarding her difficult home situation from Mrs. Kendall that mattered; it was what she sensed as a judgment-free, genuine, and durable encounter with someone who showed authentic interest in her—not only as a student but as a person—that had the greatest impact. "I developed a relationship with [Mrs. Kendall]," she said matter-of-factly. Mrs. Kendall, in fact, became someone Samina could rely on, not only for support and empathy, but also for personal encouragement and to be reminded of what she was capable of ("she wanted you to succeed").

Samina spoke of Mrs. Kendall much in the manner that one might speak of a surrogate parent, by describing the kinds of interpersonal qualities—patience, support, guidance, empathy, and care—that are crucial in that kind of nurturing relationship as well. During her middle school years, Samina found support and recognition from teachers and counselors that, while helpful,
had been somewhat less focused and personal. By contrast, her encounter with Mrs. Kendall had a far more profound influence on the recollections of her growth as a student and self-determined individual. While it is difficult to say whether it was the depth or the timing of this relationship (or both) that helped make it so important, one thing is clear: Samina’s perception was that she "mattered," in an existential sense, to Mrs. Kendall; and as a teacher, that Mrs. Kendall cared enough about her to perceive her not just as she "was," but as she was "becoming." In other words, as she could be. This kind of affirmation, which communicates the recognition of unrealized growth and potential in another, seems for Samina and others in this study to have played a key role in the transformative power of the interactions in which they are situated.

The critical nature of personal connection and relationships was also illuminated by the experiences of James. More than any other participant, save perhaps Davie, James' choice of words and personal background were suggestive of the degree to which relationships with others were important to him. His mother’s explicit valuing of relationships, family, and the reciprocal treatment of others (which he noted as important in his upbringing), along with his self-description as a "people person," someone who "likes interaction," and who "works harder" when he has a rapport with teachers, all seemed to point to this centrality of relationality for him. Furthermore, James spoke eloquently about the degree to which, in his estimation, the absence of affirming relational encounters mattered during his secondary years. The repeated use of the word "impersonal" to describe the environment at Brookhill, the high school he eventually dropped out of, was particularly telling. This relational- or care-deficit was more than a mere inconvenience for James, it, in fact, contributed to an overall sense of alienation and disconnection from the learning environment—one that made him feel "invisible." Though he never explicitly claimed that this perception of his environment was the direct cause of his
dropping out, he did hint at such a conclusion rhetorically, asking what point there was in going to a place you’re "not wanted" when it was possible to be hanging out at home, or in the neighborhood with friends, who genuinely valued presence.

Conversely, James’ encounters with adults who took the time to establish a caring relationship that he perceived as significant was, as it was with other participants, consequential. He characterized Mr. Morgan as someone who went out of his way to talk with him, and as someone that "truly cared about what I did in life." Connecting his own experiences to the larger concept of existential mattering, James was clear that the time Mr. Morgan took to notice, talk with, and support him was evidence that this coach and teacher saw and valued him as a person; such acts "let you know you’re there" he remarked matter-of-factly. In contrast to the instructor who made the sarcastic query to James about why he bothered coming to school at all, teachers like Mr. Morgan, and his counselor, Mr. Williams not only provided him with judgment-free support, they helped him feel "noticed" because they took the time to connect with him on what he called "a more personal" level. Mr. Williams ongoing interest in James' long term welfare (demonstrated by his advocacy for James even after his dropping out) was evidence not only of what James called kindness, but also reassured him that someone "saw" his newfound determination to return to school, an awareness he found to be motivationally critical.

For both Samina and James, the perception of a confirming and caring interactions with teachers was a consequential dimension of experience for them with regard to how they recalled their learning experiences. Samina spoke of her negative encounters far more in the context of her home situation than in connection with school, and in fact characterized most of her adult encounters in the classroom as "warm." However, it is nevertheless clear that the absence of affirming interpersonal encounters—when they did occur—mattered, as she described such
experiences in ways that left her far less comfortable in the learning environment. Teachers who stood at a distance, who remained at their desks and failed to "engage" with their students, made it more difficult for Samina to feel as though she was genuinely welcome in the classroom or involved in learning, and this is something she stated was important to her. Despite having been highly self-motivated with regard to academics throughout her secondary experiences, she still identified the ability of a teacher to interact with her in affirming ways as a crucial part of her education, and did so in explicit terms. It is "what I look for in a teacher," she noted.

While James experienced a profound sense of alienation in his high school, a place he characterized as impersonal "in the overall scheme," he also spoke of specific relational and interpersonal encounters that contributed to this sense of disconnection and disaffection. He had teachers who he felt "didn’t really want to deal with" him. The coach who sarcastically inquired (in the presence of his classmates) why James "even bothered" coming to school given his intermittent attendance, as well as the teacher who failed to meaningfully intervene when fellow students belittled him for what he called his sometimes "raggedy looking" clothes. James was quick to point out the impact these encounters had on his perceptions, both on a personal and academic level. When teachers fail to care enough to establish meaningful interactions with him, he maintained that he was less likely to be personally invested in the work, "I’m just gonna…do what I have to do and leave." Because James "loved interaction" so much, it was vital to him that teachers demonstrated an interest in him on a personal level—that is, to try and talk with him, to show that they are willing not just to help support his engagement with learning material, but also to get to know him as an individual, at least to some extent. That kind of effort to establish a relational connection, he remarked, "sticks with you."
Sallie was insistent about the importance of teachers both establishing relationships, and being relatable, to their students. For her this was closely connected to the notion of caring. She asserted that, for her to feel comfortable in a classroom and be able to do her best academically, teachers needed be perceived as caring. When she encountered teachers who didn’t seem to be interested in relating to her as a person, that is, who did not attempt to "connect" with her or her fellow students beyond the subject matter, she would conclude they had no authentic interest in her being successful. "By not wanting to talk to me, you don’t care," she said, "and [it’s] like you don’t want what’s best for me by doing that." As with Kenya, Sallie described a "caring" teacher in both interpersonal and academic ways. She recalled Mrs. Bookman, for example, as having a relationship with every student, "even if it was just a little relationship." But instructionally, Sallie also recalls her as someone who was both passionate about her subject, and who held her students to account for contributing to their own learning and doing their best.

It is also illuminating the degree to which participants in this study (Sallie, Devon, Samina, Allie, Alexander) characterized caring not only as an interpersonal disposition that they valued, but also as one that existed simultaneously with their being pushed to do their best amid high instructional expectations. While this could, in part, be the benefit of maturity and hindsight, it should be noted that Sallie and the others spoke about their experiences in ways that suggest they were perfectly capable of recognizing and appreciating teachers caring enough to hold them accountable for their learning, even in the midst of such encounters as secondary students. What seems to have been critical to this recognition, however, is that such expectations were perceived within the context of an otherwise supportive, caring, and authentic interpersonal relationship. Sallie further noted that not being able to relate to a teacher not only made her less comfortable in the classroom, but also less likely to be able to do well on the work. In the case of
her chemistry class, however, it was not just disconnection but unprovoked and outright hostility and judgment from the teacher which ultimately threatened her learning. The power of singular experiences such as this to severely, even irreparably, damage the student’s attitudes toward learning warrants further exploration. While Sallie (and Allie, who also endured similarly unprovoked hostility from a teacher) both appear to have been resilient enough to absorb and even overcome such encounters, they did so at a cost. It is important to recall that each reported how quickly they could "shut down" in the face of these kinds of experiences, even to the extent of silencing themselves—and doing so permanently—while in the presence of such teachers. This represents a true educational and existential loss that we should be careful not to underestimate—a horizon of human growth potential diminished unnecessarily during a pivotal time.

Allie’s relationship with Ms. Daniels also illuminates the degree to which profound transformations can occur within the context of individual rapport in the learning environment. Mrs. Daniels’ approachability, warmth, and patience were critical for Allie as she grappled with learning in her science class—her self-described "least favorite" subject. While it is clear that she viewed Mr. Daniels as a highly competent biology instructor, it was this teacher’s personal—or rather, interpersonal—qualities that Allie kept returning to as matters of abiding importance in her encounters with her. That kind of approachability, she noted, "makes a world of difference." While it appears Allie did not establish the kind of intensely personal relationship with Mrs. Daniels that Samina did with her teacher—for example, sharing details about struggles she may have had within her home life—it nevertheless seems clear from Allie’s characterizations that Mrs. Daniels successfully communicated it would have been safe for her to do so, and the
perception of this fact was significant to Allie. She was the kind of teacher that you could "go to with anything."

Allie’s experience suggests that this kind of interpersonal foundation may open up relational avenues of communication that would otherwise remain closed, such as academic or intellectual curiosity or a lack of understanding about a particular concept. Such actions, after all, require a degree of vulnerability, and such vulnerability will rarely, if ever, emerge in an atmosphere of distrust, judgment, or dismissiveness. Yet Allie felt comfortable staying after class with Mrs. Daniels "nearly every day" of the semester to receive additional help with her studies. Her perception of this teacher as someone who valued her presence, her voice, and who cast her struggle with science as a thoroughly surmountable one (i.e., "We’ll just slow it down until you get it…") were all pivotal. Her final grade in the class was something she associated directly with Mrs. Daniels caring, relational disposition.

As in the case of Samina’s experiences, the implications of these relational interactions extended far beyond a single learning encounter, or even the semester long class in question. They appear to have had the potential to resonate deeply with these learners’ sense of self, of self-worth, and even of their crystallizing sense of identity—that is, of who they were becoming, both within the context of school and beyond it. Allie’s rapport with Mrs. Daniels, and the learning that grew out of it, contributed to an outcome which she characterized in transformative language. Her time with Mrs. Daniels, she said, "showed me where I can be in the world…not [just] where I fit in in the world." This would suggest that schools and educators should work to construct learning environments that make encounters such as these more likely, given the power they appear to have to impact the lives of students such as Allie and Samina.
Like the other participants whose narratives highlighted the importance of individual relationships, the perception of disaffirming interpersonal encounters was also quite significant to Allie—particularly in the areas of humiliation and judgment. In fact, Allie cites her negative encounters with Mrs. Lennox as a galvanizing force in her own teaching aspirations. "That’s a big part of why I’m going into my career," she noted, "I don’t want to do that to a student." Not only did Allie view her time in Mrs. Lennox’s class as educationally valueless (comparing it to playing kickball for an hour each day), her recollections of learning encounters with her were as embarrassing as they were dehumanizing. She would "call you dumb or make jokes at you in the middle of class," and recalled a favorite catchphrase of hers as being "boy, you stupid."

The perception of humiliation and judgment at the hands of a teacher were of particular concern for Allie, and, not surprisingly, when she discussed the qualities of classroom environments that mattered to her most, it was crucial that she sensed warmth and caring from the teacher. Such qualities in her mind are the building blocks for "connection" with the students, and those connections were thought of as critical to her. Teachers could damage such interpersonal connection irreparably by things like embarrassment, by suggesting a student was "totally wrong" in response to a question in front of her peers. Conversely, when such connections are nurtured, as they were with Mrs. Daniels, the consequences for her were equally powerful in the opposite direction. In that case, Allie’s perception of her own horizon of potential seems to have been radically altered by her relational encounters. She saw "where she could be in the world." This is a profound and important reversal, particularly given that early on in her secondary experience she was skeptical of her academic future, seeing herself, at best, only completing high school.
Perceptions of Mattering and Marginalization

Perceptions of mattering—of sensing one’s significance or importance to another—seemed to emerge within the context of the described student relational experiences. This fact is consistent with literature on the impact mattering can have, and appears most potently (though not exclusively) in the cases of Samina, James, and Alexander. As an explicit construct in the literature, the notion of "mattering" comes out of the psychological research beginning in the 1980s (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Schlossberg, 1989). Yet the philosophical foundations upon which this phenomenon rest go back much further. James' (1890) seminal quote of the need for all humans to be recognized as of significance to our fellows, and his mention of the "torments" we would be condemned to if this basic human recognition was not present, highlights this point.

To "matter to others," then, is not a unidirectional experience. It is instead the creation of an affirming and shared social space between people: a space that rests on the perception of interpersonal significance. Mattering, therefore, is better thought of within the context of relationality: it is a consequence of the interplay between what Noddings (1988) described as the caring and the cared-for. Gillespie (2005) asserts that the shared space created between people through the experience of mattering has transformative potential, that it "goes beyond tangible outcomes" (p. 211) for individuals. This also is the kind of existential imperative in education that Greene (1978) and Vandenberg (1971) in their arguments for the recognition of being; Vandenberg goes so far to say that such an orientation is in fact the place where the "aims of education should be sought," a phrasing that could be faulted for its vagueness unless one considers the consequences of failing to "matter" to those around us—particularly for the young. Erikson (1968) argued that for youth in particular, experiences rooted in relational
acknowledgment by others are crucial to healthy identity development. These observations recognize there may be both existential and developmental potential in the value that mattering to others holds for those who encounter it. Adolescent identity is a relationally mediated co-construction of one’s sense of self, not a phenomenon which unfolds along some kind of inevitable individual trajectory. When the moral implications of this are considered, the implications of relational mattering, of being "seen" and valued by another person, become profound indeed.

The explicit use by some of the participants of words that seem consistent with the importance of this kind of personally affirming recognition, suggesting it was highly significant to them. Samina, for example, felt "noticed" by Mrs. Kendall, a teacher who afterward took what seems to have been a genuine and enduring interest in her welfare as a person, as opposed to merely her achievements as a student. The relationship that Mrs. Kendall forged with Samina was one that confirmed a sense of individual worth and value for her. In contrast to the painful and abusive interactions she regularly encountered with her father, Samina credited Mrs. Kendall with providing safe space for her to learn, to feel, and to grow. She was, in Samina’s own words, "somebody I could go to; somebody I could talk to; somebody I felt wasn’t going to judge me."

Even Samina’s experiences with supportive staff in her middle school years were remembered by her as being significant, and each of these moments appears to have begun with the sense of someone caring enough to "see" her; that is, to look with enough concern to notice not just her presence but her demeanor, as did her counselor, and as did the teacher that allowed her to function as an aide at that time. These members of the faculty took the time to inquire after her welfare, thereby conveying a sense that who she was, and how she was feeling did, in fact, matter to them. These encounters are suggestive of the transformative potential that emerges
when the perception of what Buber (1957) refers to as "genuine meetings" take place. These meetings, for Buber, are dialogic in nature, and, just as importantly, they occur in the context where one’s "whole being" is affirmed by another, as it appears was the case for Samina in her encounters with Mrs. Kendall.

Samina was careful to describe the specific relational encounters where she sensed her own value in the eyes of another as especially pivotal. When such a relationship was then complimented with qualities like those Mrs. Kendall appears to have displayed, such as passion for her subject matter, an abiding belief in the potential of her students, and a dedication to high standards, the classroom became a truly transformative place for her. Instead of being merely a place she used to escape her hardships, it became a locus of personal growth and possibility: a location where learning was no longer merely didactic, but instead became about the practice of freedom (Freire & Tasker, 1976). For Samina, this liberation was at least as much personal and affective as it was educative, and possibly more. Mrs. Kendall "made me believe in myself," she asserted; thus, what mattering may have provided for her was the freedom to embrace her own power and potential as an individual who was in the process of "becoming."

James also seems to have experienced a powerful sense of mattering, and also not mattering, to others while in school. His repeated use of the word "impersonal" to describe Brookhill, noting the lack of connection to others that he often felt during his time there, and the perception that his presence (as well as his absence) could so easily go unnoticed. All of this contributed to a self-described sense of invisibility for him; that is, a sense of not mattering to those around him. Yet when he encountered affirming interactions from adults that he perceived were based on an authentic and caring orientation—such as Mr. Morgan’s genuine concern for his lack of consistent attendance, or Mr. Williams concern that James find successful alternate
means to graduate—James employed language that could be argued as both explicitly existential and related to mattering. Such acts by others, he said, "let you know you’re there." James was careful to specify that this desire for recognition was not simple vanity. Some people "always want eyes on them" he said, and followed that by adding "I’m not like that." Instead, he indicated that feeling "wanted" in a classroom was something that contributed to not only being more invested and working harder, but feeling inherently valued as a person.

There are likely a variety of ways this perception of mattering can manifest itself in the experiences of students. One-on-one interpersonal encounters where an affirming disposition is felt may seem the most likely way, but, importantly, the words of the participants in this study suggest that other contexts can be conducive as well. Alexander, for example, spoke about the initial anonymity and invisibility that he felt at his high school in much the same way James did. However, the anxiety this produced was to some extent counteracted by the actions of Ms. Jamison, who constructed learning experiences within her classroom environment in a way that made Alexander feel as if he was "present in something" as an equal, and where he felt that his voice and feelings were confirmed. Feeling as though his presence was important, Alexander maintained, was crucial for how he reacted to the classroom, the teacher, and the academic work. As was the case with Allie, for example, he recalls doing far better than expected in Ms. Jamison’s class, even though she taught very subject that he both struggled in and disliked (English). Alexander attributed this unexpected result to the way in which he felt valued by the Mrs. Jamison’s teaching and interpersonal style. In Allie’s case, science was the subject that triggered anxiety regarding her academic ability; yet the implications of sensing that she was of value to Mrs. Daniels through the care and patience this teacher demonstrated was transformative to her own perceptions of self in relation to the world.
Authenticity was critical as part of the perception of mattering for the participants. It was crucial for Felicia, for example, who felt from two of her teachers that they their interest in what she and her fellow students felt and had to say was "genuine." For her, the notion of mattering seems to have been closely connected to voice, specifically to the encouragement to share her thoughts in a safe and judgment free atmosphere. It was especially significant to her that Mrs. Witherspoon was sensitive to the anxiety she felt early in her secondary experience, and that she facilitated non-threatening ways students could express their feelings and concerns to her through a system of note exchange. The fact that this teacher also displayed what Felicia saw as a genuine interest in what she was thinking through more intimate conversations was also something she characterized as important. Perhaps not surprisingly, it was Mrs. Witherspoon who Felicia developed perhaps the strongest bond with in her secondary years. From her earliest encounters with this teacher—including the initiative Felicia took prior to the start of the school year to address her schedule—she felt individually recognized and appreciated by her.

They psychological literature on mattering (Gillespie, 2005; Marshall, 2001; Schlossberg, 1989) identify its obverse by utilizing the using term "marginalization," a phenomenon described as the experience of feeling outside of, or beyond, the immediate care and concern of others. This is also reminiscent of Laing (1961), who, building on the efforts of Buber and his relational philosophy, employed the term "imperviousness" to describe disconfirming encounters with truly uncaring others. It would seem that marginality, as illuminated through the participant narratives contained with this study, is a theme that can be broadly, rather than narrowly, experienced. Rather than thinking of marginalization as a phenomenon which has an exclusively racial, political, or for that matter, existential dimension, it is instead suggested that the following narratives point toward a more holistic interpretation of the term: perhaps as a larger mode of
alienation, for instance, and as something that can be encountered in a variety of ways. To do this, it is important to consider not only what kinds of interpersonal and institutional actions tend to contribute to the marginalization of others, but also to understand what the experience of marginality is like from within the subjective worlds of those who encounter it so that these individual encounters do not lose their unique character and, at the same time, an eye toward the "larger picture" of otherness and estrangement is maintained.

While much of the academic literature in the area of mattering and marginalization proceeds from a positivistic framework, listening to the voices of the participants in this study suggests a more phenomenologically derived understanding of both, and their respective significance to the experiences of individuals in learning environments, is significant. For Dimitri and Davie, for example, the experiences of marginalization were acute, and were rooted principally in the kind of intimidation and harassment they both encountered as young, gay, black males in learning environments that were hostile to their growing sense of sexual identity. High school was negative "in every aspect," Dimitri asserted. He implicated numerous interactions with adults, the very people who should have been actively seeking to protect and nurture him in and out of the classrooms, as being especially pernicious. Recalling his need to seek refuge in the bathroom as a secure location to eat his lunch, he described the years of harassment and marginalization as "torture." Similarly, Davie was explicit about the degree to which his sense of isolation and marginality often poisoned his desire to learn and be at school, and his lack of confidence that even if shared his struggles as a gay male would not be understood—or treated with care—by the adults around him only made things worse. Simply put, not having the nurturing and empathy he felt was crucial made him "hate school."
For James, too, marginalization was felt in connection with a lack of being personally cared-for and cared about (by the school as an institution and, to a significant extent, by the adults who worked there). Not feeling as though his presence was regarded as consequential was something that contributed to feelings of invisibility, emotional distance, and what he described as a "businesslike" atmosphere…one that was merely transactional in nature (i.e., student work was labor, and the grade was the paycheck) and which was personally alienating for him. The perceptions of this invisibility and imperviousness were significant drivers in James’ attitudes and his actions in connection with school. Indeed, all of this contributed to a sense of invisibility that ultimately contributed to his dropping out. Yet it is important to note that for James—as with Davie and Dimitri—when affirming encounters with teachers and counselors did occur, they helped to puncture this general sense of alienation in pivotal ways.

With Allie and Felicia, marginality appears to have been more closely related to experiencing a lack of voice and with the perception of intellectual judgment by teachers. For Felicia, voice was critical, and while an interpretation of this could be restricted to treating voice (or experiencing the lack thereof) as a strictly political encounter, being "heard" seems to have had affirming existential implications as well. Felicia struggled with asserting her voice, and encountered the inclination to retreat turtle-like into her "shell," when she perceived judgment from her instructors. Conversely, when she felt teachers "wanted to hear what I had to say," she experienced a degree of empowerment and recognition in connection with her learning. Allie also attested to the power of teachers to marginalize through acts of humiliation and embarrassment. The worst thing that teachers could do, she maintained, was imply a student was "totally wrong" in front of their peers. Yet Allie, like Felicia, felt personally affirmed through the expression of intellectual voice, and her growing confidence as a participant in classroom
discourse. As with Felicia, however, there was a connection for Allie between being heard and mattering to others. This reciprocal interaction is what "broke her off the assembly line," of an otherwise alienating encounter with learning, in fact; when somebody demonstrated authentic interest in what she thought and had to say, as she encountered in her second high school with her English teacher. It was not merely that Allie had a voice and could express it as an act of intellectual or political independence. What was vital was the perception that her opinion mattered, and that her voice was "gonna be heard."

Sallie experienced racial marginalization as well, at the hands of fellow students and regarding her biracial identity. While she was more explicit about her experiences in this regard than Felicia (who also identified as bi-racial), both of these young women struggled with issues regarding to navigating the school environment with their multi-layered racial identities. Fine and Sirin (2007) use the term "hyphenated selves" to describe some of the difficulties that multi-ethnic youth face in this regard, given their sense of racial self-identity includes dimension that are "...at once joined, and separated, by history, the present socio-political climate, geography, biography, longings, and loss" (p. 2).

Sallie, for instance, felt as though she was "caught in the middle" between two worlds: one where she was not black enough for her African American friends, yet was too black for her white friends. The experience of marginalization was particularly pronounced during her time at Eddleson High, one of the four secondary schools she attended, where the treatment she received at the hands of fellow students was complicated by what she perceived as an uncaring staff that did not establish relationships with its students. "There wasn’t really any connection between the teachers and the students," she said, adding that, at Eddleson, she often felt "judged" by the very adults who were charged with helping her learn. Felicia was far less specific about her
difficulties navigating her biracial status, saying only that she felt as though she never really "fit in" at her nearly all white school, and commenting that she could not remember any explicit instances of racial judgment at the hands of her friends or teachers.

In each of these young women's cases, however, they were able to find meaning in the assertion their voice within particular classroom contexts; and the contribution of their voices in the presence of adults who demonstrated authentic interest in them was both ameliorative of their marginalization and personally empowering. When Sallie perceived encouragement and support with regard to voice from Mrs. Bookman, for instance, she described this as significant to how she perceived the classroom environment, and to her sense of comfort within it. "It kind of helped," she said of this teacher's encouragement of and attention to student voice, "She talked with us…she asked us how everything was going. It was like a big group discussion. Everyone felt like they could speak on anything, and she made it clear that we were not gonna be judging anyone."

The Perception of Active Support

In many of the cases, the perception of active support from an adult in the learning environment also emerged as a consequential theme for the participants. Such support, of course, would seem most likely to arise within the context of a caring disposition toward another—a disposition that is itself often related to the kind of affirming relationships discussed in the first section of this chapter. However, this latter distinction is not always the case, which is why participants' perception of support warrants its own separate thematic discussion. The experiences of some of the participants in this study suggest that the perception of acts of authentic and active support from another could be of significance within the learning context, even if they are not encountered (or described as being encountered) in association with an
otherwise durable, authentic, and affirming interpersonal relationship. Given the complexity and number of phenomena that likely influence the degree to which such personal connections (e.g., Samina and Mrs. Kendall) are experienced as authentic and nurturing, this is not entirely surprising. Forging relationships such as the one Mrs. Kendall did with Samina with every student—apart from being impossible for interpersonal and compatibility reasons—would also prove to be prohibitive in both time and emotional resources for those involved.

Nevertheless, as Noddings (1984; 1988; 1992) contends, a caring disposition can contribute to an environment that nurtures and supports the emotional, intellectual, and academic growth of students. It is out of the perception of this caring orientation that instances of active support seem to grow. Alexander, for instance, encountered such support from Mrs. Jamison, who—in addition to creating what he described as a warm and supportive classroom environment, which he recalled with fondness—also referred him to the school counselor when his family’s pending move back to Detroit was deeply troubling for him. The counselor responded by creating the space for Alexander to experience the range of emotions he was feeling with regard to the pending family move, and to do so in the presence of a judgment-free adult. This effect was something that Alexander was explicit about when he looked back on his eventual decision to return to school through an alternate course, which was suggested by the counselor in the midst of his crisis. It felt like someone was "really there" he said, and was "really listening to me."

There was for Alexander, as well as the others who experienced active and deliberate support, a sense of being noticed, seen, or recognized that was often directly related to their perception of this phenomenon. That is to say, someone cared enough to "see" them, and this recognition went beyond simply noticing their value as a student; instead, the person chose to
take deliberate action to support them in a some way, thereby acknowledging something essential in their humanity in a way that was significant to each of them.

Devon experienced a deep sense of support from Mrs. West, describing her in terms similar to Samina (though with even greater explicitness) that implied a kind of familial attachment and affection for her. This teacher’s investment in his well-being was palpable and significant for Devon. His recollection of her visits to the home for what he described as his occasional "hard-headedness" was remembered in the context of caring and supportive actions: as someone who was looking out for him when he failed to make the best personal decisions. Devon recalled her as one who looked out for not only him but for his friends—and students at the school in general, even using the collective "we" when characterizing her care and affection: "she loved us like we was one of her own." Mrs. West’s fairness and approachability appear to have been key in Devon’s ability to relate to her, and also to accept her support as authentically intended.

Later in his secondary experiences, Devon’s encounters with Mr. Scott are also illustrative—not just in how he perceived acts of support, but also of the important role authenticity played as part of that experience. Mr. Scott was willing to share the value of his real world experiences through anecdotes and casual conversation; he was a straight-talker and, like Mrs. West, fair in his application of discipline; and he was willing to take specific actions in support of his students. If something was bothering you "he’d take you aside and offer to listen or help." Devon recalled, adding that he also found jobs for a couple of his friends. These things were important with respect to both relatability and trust for Devon, and, as with other participants, the supportive actions connected to such dispositions seems to have helped expand his notion of interpersonal trust beyond the scope of the immediate relational encounter. In
Devon’s words, Mr. Scott "showed me you can trust people, not only inside their classroom but in other aspects." This is a crucial point, and is suggestive of the lasting impact that the perception of encountering such supportive actions can have.

Kenya also expressed the importance of experiencing support. However, her characterizations of what it meant to be a supportive (and caring) teacher were, to a greater extent than the other participants, tied to perceptions of instructor competence and passion. Kenya wanted to see that her teachers were not just knowledgeable about their designated subjects, but, and this was at least as important to her, that they demonstrated an authentic and enthusiastic interest in it. A key element of this was that the teacher should also want the student to care about (even come to be passionate about) the subject. Despite the more academic focus of her notions of care and support, however, Kenya was also clear about the importance that sensing teacher support played in classroom dynamics. This was made most explicit in her description of experiences with Mr. Englehardt and his attentiveness; not just to students struggling with the material (if you made a face "like you don’t understand, he’ll come over to your desk and ask if you’re okay"), but also to his inquiring after her well-being on a day she mentioned having been particularly tired (an act that surprised and meant something to her personally, in particular because she is "usually good at hiding her emotions").

As with Allie, the perception that teachers were willing to go out of their way to help students overcome difficulty, to "sit down with them" in the form of patient, one-on-one conversations was meaningful for Kenya. Ultimately, it was one of the key ways she defined what a "good teacher" is. This was made evident on the last day of her senior year at school, when she recalled standing outside the building with her sisters awaiting pickup. Mr. Englehardt approached them with arms extended, swooping in and circling them while mimicking the sound
of an airplane, something that Kenya seemed to remember with humor and fondness. The teacher went on to speak to her and her sisters:

He was telling us that basically, we could do whatever we wanted to do. He said, your life is yours now, you can do whatever you want. He was saying it’s you’re never too old to start over…that we never have to do anything we don’t want to …like even if we’re in a job, we can always go back to school.

Asked why she thinks that his words had such resonance with her, Kenya responded with an answer reminiscent of another participant, Allie, whose experience with Mrs. Daniels was similarly described as helping her feel as though her future was somehow less determined, less fixed. "Knowing that [things are] not so…permanent makes it better." This is a critical and potent observation that speaks to much larger issues. Seeing one’s students in terms of their unfolding potential, rather than foreclosing on that growth by viewing them as fixed beings, is a critical part of not just an existentially affirming orientation toward learning; it is, as Greene, asserts, a key dimension of learning as the practice of freedom (Greene, 1982).

Davie’s experiences with the school liaison also lend weight to the value of active support as an expression of a caring orientation. While he did not characterize his relationship with Mrs. Garrett as an intensely personal one—in fact his encounters with her appear to have been rather intermittent over the course of his secondary years—her actions and advocacy on his behalf left a lasting impact on him. As reported by some of the other participants, the specific encounters of support he experienced with Mrs. Garret’s contributed to a potentially expanding horizon of relational trust for Davie, i.e., "if she helped me or I can talk to her, then [maybe] I can talk to my counselor [too]." Thus, while he seems to have encountered numerous interactions with adults that were characterized by judgment, dismissiveness, and even downright ridicule,
the experience of having Mrs. Garret go out of her way to demonstrate support (to drive him to the Aveda institute when he lacked transportation, for example) stood out in a singular and affirming way for him.

The Value of Voice

It is clear from this study and from the pilot study which preceded it (Hall, 2010) that voice, in the expansive sense of the term, is often experienced as consequential within the context of interpersonal learning encounters. The importance of voice, both generally and in connection with youth and education, has been explored through various theoretical lenses, including its instructional potential in curriculum reform efforts; its political and cultural meaning (Coulardy, 2010); its place in conceptualizations of democracy and social justice (Newmann & Wehlage, 1993; Gutmann, 1987); and in the power it has to be transformative through dialogue (Freire, 1970). Voice also plays a central role in Buber’s (1957) notion of confirmation and "genuine meetings," which, he maintains are essentially dialogic in nature. To speak and be heard in the context of conversation is part of a reciprocal and potentially affirming act. Furthermore, to speak and be heard in the face of one’s own marginalization is a potential act of self-empowerment, a call for others to recognize your presence and humanity. Dimitri and Felicia highlight this point in reflecting on their own experiences: the former with regard to the intimidation and harassment he encountered as an LGBT youth of color throughout his secondary school years, and in light of which he concluded that "You gotta have a voice." The latter was in connection with her sense of marginality as a bi-racial student in an almost exclusively white school district. It is largely within contexts such as these that the theme of voice emerged for the participants. Voice was encountered as both as a confirming action
perceived within interpersonal dialogic contexts, and as a kind of defiant affirmation of individual worth in the face of marginalizing experiences and student silencing.

The degree to which voice as is felt as empowering and affirming appears to have been significantly influenced by the relational and social contexts in which its use occurred. In other words, the participant experience of voice seemed significant to the extent that it happened in conjunction with the perception of other confirming dispositions, such as the sense of mattering to another, or the belief that it was part of a larger attempt to engender authentic and judgment-free dialogue around learning. In the latter case, for example, what Allie claimed broke her off the "assembly line" were the encounters with instructors at her second high school valued what she had to say: when they asked her "what do you think?" and conveyed that they genuinely cared about the answer she gave. This, she said, is what "broadened her world;" not just that she was able to participate in a dialogue as an academic exercise, but that her "opinion mattered [to someone]." It is not enough to speak aloud, in other words, it is critical that our voice is heard, and, crucially, is perceived as being of consequence to others.

Voice, power, and agency are all interrelated phenomena. Allie’s description of the frequent family relocations she was forced to endure during her adolescence as a time when she "had no voice" is an example which seems to illustrate this point. While it is true that theorizing voice in the context of politics and power has implications for policy, it is equally important to remember that voice implies something phenomenologically significant. To speak and be heard—that dialogic encounter that both Buber and Freire (each in their own way) write about so passionately—requires an existential recognition of the other. It demands that one value, or recognize, the person they are intending to hear by assigning inherent significance to their presence and the subjective experience they inhabit. Freire (1970) wrote about this precondition
more broadly, arguing that an a priori faith in the value and potential of humankind was the necessary starting point for transformative dialogue. Buber’s "genuine meetings" between people is more intimate in its description, but itself highlights acts that are conditioned on the presence of an I-Thou orientation toward the other. A fundamental valuing of the other must precede, or at least go hand-in-hand with, attempts at authentic voice and dialogue in order for it to be personally, or socially, transformative; and an expansive theory of voice, then, will seek to include phenomenological, as well as transformatively political, meanings, particularly in connection with subjective experience.

Both Sallie and Alexander experienced the significance of voice as well. For each of them, the ability to relate to their teacher— that is, to see them and in turn to be seen, as in some sense equal, and as growing individuals occasionally prone to mistakes—was crucial in their feeling empowered to speak and to share. Listening to the student in ways that make their opinions and interests valued, Alexander maintained, is the "best thing" a teacher can do. His encounters with Mrs. Jamison were illustrative of how just how much of an impact this can have on perceptions toward learning; in fact, he credited Mrs. Jamison’s ability to place his own voice and interests as a student front and center with encouraging him to finally become a reader, and a lover, of novels. "Students want you to see their point of view, and to understand [them] a little bit…to work with them."

Voice was explicitly incorporated by Mrs. Bookman in Sallie’s recollection of her time in her classroom. Like Alexander, it was important to Sallie that she be able to relate to her teachers on a personal level. Without that relatability she couldn’t "connect" with them, and that connection was something she identified as pivotal in helping her learn best. But also of importance in Mrs. Bookman’s history class, according to Sallie, was the fact that learning was
heavily focused on the encouragement of dialogue and student voice. It was a place that she maintained helped her, as an often shy student, open up and become more confident to contribute her ideas. Part of this was due to what she perceived as Ms. Bookman’s authenticity and willingness to share things about her own life, including mistakes she had made and subsequently overcome. But it is also clear that Sallie perceived the frequent class discussions as purposeful and closely monitored by this teacher. The discussions weren’t "do what you want" days, Sallie maintained, "If we were talking then it was everybody [involved]."

For the participants in this study, the exploration and assertion of voice was facilitated by more than just a sense of being able to relate to the teacher. Sallie remembers Mrs. Bookman not only as a teacher who went out of her way to engage the students (and class as a whole) in both personal and subject—related conversation, she also recalls her as someone who "had discipline," who conveyed the importance of mutual respect among students when they learned and talked together. Though she self-described as "shy" and often reticent to contribute to discussions early in her secondary experiences, Sallie maintained that Mrs. Bookman’s interpersonal and instructional style were critical in her feeling comfortable enough—and safe enough—to eventually speak up.

This perception of a sense of safety and respect was also important to Felicia, who also described herself as shy and someone from whom speaking up in the presence of her classmates was especially difficult. Felicia’s narrative, in fact, suggested that encounters with voice (both affirming and disaffirming) may have played a key role for her in her secondary experiences overall. In Mrs. Washington’s class, for instance, she felt not only that her presence was valued, but she was careful to point out a recollection that her voice mattered too. "She wanted us to talk," Felicia said, noting that Mrs. Washington—like Mrs. Bookman, whom Sallie recalled
favorably—was careful to make sure students felt safe to share. Despite being very shy, Felicia’s encounters with empowering teachers suggests the degree to which voice can be successfully nurtured by another. Thus, in her 9th grade math class, where students would occasionally be called to the board to explain math problems to the rest of the class, Felicia did not feel as though she was being "put on the spot or judged." In contrast to Mr. Wells class, where she felt "pushed" by the sound of his voice, and the cajoling, sarcastic manner she felt he communicated.

Felicia’s recollection of this as a kind of torture, one that would cause her to retreat back into her "turtle shell" illuminates not only the importance of voice per se, but the degree to which it can be mediated by both individual and institutional contexts. While there is reason to believe that some students may, for various reasons, be better able to assert their voice in the face of attempts to marginalize or intimidate, it should be a first principle of educational encounters that they should seek to empower, not to alienate and to silence. There is, after all, both a psychological and an existential toll on the student (and on the person) when such dynamics constitute their learning and interpersonal contexts. Furthermore, as an individual educator or with regard to educational institutions, it must be remembered that the choice to empower rather than silence is, at its core, a deliberate one. Recall that, for Felicia, there was a very real sense that Mr. Well’s actions were a kind of game to him: that he was aware he may was putting students in an uncomfortable, and perhaps even degrading, position by his choice of method, tone, and disposition. That he or anyone might argue this kind of "instructional tactic" was done for academic reasons (for "rigor," say, or to "toughen up" his 14-year old charges for the world of competition that awaits them) is neither a compelling nor morally convincing rejoinder to the harm such actions may do. If learning is not simultaneously about empowering the individual—to narrate their world, to relate to and empathize with others, to be curious without fear of
judgment—then school’s more didactic purposes, however efficiently accomplished, are concomitantly diminished.

**Conclusion**

The themes presented in this section illuminate complex and significant meanings that the participants constructed around their learning experiences. They suggest the degree to which relational encounters may influence such meanings, and, furthermore and of equal importance, that such meanings can have enduring value to the individual. There is transformative potential in the relationships created in the learning environment, and individual decisions by adults and staff members can act in ways that facilitate such potential. If the experiences of the participants in this study are transferrable, it is crucial to recognize that the impact of this is likely not confined to strict definitions of academic success or mere interest level in a particular subject—important as those things may be. Instead, they can contribute to an affirmed and expanded sense of one’s self. They can become a part of who the learners are, for better or worse. As Allie’s words about the impact of Mrs. Daniel’s support and care imply, this can contribute to "learning" in the deep sense of the word: learning not where you "fit" in the world, but where you can "be" in the world.
CHAPTER 8: "HIGH STAKES" LEARNING RECONSIDERED: ALIENATION, CONNECTION, AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF RELATIONALITY WITHIN THE SCHOOL SETTING

"To be of importance to others is to be alive." – T.S. Elliot (in Simpson, 1997, p. 654)

Learning in public schools in the United States has long been conceptualized as a process which has both implicit and explicit characteristics. In addition to the always-contentious nature of explicit pedagogy (Beyer & Liston, 1997), critiques of the "hidden curriculum," originally described by Jackson (1966; 1968), have identified the degree to which more subtle forms of socialization also occur. For example, the promotion of vocational norms and dispositions thought to serve market interests are one of the key manifestations of this hidden curriculum, and are transmitted through the discursive practices within the schools (Giroux & Penna, 1979; Anyon, 1980; Agostinone-Wilson, 2006). Schools, from this perspective, are far from neutral sites of student learning. They expose our young to a powerful and persistent mix of dominant social and ideological practices, both as a matter of stated aims and in far more subtle ways. Such criticisms have become particularly timely amid the seemingly relentless growth of market-based school reforms, and what has been labeled the "audit society" (Power, 1999; Apple, 2005). In this conception of pedagogy and learning, the shape of school practices and organization increasingly focuses on norms such as efficiency, accountability, and pervasive standardization.

Critical interrogation of such trends and their consequences for students, public education, and society at large, is as vital as it is well-placed (Fabricant & Fine, 2012). For as Bordieu & Passeron (1990) observe, the most potent form of ideology is the kind which passes our individual and collective filters largely unchecked, thereby becoming accepted as common knowledge with little or no challenge. Schools are indeed sites where many consequential
lessons—of both the visible and invisible variety—are learned. Within the contexts of public schools as most are currently constituted, i.e., within increasingly commodified spaces, we are likely to find numerous ways in which students' lives are circumscribed and shaped by forces largely beyond their control. Centralizing the voices of students and their descriptions of school encounters, therefore, can help not only to illuminate areas of significance for broader inquiry, but should also be thought of as both a moral and educative imperative (Lincoln, 1995; Cook-Sather, 2006).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2010), the vast majority of students in the United States, approximately ninety percent, still experience learning in a traditional public school. As institutions, these environments produce a near-continuous state of macro- and micro relational encounters throughout the school day. Furthermore, such encounters come in a variety of contexts, from perceptions of their relationships to the school itself and the degree to which students do or do not feel meaningfully part of it (Blum, 2005; Bryan et al., 2012); to the importance of formal and informal peer group interaction (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997; Coffey, 2013); and also the potential for encounters with significant adults such as teachers, security personnel, support staff, administration, and counselors (Libbey, 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2006). Schools, therefore, can also be said to possess another less explicit, but no less significant, "curriculum of consequence": their significance as a location of relational space. The voices within this study suggest that accumulated interpersonal experiences in schools are transmitting powerful messages about the value of individual student presence—and are doing so not only through direct encounters with staff, but also in the ways students perceive their relationship to the institution itself. The stakes for today’s students, as the saying goes, are indeed high.
This chapter will explore some of the philosophical and educational implications of one particularly important aspect of this relational space: experiences with alienation and institutional otherness. This phenomenon is presented as one which the participant narratives suggest is a common thread among the informants, and also as one that is often mediated in powerful ways by specific relational encounters. Alienation has a long history in the philosophical, sociological, and theoretical literature (Marx, 1844; Durkheim, 1897; Seeman, 1959), and is furthermore implicated as a significant construct within context of modern schooling as well (Galbo, 1980; Newmann, 1981). Yet the voices of students in this area—both collectively and in particular those of marginalized youth—have nevertheless been limited (Schulz & Rubel, 2011). For the participants in the present study, the degree to which interpersonal encounters with both the Other (largely in the form of teaching staff), and with the institution of school itself, contributed to perceptions of alienation appear to have been significant. Yet in the midst of such experiences, affirming interpersonal encounters were also found to be potentially transformative; not only for the informants’ sense of academic efficacy and their attitudes toward learning, but in far more existential and developmentally crucial ways as well.

Acknowledging the consequential nature of relationality in connection with alienation is vital. The kinds of relational encounters produced in school represent another, co-existent form of "high stakes" learning: one where the student’s relationship to others and to the institution of school can be construed as yet another layer in the hidden curriculum. The lessons in this "curriculum" may be no less significant in their consequences to the student (and ultimately, to the community and larger society) than the very real impacts more commonly critiqued from a primarily economic perspective of schooling’s shortcomings (Hursh & Martina, 2003). What students take away from their relational encounters—that is to say, what they are "taught"…not
about history or biology, but about self, Other, and the "space between" the two—can have potentially profound and lasting implications that demand increased consideration by educators and school reform advocates.

**Alienation and Otherness**

As far back as Marx (1844) and Durkheim (1897) the phenomenon of alienation has been regarded as a central and vexing issue of modernity. Yet while varying degrees of otherness in human experience may be inevitable, they may not always be perceived by people as alienating (Keniston, 1965; Goldman, 1968). For instance, being able to experience ourselves as in some way separate or distinct from our fellows, from broader society, and from the institutions society creates, is a practice that can be *affirming* to the human condition. Such experiences may be perceived as part of a liberating form of self-awareness, contributing to a developing sense of our own uniqueness and individuality. However, Bronfenbrenner (1986) argues that this is only as long as the perceived alienation does not occur simultaneously across multiple areas of one’s life. Furthermore, it stands to reason that any social institution (school, church, workplace, etc.) is likely to contribute to complex and often intersecting experiences with both belonging and otherness, though these phenomena will not likely occur in equal measure. When the realities and consequences of alienation and institutional otherness are considered, therefore, it is critical to understand that such encounters should not be thought of as a unitary construct; indeed, they may not necessarily always be described by those who experience them as pernicious or unpleasant. Instead they exist along a spectrum of mediated contexts and in a variety of subjective experiences—and those experiences are influenced to varying degrees by external social structures (Newmann, 1981).
The young are regarded as particularly susceptible to episodes of alienation (Brofenbrenner, 1986; Brown, Higgins, & Paulsen, 2003), and the deleterious impact of adolescent alienation in the form of disconnection within the schools is well-documented (for example, Galbo, 1980; Newman, 1981; Mau, 1992; Davis & Dupper, 2004). Brofenbrenner (1974) observed that "…schools have become one of the most potent breeding grounds of alienation in American society" (p. 60). As institutions with very particular structures and practices, schools may not just be places where students happen to "encounter" estrangement; instead the voices of the participants included in this study suggest schools are actively producing and reproducing unique experiences with alienation among the population they are supposed to serve. The degree to which students experience their learning environment as a place which alienates or affirms their individual presence is not an inconsequential matter. As noted earlier in this study it is relevant to their academic interest, their school performance, and their attitudes toward learning in general. But according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2010), such perceptions have also been implicated as a significant factor of students’ desire (or lack of desire) to remain in school altogether. Regardless of what a given learning environment may or may not have to offer academically, if a student’s estrangement from his or her school environment metastasizes to the point they no longer view it as a worthwhile place to be, all subsequent efforts at engagement—however noble, innovative, or well-intended—may be for naught.

Many of the voices of the participants in this study speak to subjective experiences of estrangement in connection with its practical effect on their attitudes toward school; but the cases presented also poignantly argue for an additional category of consideration which deserves consideration: the existential and developmental value of one’s intersubjective experience amid
school encounters, and the deep personal significance for the student that such experiences can have. Taken together, the perceptions of students who encounter modern schooling in its present and dominant forms, therefore, are crucial to discussion of their overall well-being. It is argued that this notion of well-being should be viewed in more holistic and expansive ways, rather than merely through discourses which reduce the student experience to a range of quantifiable academic outcomes.

**Alienation in Brief Historical Context**

Brown, Higgins, & Paulsen (2003) and Newmann (1981) both observe that the construct of alienation is nearly two centuries old within the philosophical, theological, and sociological literature, and that alienation in connection with schooling by comparison is a far more recent phenomenon of study. Newmann (1981), in summarizing the historical discourse about alienation, draws on the work of Seeman (1959; 1975), in distinguishing between alienation’s structural explanations and social-psychological conceptions of human estrangement. From a structural perspective, alienation may be construed as inevitable when people are kept from having meaningful degrees of control over the substance and direction of their productive capacities, and instead that control is phenomenon that is instead hierarchically organized, and is concentrated in the hands of others (Marx, 1844). This perspective is rooted to a great extent in not only the philosophy of Marx, but also in the works of Weber and Durkheim as well. Alternately, alienation can result when the "norms" and "regulations" which provide culturally transmitted social cohesion break down and cause the bonds that typically sustain communal connection to deteriorate (Durkheim, 1897).

In these examples, alienation is thought to leave people fragmented from the material world around them and estranged from both themselves and from others, leading to deep
personal, and ultimately social, distress (Seeman, 1959). Importantly, both of these conceptions are also based on normative claims, or at least normative assumptions, about the essence of the human condition. That is, as dual perspectives on structural alienation, both Durkheim’s anomie and Marx’s framework of social-psychological alienation resulting from the exploitation of workers’ labor under capitalism, are inimical to our well-being because they separate us from that which they contend is most essential to our humanness. This "essential self" is thought to be rooted not only in our associations with each other in a relational context, however, but even more so the in kinds of external structures that our collective associations create (Horton, 1964).

Seeman (1975) emphasizes, however, that alienation is a "multi-dimensional" construct, and thus can be regarded from more than one perspective. In contrast to the structural-sociological view, it can also be construed as being part of an encounter described as a social-psychological experience. When regarded this way, experiences with alienation can "...constitute a critical part of social reality" (Newmann, 1981, p. 547) for all those who encounter it. Describing the impact from experiences of alienation and the degree to which encountering it may circumscribe individual attitudes, well-being, and intentionality, is the central focus in this conception of otherness—though there is variation here as well. The work of Goffman (1957), for example, situates the potential for alienation at the level of the conversational encounter, focusing on the microbehaviors and norms which emerge in such moments from areas like our accepted system of etiquette. In so doing, Goffman’s work seeks to "learn from it [alienation] something about the generic properties of spoken interaction" (p. 47). It should be borne in mind, however, that construing alienation as a significant social-psychological encounter does not necessarily exclude structural considerations, as
Bronfenbrenner (1986), Newmann (1981) and Seeman (1959; 1975) all stress. The individual and the structural perspectives intersect, overlap, and co-inform.

Galbo (1980) argues that alienation is a "vague" construct which does not allow for easy definition. While this may be seen as problematic from within the boundaries of positivistic inquiry, the present study seeks generative definitions drawn from experiential data. Such an emic orientation is central to qualitative inquiry’s search for meaning. Regardless of what cause, or causes, are seen to contribute to perceptions of alienation, it seems safe to assume that the phenomenon’s impact must be seen as consequential to someone in order to be worthy of study; and despite the structural versus social-psychological dichotomy noted above (a dichotomy best thought of with regard to emphasis, perhaps), alienation remains distinctly, though not exclusively, an experiential phenomenon. It is encountered and felt at the level of the individual, in other words—existentially and emotionally. When alienation is present as a shared human experience across discrete subjectivities (say, among the majority of employees at a given workplace), we can then say it has additional significance for the larger society as well. In short, alienation may "be" many things, but one thing it must be construed as is emic. So to borrow from Durkheim’s (1897) famous adage that sociological facts require sociological explanations, emic experiences demand emic descriptions.

**Intersubjectivity and the lifeworld.** The intersubjective lifeworld as described by Schutz (1967) is a crucial part of our existence and well-being. It describes the importance that interpersonal encounters have for our subjective experiences and the meanings we attach to them. While the mere fact that others are physically present in our life cannot be viewed as the opposite of alienation (one can be among many, for example, yet still feel deeply alienated), the words of the participants in this study point to the potential for affirming modes of
intersubjectivity to alleviate alienation. Alienation is therefore argued here as a phenomenon that is mediated by intersubjectivity rather than one that is defined by it. Relational encounters may either affirm or estrange by their own account. They may also contribute to preexisting feelings of connection or alienation, ultimately making them worse or better depending on the perceived nature of the interaction.

In his writings about the immediacy of this self-and-other dynamic to our existential condition, Levinas (1981) argues that it is our responsiveness to the Other that saturates our individual existence with meaning. Furthermore, he maintains that such "dialogic, face-to-face situations," are "experience[s] in the strongest sense of the term: a contact with a reality that does not fit any a priori idea, [but] which overflows them" (p. 59). This is an argument for relationality as a kind of first condition of human existence, or the idea that intersubjective experience is both inescapable and central to our essence and our growth as individuals. Macmurray (1961) echoes this as well in his claim that our individual existence does more than merely occasion relational encounters. Our individual life, in his words, is:

…Constituted by personal relationships between persons. [One’s] personality is mutual in its very being. The self is one term in the relation between two selves. It cannot be prior to that relation and, equally, of course, the relation cannot be prior to it. ‘I’ exists only as a member of the ‘You and I.’ The self only exists in the communion of selves. (p. 137)

There are clear intersections here with the philosophy of Buber (1923; 1957), who also argues for the centrality of self-and-other experiences as both inescapable and crucial to our own sense of being and fulfillment. Buber’s phrase "I require a You to become" clearly echoes the words of Macmurray. The writings of Levinas, Macmurray, and Buber, are all attuned to the ethical implications of an interpersonal ontology based on dialogic encounter; that is, the degree to
which the norms, and even the structures, which we encounter in the world around us are informed by the way/s we choose to "see" and engage with the omnipresent Other. Levinas refers to the shape of this Other encounter in many ways, including terms like response and proximity. He further maintains that these interactions with the Other is the place where our collective ethics emerges (Levinas, 1981).

Buber makes his normative argument in the shape of his famous I-Thou/I-It distinction, calling on us to strive to see and encounter the Other holistically. For Buber, the ultimate "Thou" to which one can relate, or be alienated from, is God. He exhorts us to confirm one another through a recognition of the Other in their wholeness (Buber, 1957) through face to face dialogue he calls "genuine meetings." Later consideration of Buber’s confirmation construct by Laing (1961) and others (Sieburg, 1973; Waltzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967) yielded the term disconfirmation, described by Laing as a perceived imperviousness and dismissiveness of our worth or value by another whom we encounter. This is alienation borne of direct interpersonal contact leading to the perception that "I don’t matter" or "I don’t exist" to another human being.

Collectively, these observations central to the learning environments of our young people today, and the words of the participants in this study appear to bear this observation out. Vandendberg’s (1971) call for an educational ontology that centralizes the "being" of the learner, and the relational implications of being that Buber and others argue for, are an extension of the ethical implications that Levinas’s (1981) self and other encounter identifies. In this spirit we could consider the valuing of the intersubjective and its attending experiences as a foundation upon which not only to build arguments for educational justice, but as a way to help further the critique of current of paradigms within schooling. For the informants in this study, specific relational encounters had the potential to radically transform their disconnection and
estrangement from their given learning environment; thus it may also be argued that a relational orientation more broadly applied within schools might constitute a radical re-orientation for learning environments in and of themselves.

For the purposes of the present exploration the term alienation and institutional otherness will be used interchangeably. Either term is assumed to describe student perceptions of experiences generated within the learning environment that degrade a sense of their value in connection with a) other people, or b) with the school itself as an institution…or with both. No claim is made that this is a definitive or comprehensive way to conceptualize the term; rather, it is suggested that forming impressions of either one of these in any degree is likely to resonate with subjective experiences of alienation. It must be remembered, too, that interpretations of the phenomenon must ultimately be rooted in the voices of the informants, and not externally imposed upon their experiences by others. To this last point, in drawing from the specific participant experiences found in the case narratives, encounters with alienation are viewed as having been illuminated by the following conceptual themes:

- Institutional invisibility (e.g., James, Allie, Davie)
- Marginalization (e.g., Dimitri, Davie, Felicia)
- Perceived imperviousness/failure to "matter" (e.g., Alexander, James)
- Active dehumanization (e.g., Felicia, Dimitri, Davie)
- Lack of safety (e.g., Dimitri, Davie)

**Alienation as a Relationally Mediated School Experience**

The public school is an environment rife with opportunities that may contribute to student perceptions along a spectrum from affirming connection to otherness and estrangement. While direct interpersonal encounters, those between a teacher and student, may be the most obvious
example of this, they certainly do not represent the only such opportunity for this type of experience. Students can be alienated from, and indeed by, the curriculum they are taught (McKinerny, 2009); they can be alienated from the school as an institution: due, for instance, to the perception that they have little or no capacity to genuinely shape the school’s norms or rules, or that the school itself an unsafe place for them (Blum, 2005); they can be alienated because they feel as though their voices are not recognized or valued by staff and administration (Smyth, 2006); and they can be alienated from their fellow students, contributing to feelings of marginalization and isolation (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996). The degree to which alienation is experienced, and the kinds of discursive practices this phenomenon’s institutionalization promotes, is neither vague nor inconsequential. The tendency to disconnect from others and to reduce their individual value contributes to practices of dehumanization. At the level of institutional procedure, norms, and structure, we may find rich soil for disconfirming attitudes and behaviors toward others. Bauman (2001) refers to this by employing the term "adiaphorization" of human action, a term he used in his analysis of the Holocaust, but that also has implications more broadly. Adiaphorization maintains that we can come to see whole areas of our personal choices and actions as being exempt from ethical evaluation or responsibility. This intersects with Buber’s (1923; 1957) notion of "distance" within the framework of the I-Thou imperative. Those whom we keep "at a distance" from abiding concern and regard, we are more likely to degrade and dehumanize.

The experiences of the participants in this study, when considered together, present a compelling portrait of the degree to which individual relationships can influence how students perceive the learning environments they encounter—both positively and negatively. Specifically, the power of such relationships to help puncture through varying experiences with alienation was
reported by the informants as significant. Recall Allie’s comments about Mrs. Daniels, whose caring orientation and nurturing relationship with her, helped illuminate for Allie the possibilities of where she could "be in the world" rather than where she "fit" into some preexisting social order. Her perception of Mrs. Daniels as a caring teacher—that is, one who demonstrated a genuine interest in knowing her students as individuals, and who supported their growth and learning in consistent and affirming ways, was transformative for her; and this impact she experienced as both potent and lasting, despite her overall perception of the school as a whole as a "failing" institution. This experience resonates with the literature that identifies a caring orientation from the teacher, and the development of an affirming relationship with them, with can be important to student disposition toward school (Davis & Dupper, 2004; Valenzuala, 1999; Schussler & Collins, 2002).

It may not be necessary that such a teacher establish an equal degree of rapport with each student in the classroom, either. Recall Sallie’s observation about Mrs. Bookman, who she said established at least a degree of rapport with every student in the class, even if it was "just a little relationship." The perception that a teacher possesses an authentic interest in getting to know students better, in other words, may be sufficient to impact student attitudes about the degree to which their presence is valued in a particular classroom. This may be true even if the actual relationship between a student and a particular teacher does not go beyond what she sees when the teacher is orchestrating lessons, or that occurs within the exchange of intermittent pleasantries. Such exchanges—a smile, a warm greeting, a particular "tone" that was welcoming—may seem small, but they were nevertheless consequential both to Sallie and others.
The Dialogic Encounter: Power to Harm and Affirm

In the 1980s, the AdCouncil put out a compelling and memorable public service announcement with the intent of drawing attention to, and curbing, child abuse. It pictured a series of close-ups showing the mouths of different parents in quick succession, each one saying something more hurtful toward the camera than the last: "You’re pathetic, you never do anything right," "You disgust me," "Don’t you ever listen?" "You’re worthless," "I wish you had never been born," and so on. The last scene in the ad is that of a tearful young child who slowly hangs her head in shame, at which point the announcer comes on to remind parents to stop and consider how "words can hit like a fist." Schools as they are presently constructed (often large, densely populated, designed with values of "efficiency" in mind, and incorporating relentless pacing in their daily schedules) exacerbate the likelihood of such disaffirming, even abusive, personal encounters, and of disconnection generally. They do little to help remind people of the power of caring relationships, to say nothing of recognizing how these experiences may be felt at the level of the individual.

Yet it is just such interactions that can have a lasting impact on the perceptions of students. These perceptions may also contribute significantly, and in mutually reinforcing ways, with developing notions of self. Furthermore, as Merleau-Ponty (1962) argues, it is such perceptions which guide our actions in the everyday world, and it is from interaction with that world that we draw meaning. As Allie grew more confident in the presence of Mrs. Daniels, she became aware of new possibilities and new paths for herself. As Samina was supported and affirmed by Mrs. Kendall, she connected with deeper realizations of who she could become. These are examples of expanded possibilities of one’s identity, of a horizon of potential made broader at least in part through significant interaction with affirming others; of learning that it is
possible to re-see oneself in ways that go beyond previous "limit situations" (Freire, 1970). This is both an existential phenomenological, and a developmentally psychological, point worth noting. The degree to which young people are still developing cognitively and emotionally when they transition to high school, and extent to which the kind of interactions they encounter can present themselves as pivotal during this time period, may in fact be difficult to overstate (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2013).

However, the impact can be just as profound and damaging in disaffirming contexts. For both Davie and Dimitri, experiences of marginalization through dialogic acts of judgment, outright intimidation, and abuse, stemmed from their identities as gay, black men, and were reported by both as significant. In each of their cases these encounters contributed not just to estrangement from fellow students, but from the school itself and particular teachers—a tragically commonplace occurrence in the schools (McCreedy, 2004). Dimitri, who was forced at one point to eat lunch in a bathroom stall—his "safe zone"—in order to avoid the persistent harassment and intimidation of fellow students, highlights just one tragic end of this spectrum. It is no surprise that school was not perceived as a caring place for him; a place that was neither "safe" nor "warm." One of his most basic human requirements, the need to feel physically safe in his environment, Dimitri’s school appears to have failed him utterly.

Worse, with few exceptions, direct interactions with the staff not only did little to counter this toxic atmosphere, but sometimes actually exacerbated it. There too Dimitri faced numerous microaggressions based on sexuality, contributing to the experience of what Nadal et al. (2011), in considering the kind of hostility gay and lesbian students often face in schools, referred to as "death by a thousand cuts" (p. 234). These came in the form of palpable adult and peer judgment, snide comments, and forms of public humiliation (recall the security guard who laughed who
made jokes at his expense rather than help protect Dimitri from an escalating argument with another student; the teacher who commented publicly on his choice of footwear; and the teacher who remarked in earshot of his peers that homosexuality was wrong because the Bible "said so"). Despite his characterization of these encounters as merely "annoying," they conspired to create an atmosphere so inimical and alienating that Dimitri, like so many gay youth, required counseling for depression and suicidal thoughts during his adolescence (Haas et al., 2010).

"School should be warm and caring all the time," Davie emphatically remarked. It is possible to honor the spirit of this exhortation as a call to institutional and interpersonal betterment, even as its improbability within an environment as complex as a modern public school is simultaneously acknowledged. Laing (1961) noted that even on a much smaller scale, for instance in the case of two otherwise well-intended individuals, confirmation is never experienced as an absolute phenomenon: "Total confirmation of one man by another is an ideal seldom realized," he wrote, adding that, according to Buber (1957), it is always a phenomenon encountered in partial degree, or "to some extent or another." (Laing, 1961, p. 82). Perhaps so, but dialogic interactions that affirm or alienate, however partial, can still have significant and lasting impact. Like Dimitri, Davie faced judgment and public humiliation in such encounters also centering on his sexual orientation. Not only did his math teacher, Mr. Canfield, frequently "pull him aside" both during and after class to criticize and chide him for his choice of clothing, the chance post-graduation meeting with that very same teacher yielded nothing but disdain for Dimitri's choice of profession: for just wanting to "do hair with those other queens" as his former teacher reportedly phrased it. This career choice was a decision, the teacher added, that would consign Dimitri to permanent penury.
Both of these young men’s stories speak to enormous courage and resilience in the face of persistent hostility, judgment, and marginalization. Given that the preponderance of their experiences in school describe environments and encounters that resonate profoundly with alienation, they each nevertheless managed to emerge from their secondary environment with degrees—a testament to their perseverance and resourcefulness. They also were both able to identify interactions with teachers that helped them puncture, or at least to some degree to counterbalance, the forces which conspired to keep them estranged within their schools. Each of them spoke using transformative language in connection with this. For Davie, there was Mrs. Kelley and Ms. Garrett, both of whose caring orientations, he maintained, helped him learn that he could trust other adults. For Dimitri, there was Mrs. Walker, who he claimed was a significant part of his maturing and seeing the world differently.

These interactions helped close the relational distance that Buber (1957) referred to in his writings on confirmation, and thereby seem to have made the perceptions of the school as an alienating environment less absolute. Such encounters, "seeing that there were people out there who actually cared," as Dimitri put it, mattered not only in those moments themselves, but were significant in the ways they helped transform perceptions of what was possible going forward for these young men with regard to possibilities of adult support and connection. Recognizing the importance of affirming interpersonal experiences to the perspectives of learners, therefore, may create opportunities for both transformation and critique of the realities in our schools which tend to estrange, fragment, and dehumanize. Noddings (1984; 1988) called for an "ethic of care" within the schools as an explicit moral and pedagogic foundation upon which learning should be built. The individual narratives in this study lend weight to the power such an orientation—manifested at the level of particular human encounters—can have.
Varieties of alienation: Structure and subjective experience. The case of James illustrates that perceptions of otherness in schools may also arise in less directly interpersonal ways. Unlike Davie and Dimitri, James' perception of estrangement did not arise from recurring experiences of intimidation or systematic harassment; instead it manifested because of a lack of connection and affirming relational encounters in general. In other words, James failed to perceive that he mattered enough to the institution he attended to remain there, and he spoke explicitly about the implications of this perception. This was epitomized by his rhetorically framed question asking why he should continue to attend school (where, in his estimation, his presence did not appear to matter) when he could spend time in the neighborhood or at home where people "actually cared if he was there." He referred to this experience as a sense of being "invisible" to the school he attended. Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006) identify this need in the context of the epidemic dropout rate in America, highlighting among their primary recommendations for addressing this crisis as the need for students to "have a strong relationship with at least one adult in the school" (p. 3). For nearly all of the participants in this study, the presence (or absence) of perceived mattering to an adult seemed to rely heavily on whether or not affirming, durable bonds with caring adults were encountered. The experience of James, who had literally given up on school until the intervention of his counselor, seems to bear this out in vivid and poignant detail.

How the relational lifeworld—that intersubjective space where our encounters with others and where our meanings are constructed—is affected by the current paradigm in schools matters greatly. Rather than view educators as emissaries of compassion and empowerment for young people, teachers in this paradigm have been increasingly situated as part of a larger surveillance and accountability apparatus (Agostinone-Wilson, 2006; Meiners, 2010): one that
emphasizes frequent testing and characterizes students in the cold and often misleading
discourses of the modern workforce (note, for example, how what used to be called "classroom
discipline," a straightforward albeit far from innocuous term in itself, became classroom
"management" in common educational parlance). The extent to which teachers are viewed by
students as part of a power structure where, in the words of Foucault (1977), "the few see the
many" (p. 217), means that their ability to find and nurture the affirming relational spaces so
vital to students such as Allie are likely to be concomitantly diminished. We should not be
surprised, then, to find experiences of fragmentation and alienation, and students like James,
feeling as though they were reduced to being a mere "body in a seat."

A neoliberal market orientation presupposes that any activity emerging within it which
does not serve economic ends has, at best, limited value (Harvey, 2005). This of course would
include things such as creative expression, collaboration and solidarity with others, and critical
thinking: all of which are suspect and marginalized in the drive to instill attitudes and habits that
are consistent with production and work (Agostinone-Wilson, 2006). This kind of orientation has
clear implications for democracy, because such skills-based learning is typically far more
centered with students "knowing how," rather than "knowing why." But just as importantly,
and more to the point of the present exploration, it also subsumes and circumscribes human
relations themselves, at least those relationships which do not help advance larger workplace
principles. When people are driven to view much of their world, including the significance of
interpersonal connections with others, through the prism of transaction and economic utility, it is
likely to be far easier for them to disregard and dehumanize others, far easier to justify methods
of control and "management" of their fellows. From a relational perspective then, this kind of
orientation can be downright poisonous in what it "teaches" our adolescents, and ultimately in how it disposes them toward very particular modes of association with one another.

Systematic critiques about the degree to which modernity has constructed forms of labor that are conducive to alienation go all the way back Marx. The industrial workplace—with its tendency toward hierarchical organization, often heavily reliance on automation, and (in more recent years) worker insecurity due to the forces of globalization—speaks to how particular constructions of labor can contribute to disconnection and estrangement (Erikson, 1986; Archibald, 2009). James, Allie, and Davie all spoke to the impact of this reality. Each characterized schooling experiences by making reference in one way or another to images of the factory and to the wider world of industrial work. Indeed, some of the same critiques of industrial work have been applied to public education, most commonly heard in the "factory model" of schooling refrain. Like the worst examples of the industrial workplace, this model may rely heavily on discursive practices such as increasing regimentation of daily rhythms and activities, a focus on efficiency, control and standardization, and worker (i.e., student) compliance through strict modes of evaluation, accountability, and discipline. When students frame their experiences in school in ways that are suggestive of such environments, their narratives merit attention.

Allie’s characterizations of her experiences at her first high school were resonant with this critique. Reflecting on them with the benefit of hindsight, schools, she maintained ruefully, are

…all about the end product, [they] don’t care about what’s going on in our classrooms. Students don’t have the tools to do anything other than keep their heads down and do
what they’re told. I just imagine little kids on an assembly line…you’re just preaching to them as they go down the belt.

The conveyer belt analogy appears for Allie to have been as much about self-efficacy and about discovering of her potential to become as it was a criticism of rote learning writ large. This observation is consistent with two key aspects of alienation identified by Seeman (1975), who argued that feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness are central to experiences of the phenomenon. For Allie, being estranged from school was something her encounter with Mrs. Daniels helped disrupt; that teacher’s caring orientation, and her persistent support for Allie’s learning in a way that made her feel individually valued, was something she clearly recalled as instrumental in "breaking her off the assembly line."

For his part, James also referred to schools as being run "like a business." Such an environment was something he thought of as being synonymous with work that was not only devoid of meaning and discernible purpose, but was also devoid of what he perceived as genuine and affirming relationships. "You go there as like a worker or employee…" he remarked, "there’s no true connection between you [and the teacher]…you’re just doing what you have to do to get that grade." Recall that despite his not encountering specific and persistent acts of dehumanization at the hands of adults in his school, it remained significant for James that the absence of affirming relationships—and the overall impression of the school as an "impersonal" place—was enough to create profound levels of disengagement. It may therefore be more accurate in fact to say that he was "pushed out" of his learning environment, and that to a significant degree this appears to have occurred because of the perception of alienation he encountered. As may be the case with increasing numbers of students, James' perception that he
was "invisible," and his lack of connection to the school, are something he viewed as central in his decision to leave (Davis & Dupper, 2004; Schultz & Rubel, 2011).

Felicia also encountered marginalization at the hands of teachers whom she perceived to be impervious, even belittling of, both her feelings and the feelings of fellow students. Like others, such as Sallie, Felicia’s encounters with school as an alienating space was one that seems to have been mediated by an interplay between teachers who either affirmed or dismissed the value of her presence and her voice. That is, in the classrooms in which she felt her contributions were encouraged and affirmed, such as Ms. Witherspoon’s, Felicia not only felt "safe," she also perceived a greater sense of connection and care. Voice can be thought of as both an individual resource that demands nurturance and affirming encounters, and a communal resource that requires social recognition. In either case, its silencing can and should be construed in political, cultural, and also in existential terms. Weis and Fine (2003) describes the combined effects of this in schools as "a terror of words, a fear of talk" (p. 14). If voice is indeed related to power, then there is inherent value in the ability self-narrate—to "name the world" as Freire (1970) claimed—and the perception of one’s voice as being silenced or marginalized by others will likely produce alienating consequences within individual experience. As was the case with Felicia, students are likely to feel devalued when their contributions are diminished, disregarded, or treated as an object of entertainment (as the teacher whose verbal prodding she perceived as being sarcastic and demeaning). Students are far from passive in their learning environments; they are aware, watching, observant, and cognizant of how teachers interacted with them. They are integrating these encounters into a broader narrative about what kind of place their school is, what kind of teachers their instructors are, and what kind of value they have in light of these perceptions. "When there’s that disconnect," as Davie succinctly put it, "we see that."
Conclusion

The voices of the participants affirm much of the literature on alienation in general, and alienation the schools, in that it is a layered and nuanced phenomenon (Newmann, 1981; Galbo, 1980). What their words also highlight, however, is the degree which such encounters can be mediated in significant ways. This, too, is consistent with much of the literature on the power of affirming relationships and orientations of care within learning. What this points to is the degree to which relational encounters of the affirming variety may help counter the diverse and damaging ways that students can become estranged from their learning in public school environments. It is critical to consider specific pedagogical orientations and philosophical frameworks for such acts, just as it is crucial to consider the broader contexts that may be producing alienation in the first place. When learning encounters were constructed by staff in ways the participants perceived as possessing an open horizon of possibility, as part of a supportive encounter which valued their voices, and as part of a collaborative student/teacher exploration where the instructor was "down there with us," the participants in this study expressed greater levels of academic interest and increased sense of self-efficacy. They reported transformations in their own thinking about things as significant as trusting others and what their place in the world was, versus what it could be.

Transforming schooling into something broader and more profound, into "education," in the deeper sense of the word, requires recognition of the student as one who is becoming, and who can contribute to transformations of the world as they have come to know it. Young people show an abiding capacity for recognizing when they are being "treated like a number," when their work is perceived as meaningless, and when they have little or no real power to shape the direction of their learning. In short, they can often name their alienation. Empowering and
working alongside them to confront, interrogate, and ultimately transform the ways in which they perceive modern schooling as a place of estrangement should be a priority for educators. Education in the broadest sense of the word cannot flourish when students are alienated from their teachers or their learning environment.
CHAPTER 9: CONFIRMING ACTS AS ETHICAL IMPERATIVE: THE POWER AND MORAL OBLIGATION TO TRANSFORM EXPERIENCES OF ALIENATION WITHIN SCHOOLS

While critiques of modern schooling, particularly those in connection with the influence of audit culture and market models of education, are varied and timely, it must be remembered that alienation can be produced—as well as felt—in a variety of learning contexts. A school need not be modeled on market-based principles of efficiency, standardization, and accountability in order to contribute to experiences of otherness among its students (though such practices seem certain to increase their probability); likewise, a school that is modeled on such principles may not produce uniform and/or guaranteed personal encounters with alienation. Perhaps most importantly, if the narratives in this study are transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), then there is room even within the confines of institutionally generated alienation for significant and transformative affirming interactions in the experiences of young people. Such interactions, when they are perceived to confirm not just the learner’s creative potential but also their worth as a person, must be deliberately sought out despite whatever larger organizational and structural currents of alienation may be present.

The stories of James, Alexander, and Davie, for example—all of whom were affected in powerful ways by such interactions—attest to the impact that such encounters can have: even within otherwise difficult and marginalized circumstances. If the perceptions and experiences of students can be profoundly transformed by such relational encounters, it is incumbent upon practitioners and reformers to ask how this awareness should shape their theory, practice, and pedagogy in the most immediate and tangible ways possible. Alienation, therefore, is best thought of as a mediated phenomenon; and one powerful mode of its mediated nature appears to
be encounters with confirming or disconfirming relationality. Despite this, it is important to bear in mind the degree to which such encounters themselves are contextually mediated by the larger social and institutional structures in which they occur. Contemporary school culture, after all, can in many ways be seen as a hostile environment when it comes to confirmatory practices. Not only is the philosophical orientation of modern public schooling largely anathema to notions of interpersonal confirmation, Brofenbrenner’s (1974) characterization, mentioned previously, of modern school’s as "breeding grounds" (p. 60) for alienation speaks to the institutionalization and normalization of such practices. Schools promote far more than just book learning: they encourage and reinforce very particular "modes of human association" (Dewey, 1916); and far too pervasively these modes are hierarchical, driven by instrumentalist discourses, and contribute to perceptions and experiences which disconfirm and disconnect. Taken together the implications of the participants’ experiences not only speak to the significance of such forms of interpersonal distancing, they also are suggestive of the degree to which Buber’s "closure" of that distancing—of "entering into a relation" (Buber, 1957, p. 102) that confirms—can transform.

Confirmation can and should be thought of as part of a moral argument for increased attention to relational dispositions within learning encounters. Not only because of its interpersonal possibilities for one-on-one "dyadic" encounters that emphasize the importance of care (Mayeroff, 1971), but because doing so may also provide a way to reclaim to transform institutional patterns which tend to alienate and dehumanize. We can and should, therefore, view "confirming acts" in specifically actionable ways; that is, as concrete interpersonal behaviors that may contribute to a perception by the recipient that they are authentically valued, and which we can choose to participate in as educators. Examples of what can be confidently described under the label of confirmation (whether it emerges from the kind of durable relational dynamic that
Samina felt with Mrs. Daniels, or happens to be of the smaller but still significant interpersonal variety described by Dimitri and Sallie in the form of welcoming smile, tone of voice, inquires after one’s well-being, etc.) are identifiable and worthy of deliberate pursuit. However confirming and disconfirming behaviors are considered, they should first and foremost be thought of in ways that are definable and actionable. This study demonstrates that each phenomenon carries with it the potential for significant consequences in the perceptions, and lived experiences, of those who encounter them.

Noddings (1984; 1988) uses this to make a broader argument for a curriculum and pedagogy explicitly organized around an ethic of care. Echoing Buber, she observes that "In every human encounter, there arises the possibility of a caring occasion," adding that the profession of "…teaching is filled with caring occasions, or, quite often, attempts to avoid caring occasions," (p.222) [emphasis added]. In particular, this can occur through the use of depersonalized and scripted instructional techniques, alienating institutional norms that marginalize student voice and input, and harsh disciplinary measures found in zero-tolerance policies. As a critical site for such encounters, attention to the nurturance of confirming encounters must of course ultimately be confronted on the structural level as well as pursued by individual practitioners. But we must see it as a moral imperative, one that attentive educators can integrate at their discretion and without first having to surmount ever-present organizational inertia. In particular, two such areas of significance regarding the potential of confirming encounters to confront institutional otherness have been at least partially illuminated by the cases in this study: the importance of affirming student voice, and the power of individual relationships to transform student perceptions about their learning environment.
The Need to Speak and be Heard: Student Voice and Agency within the Relational Space of the Learning Encounter

As mentioned in the previous chapter voice is part of what may be called a two-fold or relational encounter with another. We may speak in order to affirm our unique subjective existence, but affirmation from those around us is a crucial part of the meanings subsequently constructed. These meanings are drawn from the perception of the other’s authentic interest in the concerns, feelings, and viewpoints of the speaker. Affirming voice, therefore, cannot be viewed merely as an act of stand-alone significance, engaged in solely by the speaker. Indeed, within the literature voice is construed in a variety of ways (Cook-Slather, 2006), and theorizing it has been regarded as both complex and problematic (Arnot & Ray, 2007). But as a part of subjective experience voice needs to be seen as a consequential expression of who we are and what we experience. Yet as a phenomenon it also locates the speaker within her broader environment by attempting to bridge the interior and subjective world we know as individuals with the world of intersubjective experience. Buber (1957) argued that the interplay between relational confirmation and the dialogic encounter is crucial, particularly in his explication of what he called "genuine meetings" between people. Our shared words constitute what he called the "great characteristic of men’s life with one another," and added that, "to speak to others is something essentially human, and is based on the establishment and acknowledgement of independent otherness of the other with whom one fosters a relation" (p. 102). It is this dialogic space within which we can confirm, where his I-and-Thou encounters have the potential to take place. Confirmation thus has the notion of relational voice as a central component, and that dialogic dimension highlights the intersubjective nature of our being-in-the-world. Voice therefore must be seen as being both relational and existential.
Couldry (2009) also highlights this interdependence between speaking and listening, emphasizing that the two should not be thought of separately, and further noting the critical nature of listening as being "...the act of recognizing what others have to say...that they, like all human beings, have the capacity to give an account of their lives that is reflexive and continuous, an ongoing, embodied process of reflection" (p. 579). The ability to narrate our experiences through voice is not just an act of self-confirmation, therefore; it is what we do in the hope that those around us will hear and, more importantly, affirm that narration as being of inherent and abiding value. Indeed, it has been argued that who listens is more critical than who speaks (Spivak, 1990), and what Buber calls "genuine conversation," is an act whose consequence "means acceptance of otherness" (p. 102). The power to self-narrate may be best viewed as inherently and inseparably interdependent with the perceiving of others in relation to that narration—in particular those who care enough to hear what we have to say. "Voice," and by extension, "student voice," remain somewhat misleading terms when regarded casually, for they are suggestive of an acts whose significance exists principally within the domain of the person doing the speaking. But the very nature of voice implies unavoidable modes of relationality with those around us.

This relational component of voice also implies something larger, however, for there is the potential for a decidedly public dimension to our narration as well. Voice contributes to the construction of common space between individual actors, much in the way that Sallie experienced whole-class discussions with Ms. Bookman not only as being a validation of her own self and growth, but also came to recognize it as being part of a shared, purposeful social space with her fellow classmates—each of which had their own story to tell. In pursuit of this, Sallie described her teacher as having encouraged the practice of norms and values that
empowered such sharing so that Sallie and her classmates could learn from one another through dialogue. In this way, voice—when defined as the need to both speak and be heard—is also about contributing one’s narration to the public space, or as Greene (1978) would phrase it, the "common project."

**Learning Environments, Confirmation, and Public Voice**

The power to name the world is recognized by Freire (1970) as a central tenet of what has come to be called transformative education. In contrast with more instrumentalist or commodified approaches to learning, what Freire referred to as "banking" models, conceiving of education in ways that affirm voice would encourage students’ capacity to criticize and participate in re-making the world around them rather than merely fitting the student into the broader society "as it is." This, it could be argued, is the essence of Allie’s comment about transcending the assumption of how she must fit into the world, and instead experiencing a sense of where she can be in the world: a surpassing of what Freire (1970) characterized as one’s "limit situations." When Allie was asked "what do you think?" and perceived that teachers such as Mrs. Daniels actually cared to hear the answer, it helped break her free from what she called the "assembly line." Thus, her own future, which Allie had perceived as greatly circumscribed, was significantly transformed by an affirming dialogic encounter: a "genuine meeting," as Buber (1957) might suggest. The nature of this kind of encounter requires an authentic openness to, and faith in, the Other’s growth potential. It hinges on an orientation that allows one to see another not as he is, but as she can be. In so doing it may be possible to be meaningfully present with another as they grow in ways even they did not believe possible. Such was the case with Allie, who in the moments described above was no longer trapped in the "actual" and instead found herself reckoning with notions of the possible (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).
In each of the cases where participants felt similar degrees of empowerment within this study, there was also the presence of a perception that their voice was to some degree not only welcome in a general sense, but that its presence actually mattered to the teacher. By contrast, in the encounters where their voices were experienced as being disregarded, demeaned, or both, the consequences could be both profound and long-lasting. Such was the case with Felicia’s comment about how she recalled retreating "into her shell" when her voice was perceived as being treated with dismissiveness or disdain; or with Sallie’s conviction to never again speak to or seek help from her chemistry teacher, after she encountered an unprovoked and public outburst toward her in response to merely asking for additional help with the material. The silencing or disregard of student voice, as much as its empowerment, appears to have academic and existential impacts which require serious consideration by educators, researchers, and reformers.

In the case of our schools students may be speaking, but who listens to what they say (as well as who fails to do so) varies greatly. An environment that routinely devalues or dismisses student voices is one that denies more than just students’ political autonomy, academic interests, or their rights—though these manifestations are indeed all quite likely and in need of ongoing critical interrogation. It also disconfirms them existentially by denying their potential to self-narrate, and by reducing the relational ethic between teacher and student to what Buber (1923) characterized as an I-It dynamic; it conveys an imperviousness (Laing, 1961) in connection with their individual worth; and ultimately, by failing to recognize their humanity at this fundamental level, it very likely contributes to larger perceive modes of alienation within the schools. Modes which, ultimately, can estrange students from school altogether.
Much work has been done on the ways in which voice is empowered or disempowered in the context of modern schooling, and the differential ways in which these practices often break down by race, class, and gender (Corbett & Wilson, 1995; Delpit, 1988; Fielding, 2004; Weis & Fine, 1993). Our school systems, following the larger patterns of society itself which privileges according to these categories, construct these experiences differentially; those institutions having seen the largest share of "reforms" shaped by our audit culture are all too often those which already suffer amid persistent poverty, disinvestment, and racial discrimination (Payne, 2008; Lipman, 2004). The voices of students in such settings are therefore likely to be disproportionately marginalized, contributing to a segment of youth Giroux (1988) referred to as "the silenced ones."

Student voice should be re-conceptualized as being both a representation of the subjective self, which demands nurturance and confirming personal encounters in the ways consistent with Buber’s philosophy, as well as a communal or intersubjective resource that requires concrete social and political recognition. This recognition, at its best, must help create possibilities for transformation within individual relationships, within the classroom, and even within the larger school as a whole, if voice is to ultimately matter in an abiding sense. Alexander’s perception of being "present in something," for example, was a sense he related explicitly with Mrs. Jamison’s tendency to engender discussion in affirming and non-hierarchical ways. This was at least in part because, in his words, "she sat down with us" and helped construct a dialogic encounter among peers that affirmed. The importance of voice was also present with Sallie, who recalled Ms. Bookman’s encouragement of and respect for what she and her fellow students had to say as a significant part of her growth as a self-empowered learner.
Whether we think of student voice in the context of subject-related discourse within classrooms, or that of more intimate interpersonal exchanges that may occur between staff and student, the nature of voice amid modern learning is likely both shaped and circumscribed by the dominant approaches to the ways schools are structured. The present paradigm in that regard, at least as far as most public schools are concerned, is deeply saturated with market assumptions and the discursive practices of the kind of audit culture that emerges from it (Apple, 2005; Agostine-Wilson, 2006; Lipman, 2004; Power, 1999). It is important to acknowledge the degree to which such an orientation is likely to predispose learning encounters in ways that alienate students by the diminishment of voice, especially in light of the case material presented. Despite the lip service often paid to "real world" lessons, curricular "relevancy" and "student-centered" learning, for example, pedagogy rarely incorporates the voices of students in substantive ways (McInerney, 2009). This follows logically from the influence of education modeled on market principles. Instructional material and what students "need to know" under such a paradigm are bound to be both narrowed and standardized (Sacks, 2000), often arriving "top-down" in deference to a testing and cost efficiency focus that trumps more affective educative interests.

Furthermore, in such an environment—that is, one which places a premium on maximizing efficiently delivered student outcomes in the form of test scores—efforts at controlling the population schools are ostensibly there to serve will only become more and more common. An "educational" institution which values such assessment outcomes over the learning experiences of students themselves is already on the path to alienating and dehumanizing them. Yet, in a perverse twist of responsibility, when the students (particularly, though not exclusively, low-income and minority students) predictably disengage from or rebel against such pedagogies, it is they who must change and be fit to the pedagogy—rather than the pedagogy fitting to serve
them. How does a student find a sense of empowerment either individually or in solidarity with others, after all, if the curriculum (or, by extension, the world that curriculum describes) is presented as already fixed? What purpose is there in the contribution of their voice to an already finished aria, where all they "need to know" has already been written? It is not an exaggeration to say that voice and the ability to narrate the world in such a paradigm are both stolen from student. Not because this represents the way things "are," but because it represents the way things are presented.

While teachers, and schools, can still empower student voice within such contexts, the efforts to do so against the currents of discursive practices like these make doing so challenging at best. Large class sizes, furiously paced movement through subject matter, and the aura of externally mandated curricula as fixed knowledge that students should simply absorb without question, all militate against authentic encounters with voice. As Fielding and Rudduck (2002) note, the problem here is not a lack of inclination on the part of students to contribute their voices, but their entanglement within larger systems that too often fail to affirm their perspectives; schools, the authors assert, must provide "…a framework that legitimates comment and provides reassurance that teachers will welcome [student voice] and not retaliate" (p. 2). The reality, however, is that it is not just schools but communities and larger social systems which are frequently complicit in the marginalization of adolescent perspectives and voice.

Despite these obstacles, teachers and adults within the school context can have an immediate and transformative impact on students’ perception of themselves as learners. The words of Sallie, Alexander, Felicia, and Allie attest to the fact that safe and affirming space can be created in schools that may otherwise be contributing to alienation. In this respect, no greater argument can be made for encouraging and empowering student voice as an act of confirmation.
Teachers have the capacity to play a deliberate and significant role, not only as active listeners who affirm students’ unwritten potential through one-to-one encounters, but also as co-constructors of a deliberate classroom environment that facilitates collaborative dialogue: dialogue that recognizes their ability to engage and to re-write the world around them.

Voice is therefore about existential recognition and also about social agency, and student voice in particular should be conceptualized along such multi-dimensional lines. Each person and his voice must be acknowledged as unique within the framework of Buber’s genuine meetings, but there is also a concomitant need, as Arendt (1958) argues, for us to confront how our individual voices contribute to what we define as "public." Intersections here with conceptions of voice as a vital component of progressive democracy, of voice as a right, and of voice as an integral part of the expression of freedom can and should be sought. Care and confirmation of voice can be thought of as existing in conjunction with this larger effort for equity and justice rather than being apart from, or secondary, to it.

Recognizing, as Greene (1982) does, that our biographies are in a constant state of being revealed and reconstructed should urge us to place a premium on the value of student voice in educational encounters. Such a phenomenological orientation can help educators arrive at learning possibilities that hooks (1994) refers to as "emancipatory," contributing to transformations in the ways they see themselves and connect with their surroundings. Neither students nor the world they inherit should be construed as a die which is already cast; and the resistance toward such "certainty and fixity" (Greene, 1982, p. 126) is not only part of a radical orientation, it is, as Green herself argues, central to the struggle for student agency. In light of the impact that such affirming encounters seems to have had on the participants in this study, it is difficult to imagine a larger social justice orientation being construed as holistic or complete in
the absence of recognizing this existential need for confirmation. The acknowledgment of
relationality, and the importance of confirming acts toward the value of adolescent perspectives,
may therefore ultimately help to broaden how voice is contextualized in both research and school
reform.

Transforming Experiences of Alienation: Individual Relationships and the Power of

Confirming Acts

Students’ perceptions of their relationships with teachers (or other adults in the school
setting) are constructed on an edifice—a cumulative edifice—of discrete but interrelated
encounters. Taken together, these encounters can create a perception of trust, care, reliability,
and support that the student can grow to trust. When we speak of "relationships," and their power
to positively impact student experience, therefore, it should be remembered that it is this
accumulation of individual and deliberate acts, acts undertaken within an affirming orientation
toward another, which lies at the heart of that term. The kind of connection that Devon described
with Mrs. West, that James had with Mr. Morgan, or that Allie had with Mrs. Daniels, for
example, should be seen as the consequence of dozens, perhaps scores, of interactions with these
teachers over time at both the micro- and macro-level. Furthermore, many, if not all, of these
interactions surely occurred against a complex and dynamic backdrop which combined
institutional, cultural, professional, and personal influences, at least some of which may have
made such encounters more difficult. Thus these affirming relational interactions are anything
but inevitable.

Whether such actions on the part of these teachers were borne out of a deliberately
chosen orientation, or were serendipitously present because of preexisting personal dispositions
on their part, is beyond the scope of this investigation. The recollections of the participants’
leaves little question, however, regarding the impact of such interactions on subjective experience. That is, discrete encounters which were described by the informants as affirming tended to be woven into a larger perceptual narrative about their relationships with "the teachers who cared" in contrast with the teachers they perceived did not; these impressions, in both the confirming and disconfirming direction, had immediate and lasting consequences. As with the recognition and empowerment of student voice, the presence of confirming acts as a component of individual relationships creates the potential to significantly disrupt experiences of alienation for students; they should therefore be sought out and maximized as a moral imperative for concerned educators.

One of the most poignant aspects of the stories shared by the participants in this study was the degree of insight and clarity they displayed when reflecting on the behaviors of teachers who they deemed as either caring or uncaring. While research on student perceptions of care has historically been limited (Adler, 2002), young people often can and will contribute eloquently to our understanding of what constitutes a caring act if they are asked (Bosworth, 1995; Garza, 2009). A caring orientation, and the kind of confirming behaviors which contribute to the perception of being genuinely invested our well-being, is more than just fluffy, feel-good "eduspeak." It is something that is concrete, identifiable, and influential in the lives of our students. Rather than struggling with how one might transform oneself into a relationship-oriented teacher extraordinaire, we can instead turn to the words of students and former students. They can help guide us in the matter of what behaviors constitute and contribute to such relationships.

The Power of Proximity
In Distance and Relation, Buber (1957) writes: "Man sets things he uses at a distance." (p. 101) [emphasis added]. It is the closure of this distance, he adds, which constitutes the potential for reciprocal encounter, and "provides the human situation." (p. 100). In other words, that which we are set apart from makes up the world of "things," a world of objects, each of which is delimited by a predefined nature and which lacks the potential to become something else. "Things" here is not meant to refer only to inanimate objects; nor should "distance" only be thought of spatially. People can be reduced to objects as well; they can be stripped of their potentiality, their right to become; and distance, typically thought of in geographic contexts and our connection with them as embodied individuals, can in this sense be emotional, spiritual, or psychological. However it is defined, distance, in Buber’s sense of the term refers to something which can be collapsed. Specifically, it can be transformed when we enter into a relationship, when we are open to our own growth and the growth of the Other in a given encounter and transcend Sartre’s notion of being in-itself (1958).

When we consider the role proximity plays in the growth and development of human beings—a mother’s comforting touch as felt by her child, the embrace of a loved one, the reassuring knowledge of a friend’s mere nearness in a time of trouble—we can begin to see the role proximity has to play in what Buber calls "…our connection with one’s fellow men" (p. 100).

Many schools today create regimented and rigid environments that distance teacher from student, however, often making it harder to establish rapport and trust between the two (Smyth, 2006). Of course the teacher is different from the student in some fundamental and undeniable ways. Teachers are older, have more formal schooling, and are (presumably) more psychologically mature. Importantly, they are also "official" representatives of an institution—
the school—and as such they have more power than the students tend to. Even in the best of circumstances such power is likely to immediately distance teachers from their students, and to make the crossing of boundaries a hard-won endeavor. But in today’s schools teachers are increasingly and actively encouraged to wield this power as institutional representatives in ways that further exacerbate a perception of them not as allies and collaborators in student learning, but far more likely as custodians: as deliverers of institutional judgment, of inequitably distributed punishment, and of externally determined learning goals (Meiners, 2010; Payne, 2008; Giroux, 2004).

Yet the voices of these students are suggestive of the power teachers have to shatter that perception. Devon, Alexander, Allie, Samina, and Davie, for example, were all discretely attuned to actions taken by their teachers that helped produce a feeling of equality and inclusion—even solidarity—with them. Very often this would come down to individual, non-verbal actions taken by the teacher that humanized them. They described teachers who would "sit down and talk with us," or "get down on our level." These teachers were uniformly recognized by the participants as having affirming qualities, and comments such as these appeared to have both a physical and metaphysical dimension to them. They conveyed not only a teacher’s conscious decision to position themselves amid the students with a mindfulness toward equity (recall Allie’s references to Mrs. Daniels as "always in the middle [of her students] somewhere, immersed"), but also implied the ways such actions contributed to a perception of such instructors as a relatable and caring persons. Specific aspects of relational proximity (e.g., being behind the teacher’s desk versus out amid the students) and physical positioning (e.g., standing versus sitting), therefore, were connected to perceptions of equality and notions of the teacher as a being someone who wanted to create a bond or degree of connectedness with the students.
While it may be possible to exaggerate this interpretation, the fact that comments about teacher proximity were reported as meaningful and surfaced in nearly all of the participants’ narratives is suggestive of something significant and worthy of further consideration. Such an orientation is also supported through the concept of embodiment within phenomenological literature, where bodily experience and the "imposition of meaning" are seen as intimately related phenomena (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 147). Humanizing oneself and affirming others through specific actions such as taking the time to sit down and inquire after the well-being of a student, or conducting a class-discussion while having a seat at one of the circled desks may seem like insignificant actions; but they may in fact carry a great deal of significance and meaning to students as they construct a larger narrative about the intentions their teachers, their school, and their value to both. When the relational space between teacher and student is reduced, the potential for transformation from Buber’s I-It to an I-Thou orientation becomes possible. Experiences of alienation can of course survive such an encounter, but the narratives presented in this study suggest it will be far less likely.

Caring through competence. For the informants in this study, descriptions of confirming acts as part of a larger orientation of care rested on more than the perception of the teacher as a warm nurturer. This recognition is crucial, for criticisms of placing a value on the importance of confirming orientations in the learning environment vary. Toshalis (2012), for example, worries that, as a pedagogic approach, such efforts may obscure very real academic and developmental needs students may have beneath layers of interpersonal affirmation and praise; while (Rivera-McClutchen, 2012) worry that the care orientation may fail to hold students accountable to doing their best work. Despite these caveats, there remains no reason to think that attempts to maximize confirming acts are inherently anathema to intellectual rigor or academic
success. It is of course possible to privilege any strategy, pedagogic approach, or educational philosophy to the detriment of authentic learning (just look at what the obsession with testing and the promotion of punitive disciplinary practices have done, to take but two examples), but the perspectives of the students and former students in this study suggest just the opposite may be true. Not only is it possible to blend a caring, confirming, supportive approach to learning with high expectations, the very definition of "caring" can in fact be synonymous with intellectual challenge and creatively engaging pedagogy. This kind of teacher has been described by Bondy and Ross (2008) as the "warm demander."

While some practitioners may indeed appropriate the notion of caring in ways that diminish rather than enhance student learning, the foundational literature is explicit on this matter. For Buber (1957), confirming acts (those relational encounters upon which the perception of a caring orientation is built) contribute to the fullest actualization of both self and other; for Mayeroff (1971), caring is about attending meaningfully to the growth of the other through the "process" of care; and for Noddings (1988), in a classroom dedicated to care, both the quality of student-teacher interactions and the academic outcomes are viewed as centrally important. Confirmation and care, in other words, do not limit the one we are concerned for in their growth and potential. They have an abiding concern for who that person can become.

The perception that young people are lazy and relentlessly seek the path of academic least resistance is itself a lazy assumption. In contrast to such a view, the "warm demander" characteristic was in fact one that nearly all of the participants identified as crucial; it was also tightly woven in with perceptions of confirming behavior, particularly for Sallie, Devon, and Samina. Some of this clarity may of course have had to do with the benefit of hindsight, as each of the participants was a year or more out of high school. But for each, there was an alignment of
characteristics suggestive of professional competence that they valued. This was defined by things such as passion about and knowledge for the subject-matter (Kenya and Mr. Englehardt); the persistent encouragement to transcend perceptions of one’s limits, despite hardships (Samina and Mrs. Kendall); the unwavering requirement to respect classroom norms that helped students to learn from one another (Sallie and Mrs. Bookman); the application of deserved disciplinary action, followed by a chance to "start fresh" the next day (Devon and Mr. Scott); or the willingness to support student difficulty with the subject regardless of the time or personal investment required (Allie and Mrs. Daniels). Conversely, teachers who were disengaged, disinterested, unenthusiastic about their subject, or perceived as impervious to ways their students struggled with it, were consistently found on the other side of the descriptive ledger: that is, as uncaring, bad, or "unprofessional" teachers.

Collectively, the actions perceived as confirming listed above could be said to either directly impact high quality learning, or at least be helpful in creating a conducive context for it. More importantly, each of these behaviors was described by the informants as being essentially synonymous with the characteristics of a "good teacher." Confirming one’s students may of course be achieved with a supportive gesture, a warm greeting, or an invitation to "sit and talk" if the student looks troubled. But the informants in this study have illuminated care and confirmation must also be viewed, and pursued, through the lens of what may be thought of as professional competence. If young people, most of whom were within a year of their high school experiences, are themselves defining care and confirming behaviors in such a way, we should not be so quick to dismiss the potential of such behaviors to contribute to more fully engaged students.
Conclusion

What the words and stories of the participants in this study illuminate is the potential for transformation within student learning experiences. Varieties of alienation may in fact be a dominant theme in much of the schooling landscape today given the ever-present, and unequally manifested, emphasis on discursive practices that seek to control, standardize, and commodify learning. Yet transformation is possible, and not only for one-on-one encounters. Despite the obstacles, entire classroom cultures whose principles and valued modes of association promote affirming interactions are within the ability of teachers to construct. While the perception of confirmation is not assured in every relational instance that may be sought, nor is it likely achievable in equal degree across all student encounters, it must also be remembered that facilitating such moments is not something intangible, mystical, or illusory. Geertz (1973) asserts that "small facts speak to large issues" (p. 23). As the cases in this study illuminate, the power of individual confirming acts, from the empowerment of voice to the deliberate use of proximity, may help disrupt larger currents of perceived alienation for learners, and this should be regarded as significant. As Sallie put it in her first interview, "teachers should automatically want what’s best for me."
Throughout this study, four major themes emerged from the participant narratives through the process of identifying and then "clustering" meaning statements (Hycner, 1985; Creswell, 2007). They were 1) the power of individual relationships, 2) the related themes of mattering and marginalization, 3) the perception of active support, and 4) the value of student voice. Each of these themes was meaningful within the context of the participants’ subjective experiences, and pointed to interpretive significance (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), both analytically and for other adolescents. These themes appear to intersect profoundly with how students experience modes of alienation or connection within the public schools; specifically, the ways in which individual relationships, voice, perceived mattering, and active support have the potential to mediate such encounters and the significance students attach to them. Alienation has been demonstrated across the literature to be a phenomenon of importance, both for adolescence generally and in connection with schooling (Blum, 2005; Brown, Higgins, & Paulsen, 2003; Brofenbrenner, 1986; Galbo, 1980; Newman, 1981; Schultz & Rubel, 2011). Less well documented, however, are student and former student perceptions of these experiences, and the explicit ways which such perceptions can be mediated by confirming or disconfirming modes of relationality. The words of the ten informants included in this study speak directly to the importance of this underexplored area.

Furthermore, the significance of the structural contexts within which these intersubjective experiences occur has also been acknowledged. It has been highlighted that the socio-cultural nature of schools contributes to the likelihood of differential relational encounters for students based on a variety of influences. These include, but are not limited to, the embedded assumptions
within school organization and school culture, pedagogy and curricula, the influence of the larger audit culture within which our schools reside, and issues of race and sexual orientation. Taken collectively, the voices in this study speak to larger socio-cultural contexts present within schools, and these linkages were made both explicitly and implicitly in the narratives of informants themselves. Though James, Davie, and Allie, for example, each spoke poignantly to the importance of understanding what occurs at the level of the subjective encounter—the individual meanings they each drew from their experiences, their words also help illuminate how these encounters are often shaped by structural forces. Comments about the ways schools are run or organized like a "business" or a "factory," for instance, or Dimitri’s statement that schools should not feel "like a prison" appear to be compelling evidence of this. Ultimately, the kind of relational meanings that students are constructing amid these socially embedded encounters, what Ross (2002) called "the space between us," must be acknowledged as having both existential significance for learners and as encounters circumscribed by larger discursive practices.

**Relational Theory and Confirmation as an Orientation: Potential and Pitfalls**

Small facts, in other words, can indeed speak to large issues. If qualitative inquiry is to take Geertz’s (1973) dictum to heart, then the question to ask is, What can be said about theory, pedagogy, and practice given the issues raised by the informants of this study? What seems clear is that affirming and disaffirming school encounters have the potential to contribute to transformations of perception that are significant for students. In the end, I am confident that both shape and substance in connection with confirmation have emerged in this study; in short, that a degree of Munhall’s (2007) call for "significance" in phenomenological research can be
claimed—significance rooted in the narrative material and referential adequacy in its analysis (Eisner, 1991).

Current schools in the United States operate in an environment of profound challenges, and this fact is largely because the society in which they are situated—and the communities where their primary constituency is drawn—is under increasing economic, cultural, and antidemocratic strain. Anyone who has taught at the secondary level in the public schools and has taken the time to reflect critically on his or her experiences can likely attest to its complexity, and how quickly one is likely to be disabused of simplistic notions of teaching and learning. For example, the idea that subject-matter will be inherently and equally interesting to all students, that the public schools are apolitical institutions, or that colleagues will always have the best interests of students at heart.

What’s more, given the vicissitudes just mentioned, many young people walk into their schools already contending with profound personal and community-based struggles. This can take the form of domestic violence, substance abuse, economic displacement, experiences with racial and gender prejudice and violence, and much more. Clearly, schools do not educate in a vacuum. An awareness of this fact has caused some to urge that pedagogy be specifically oriented in such a way as to try and counter, or at least ameliorate, the worst of these societal ills (Haberman, 1994; Hooks, 2003; Noddings, 1992). It has also called attention to the ways in which larger social policy, inequality, and discursive practices significantly impact the lives of young people (Polakow, 1994; Giroux, 2004). In far too many cases, moreover, schools may actually be exacerbating the problems listed above; an example of which we saw in the present study with Dimitri, who described his harrowing experiences with systematic uncertainty,
violence, and intimidation in both his community and at the hands of faculty and fellow students where he attended school.

Considering the scope and depth of the ills in question, and in light of the fact that schools can neither be the sole cause nor the sole cure of such ills, caution is certainly warranted in the area of conclusions: if nothing else than to avoid facile and simplistic recommendations. Indeed, as mentioned in an earlier chapter, the idea of a caring or confirming orientation as an organizing principle for schools has already been critiqued in the literature as being, by itself, both an inadequate and a complicated approach to substantive school reform (Schutz, 1998; Rivera-McCutchen, 2012). Yet it is also true that this study was designed with a focus on the meanings that emerge from within subjective experience and perception, and the role these meanings play in how adolescents view their learning. The first-hand experiences described in previous chapters illuminate examples of powerful relational encounters within the school setting. They represent an ethical imperative. Not only from the standpoint of empowering and centralizing adolescent voice through such description with regard to inquiry, but toward the meanings drawn from these experiences, and to the potential they have to contribute to broader interpretive understandings for practices and theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002).

**Contributions to Practice**

The narratives of this study suggest that there are critical and identifiable relational dimensions to today’s learning environments that may be perceived by students, and that these encounters often mediate in significant ways their attitudes toward school. This includes, but is not limited to, perceptions of alienation and connectedness. Encounters with affirming connections or their disaffirming counterparts, furthermore, appear to also influence perceptions of students’ own self-efficacy and self-worth. Thus whether we are speaking about one-to-one
interactions between a teacher and student, or are referring to the teacher’s relationship to an entire class, mindfulness about one’s capacity to damage or nourish this relational terrain should be an explicit topic of discussion among the staff. Such conversations need not remain too nebulous or theoretical for teachers to take advantage of, either. For one thing, the literature (both qualitative and quantitative) on how we can confirm others provides at least in some cases explicit examples of the kinds of behavior that help contribute to affirming experiences (see, for example, Sieburg, 1973; Cissna & Sieburg, 1981; Ellis, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Waltzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967; Noddings, 1992). Such literature could be distilled and presented to staff, with an emphasis on the often overlooked impact these interactions can have on a variety of adolescent learning- and learner-related perceptions. The same can be said of the literature on alienation, much of which is even more accessible to the lay reader than the confirmation-oriented scholarship (Blum, 2004; Brofenbrenner, 1986; Brown, Higgins, & Paulsen, 2003; Newmann, 1981).

But perhaps more importantly, the words of young people themselves can and should provide insights that are both practical and explicit that educators might benefit from. In order to do this, of course, it is important to have a professional culture which values such voices already built and sustained among faculty—again, who speaks may be less important than who listens. Regardless, such a focus is not only consistent with the literature that conceptualizes student voice as critical in both research and education reform (Cook-Sather, 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Grover, 2004; Soto & Swadener, 2005), but also presents opportunities for "real world" insights regarding best practice from the very constituency schools are ostensibly there to serve (see Cushman, 2005). Sallie, Dimitri, and Davie, for example, were all quite candid and eloquent in their observations about how positive and affirming relationships not only benefitted their
learning, but also nourished an emotive dimension to the school experience which they found deeply significant. Their descriptions regarding how such relational encounters might be favorably constructed were neither opaque nor esoteric, and as such they could be part of a larger effort to present accessible and explicit material to educators working to improve classroom climate and teacher-student rapport. Their narratives are, or should be, more than just material for scholarly reflection in other words; they can be seen as a source for professional discussion and action around best practices in the classroom.

Consider just two of the ways the aforementioned participants highlighted concrete areas that could provide insight and guidance to mindful educators: through the value of casual interpersonal exchanges (e.g., things such as a handshake, a smile, or an authentically-perceived inquiry about the students’ general well-being); or through more involved and demanding modes of affirmation, such as the explicit ways a teacher can demonstrate support for student voice through their instructional approach, (e.g., the careful use of proximity to create a perception of conversational equality, authentically delivered inquires about student perceptions, i.e., "what do you think?" and maximizing the impression of having a relatable and approachable persona, which Sallie suggested could be done through appropriate personal disclosures about the teacher’s own struggles). These are dispositions and behaviors that can be identified and aspired to by each practitioner in their own way.

Lastly, it should be regarded as crucial that confirming acts are reconsidered and reframed in the context of their broader significance to school culture. In other words, they need to be seen as more than just qualities that a "nice" or "friendly" teacher might possess, and instead come to be regarded as critical components of wider set of morally defensible practices which 1) influence student experiences of intersubjective space which is where they come to feel
valued, or not valued, by encounters with significant others, and 2) may be central in mediating the student’s larger perceptions of alienation and otherness amid their learning. This is not just "feel good" education. The stakes, as indicated by how Samina was transformed by her interactions with Mrs. Kendall, how Allie was inspired and affirmed her encounters with Mrs. Daniels, or how James’ eventual graduation was critically supported by the intervention of his counselor, are clearly much greater than that.

As a teacher in the public schools for 14 years, I realize the need to acknowledge some important caveats at this juncture. Significant barriers between the act of introducing material related to relationality and confirmation (however compellingly it is presented) and the transformation of actual day-to-day practice. For one, as already mentioned, a school’s extant professional culture—itself a complex interplay between leadership and staff empowerment/collaboration—cannot be assumed to be favorable, and the degree to which this culture is a healthy one will itself go a long way to determining the degree of receptivity and practical reform. Furthermore, even receptive and well-meaning teachers will vary in their capacity to practice confirming behavior with students; and as Devon’s narrative reminds us, the students’ perception of authenticity in such encounters can be a crucial component of the meanings they attach to them.

Aiming for a focus on seemingly non-academic, or "affective" teacher practices alongside increasingly demanding assessment, curricular, and instructional realities will always be a challenge. These realities are likely to ensure that an often exhausted, possibly disempowered, and even in some cases cynical, faculty will view such undertakings with suspicion: at best as a questionable use of their limited time and personal resources. Of these challenges, each being significant in their own way, cynicism on the part of educators themselves may be the biggest
threat to creating a more affirming relational environment for students. Cynicism and apathy are often driven by "teacher burnout" (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Maslach & Jackson, 1981), and is itself closely associated with school climate. This fact can present a highly destructive feedback loop of deteriorating relational phenomena. Influenced by their own challenged sense of efficacy, greater and greater degrees of depersonalization and disconnection on the part of faculty will only further alienate them from the students; furthermore, a circumscribed perception of individual student value and potential can also suffer under such conditions, lessening the chances for Buber’s (1957) genuine meetings. There is no question that these realities (structural, psychological, and the interplay between the two) present serious challenges to affirming attitudes and school cultures. How does one teach another to care, after all? Particularly when authoritarian structures and the chasm between resources and expectations are so prevalent, and a lack of the personal resource Freire (1998) referred to as "armed love,"—a disposition so necessary for the task at hand—is absent? The answer is likely as complex as the construct of relationality itself. It is rooted in proper preservice training that addresses the challenges and joys of teaching in all their remarkable complexity, and does so explicitly; it is rooted in collegial support structures that interrogate the realities of teaching and question those things which militate against authentic connection; it is rooted in the courage of individual teachers to share how practices can be transformed by transformed teacher dispositions. None of which these are givens.

Presuming there is a degree of receptiveness by faculty and some meaningful support from administration, however, the linkages between students’ experiences of connectedness in the school, their interpersonal encounters with teachers who "care with competence," and their eventual learning outcomes can surely be highlighted (Bondy & Ross, 2008; Blum, 2005; NCES,
2010; Cassidy & Bates, 2005). So, too, can the variety of ways students seem to perceive confirming behavior. For example, Kenya, Alexander, and Allie’s experiences showed that demonstrating a genuine and observable passion for one’s subject matter can be just as important to some as a warm greeting or a handshake. This last point is particularly crucial. It is important that teachers not feel they each must become identically competent in precisely the same kind of confirming dispositions in order to contribute meaningfully to student transformations. Indeed, this study indicates that even among just ten informants there is significant variance in how students might define and describe confirming behaviors. Not only should this fact should be regarded as both positive and reassuring—why should it not be so? As with students whose interests and capacities for different academic subjects are bound to vary, because each of them is a unique being, teachers should similarly frame their own capacity to alloy practice with affirming behaviors as existing along a diverse spectrum of potential. As long as such behaviors are supported by thoughtful interrogation of what is in the students’ best interests, and is guided at least in part by their voices, it seems reasonable to assume that encounters with alienation can and will be lessened when such efforts are undertaken.

Finally, as was mentioned in an earlier section, there are clear ethical implications to a consideration of the ways in which affirming or disaffirming encounters mediate student perceptions of connection and otherness in today’s schools. Alienation is not merely a theoretical construct: it is a term that describes a lived experience. As such, its costs and consequences need to be framed in human terms: in ways that transcend economic and narrow academic impacts. When a student such as James or Dimitri experiences lasting perceptions of marginality, because of sexuality, for example (whether these perceptions are generated through institutional imperviousness or persistent psychological violence and intimidation), we are not merely talking
about the possibility of circumscribed "student outcomes." We are instead flirting with the possibility of a circumscribed and diminished human life.

In the cases of Davie and Dimitri it would appear that through their resilience, the presence of at least some affirming adult encounters, and perhaps a small amount of good fortune, they were able to transcend their marginalization in some significant ways, though it should be noted that their doing so was far from easy or assured. Such an outcome for others is by no means a certainty. Both of these young men existed for a number of their adolescent years walking along what might be described as a kind of existential knife’s edge: on one side of this edge lay a horizon of possibility and personal growth that was open. On the other side there lay what may have been a life of greatly circumscribed individual potential. In such instances the presence of confirming acts by people who are perceived as genuinely caring—acts that might otherwise seem inconsequential—can suddenly become profound indeed. This may be especially so in areas where issues of poverty, inequality, and systemic deprivation of educational and community resources exist (Polakow, 1994; Kozol, 1991; Kozol, 2005). As Davie, who was explicitly critical of schools that felt like "prisons," and who claimed they instead should be "warm and caring all the time," stated so eloquently:

Kids where I’m from, in urban areas, they have a lot on their plate before school. School is not the main priority. [For them] it’s about a quick fix to try and get some money, or to try and provide for their mom, or for their brothers and sisters, or be the man of the household. …We’re not adults, but we’re doing adult things…and we’re trying to get beyond our years. I feel like a lot of times [teachers] knew that a lot of the students didn’t care. [But] it’s like, well, if [the teacher] don’t care then I don’t care. But it’s not supposed to be like that. Why are you a teacher if you’re not caring only because I don’t?
Contributions to Theory

Collectively, the voices in this study add to the literature on both Buber’s (1957) theory of confirmation and to understandings of student experiences of alienation in schools: in particular, how student perceptions of their range of relational encounters with adult staff members are influential in the areas of adolescent resilience, school connectedness, and larger attitudes toward learning. The participants’ voices have made it clear that such encounters can have deep and lasting personal significance, and that, far from being tangential to traditional notions of academic learning, they constitute an inseparable part of how students are likely to perceive, and construct meaning, within the context of their learning experiences. The connection between self-concept and school success has been identified as consequential at least as far back as Bloom (1976; 1977), and the experiences of these participants helps refine this understanding by identifying through first-hand account the profound ways in which affirming or disaffirming encounters can impact learner perceptions of self.

This observation regarding the crucial nature of confirming acts is also consistent with the epistemological and philosophical roots of relational theory (Buber, 1923; Buber, 1957; Laing, 1961; Macmurray, 1961), which tends see human existence throughout the entirety of one’s life as being part of an inescapable and significance-laden interdependence with others: an interdependence through which we ultimately shape and re-shape perceptions of who we are as individuals. Buber (1923) referred to the recognition of this relationality with his I-Thou/I-It paradigm, Blumer (1969) acknowledged it though the second major assumption in symbolic interactionism, i.e., that how we act is based on meanings derived from our social interactions with others, and Schutz (1967) in his treatment of intersubjectivity, specifically with his conception of the We-Relationship. Whatever the label we choose to affix to these notions of
relationality and our inherently social existence, one is tempted to wonder if the ubiquitous and familiar presence of this reality tends to limit, rather than expand, larger consideration of its impact. This may be particularly so with regard to its importance in connection to school experiences, which so often tend to be viewed in narrowly technical and vocational terms. "Well of course our lives are social," the thinking may be: "that just goes without saying." The actual implications of something which on some level appears so patently obvious may, as a result, tend to be ignored or forgotten. As the saying goes, there is a good reason that fish are the last to discover water.

Confirming and Disconfirming Acts, Perception, and the Lifeworld

Historically within the theoretical and empirical literature, the significance of relationality and, more specifically, of confirmation, have been described largely as philosophical or conceptual phenomena. This means that explorations of what confirmation "is" has been exogenous rather than endogenous (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), etic rather than emic. Despite its importance, confirmation as a construct remains derived principally from compelling theological and theoretical writings rather than from descriptions of first-hand experiences by those who may have encountered it (see, for example, Buber, 1957; Cissna & Sieburg, 1981; Ellis, 2000; Laing, 1961; Noddings, 1988; Sieburg, 1973; Waltzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). This is true across the communications, psychology, and even the dominant educational literature, each of which to some degree draws on Buber’s original theory of relationality and confirmation in some way.

An orientation toward existential phenomenology, however, calls us back to our embodied encounters with the world as we perceive it, and with lived experience as we construct meaning around it (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Any thorough exploration of what confirmation and
disconfirmation are, in this sense, must necessarily include a direct and traceable linkage to the described experiences of individual lifeworlds. While it is true that such material alone cannot be sufficient to address and contextualize the full importance of relational confirmation, it must be regarded as equally true that the notion of exploring this construct without a firm phenomenological foundation must be seen as a dubious endeavor at best. Even within the quantitative paradigm, confirmation is acknowledged as a "receiver-based variable" (Ellis, 2000; Ellis, 2004). While this is a rather unfortunate and indelicate way of describing experiences of confirmation, it nevertheless highlights an important point. Confirmation and confirming acts are, to a significant extent, what their experiencers perceive them to be. No full account of either one of these phenomena, therefore, can be seen as complete without the contributions of individual participant voices.

It is in this sense, first and foremost, that the present study contributes to the broader scholarly literature. The lived experiences of the informants presented in the preceding pages suggests that authentically perceived acts of confirmation—whether experienced as discrete and isolated, or as part of a longer-lasting and durable affirming relationship—create the potential for transformations of perception that are lasting and significant. These transformations can impact a variety of student attitudes and orientations toward their learning and toward themselves. Furthermore, they can mediate and even puncture experiences of alienation that our modern schools, given the ways in which they are structured, generate far too often. Understanding the power of confirming acts and dispositions, and having an awareness of how damaging disconfirming encounters can be for young learners, is therefore critical. Whether ultimately situated within the framework of a larger "care orientation" a la Noddings (1984; 1988) or not, the potential of confirming or disconfirming acts to contribute to these perceptions, when
accounted for by first hand narrative material, is crucial. It is an important step toward extending, deepening, and enhancing our understanding of these twin phenomena at the level of subjective experience. While some of the scholarship that addresses confirmation- and care-oriented school reform includes student voices to varying degrees (see, for example, Adler, 2002; Bosworth, 1995; Schussler & Collins, 2006), the voices of students and of former students themselves still remains far too rare in this area of inquiry (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010). When we ask questions like, What does, or should, confirmation look like? and, How do confirming and disconfirming acts in the schools influence students' feelings and attitudes toward themselves and the school? it should be remembered that student voices need to be an integral part of any comprehensive exploration or explanation of this phenomenon’s significance.

Confirmation and disconfirmation should be seen as a critical component of the larger landscape of relational theory described by Ross (2002). It also can and should be viewed as an act that is both deliberate and potentially discrete in its manifestations; in other words, as something that usually arises out of a choice by one who has embraced a commitment to in some way care for another. Each of them has concrete and identifiable characteristics. Continued refinement and description of these related phenomena in the literature, and of their ability to influence the learning experiences of adolescents, may help contribute to substantive discussion of practice, reform, and of scholarship. If, as communication theorists have claimed, confirmation is a phenomenon so important that it transcends all other interpersonal acts in its impact on the personal growth and mental health of the individual, then failing to pursue it in connection with education would be a disservice to our young people (Sieburg, 1973).
Recommendations for Further Study

The existential phenomenological focus of this study, and the narratives it illuminates, represent a significant look at how encounters with perceived confirmation and disconfirmation can mediate the intersubjective worlds of students. However, the interpretive breadth and significance of the present findings can certainly be enhanced by additional research approaches. One way is to expand the pool of participants in a follow-up study to include informants from demographic backgrounds not included in this dissertation; specifically, those from rural areas and students or former students from wealthier households. Doing so would add to the interpretive scope of how confirming experiences and relationality are perceived, and strengthen the study’s transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Another such way is to combine a phenomenological-qualitative focus with material that is ethnographic in nature. Doing so would not only create rich possibilities for further triangulation of the data, but also may provide opportunities to extend the inquiry into areas of structural critique: for example, how the institutional and organizational patterns found in schools may be exacerbating experiences of disconfirmation. Such observational material can also provide a way to increase corroboration of reported participant descriptions. Given the conceptual and methodological framework for this study, the descriptions of these perceptions are given a privileged position.

A further possibility is to include the voices of educators as another way to help understand how a single confirming act is perceived by both the student (who was the recipient of the intended action) and the teacher or significant school adult (who was responsible for it). Lastly, while this study, and my own particular orientation, clearly situates me as one who hews closely to the potential for interpretive inquiry to speak to larger issues of significance, there is no reason why a mixed methods approach to understanding how confirming and disconfirming
acts are impacting students could not be used. Such an approach could take the shape of aggregated survey data that, for instance, yields information about larger populations of informants and their perspectives on specific behaviors that occur in the classroom. I maintain at the end of this journey that student and former student perspectives constitute a critical component of understanding how confirmation mediates experiences such as alienation, not that phenomenologically-oriented work constitutes the only way to explore this kind of encounter.

Furthermore, when we genuinely listen to the voices of students and former students, and are deliberately receptive to what they tell us, a curious thing happens. It is not just they who are affirmed or transformed. It is also we—the adults, whether teacher or researcher—who are also significantly impacted. This observation is, in the deepest sense, what Buber (1923; 1957) meant when he said "I require a You to become." Teachers cannot expect to enter into their professional journey and not be substantially changed by the student encounters within it. If such an outcome were to occur, it would represent an impoverished and circumscribed journey on the part of the educator indeed. To this final point, in my case, I have discovered and been transformed by the sheer complexity not only of human experience amid the words of my participants, but also by the exhilarating challenges involved in authentically re-presenting those experiences in written form.

It is true that I feel as though I have found at least some tentative evidence of encounters that appear consistent with "confirmation" as I understand the term to mean; but more importantly than this, I have found that the description of human experience, when the invitation to narrate is presented, is likely to always transcend one’s wildest anticipations in its hue, complexity, and significance. Perhaps this is why Geertz (1973) characterized the obligation and challenge of qualitative scholarship as one that should add to the universe of human meaning. To
have the opportunity to systematically explore one small part of this universe for my participants has been personally, and intellectually, gratifying in ways I could not possibly have imagined at the outset of my journey.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Consent to Participate in Research

Principal Investigator: Clayton W. Hall

I agree to participate in one or more interviews as part of a research study that will focus on my interactions with significant adults while in school, and the impact I think those interactions had. I understand that the interview(s) will last approximately 60 minutes and that the interview(s) will focus on my perceptions of the kind of relationships I encountered with teachers, administrators and other significant adults while in high school. I realize that I will be asked questions regarding what I thought and how I felt during both positive and negative encounters with these adults, and I will be encouraged to share any other related issues concerning my school experiences that I am open to talking about.

I understand that my participation in the interview(s) is completely voluntary; that there is no direct benefit to me; that I may choose not to answer any questions; and that I may decide to stop participating at any time with no negative consequences for me and with no penalties. I further understand that my privacy and confidentiality will be protected at all times and that I can choose a fictitious name, that my school will be assigned a fictitious name, and that any identifying information about me, my family, my school, and my community will be completely confidential.

The interviewer will digitally record my interview and it will be typed up in the form of a transcription. All recordings and transcriptions will be assigned a numeric code and kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s home, and stored in a password-protected computer file at all times to maintain privacy. Only the principal researcher will have access to the files throughout the research process. I understand that, should I decide at any point during or after the
interview I do not wish to participate, my recordings and transcripts will be destroyed and no material will be used from the interviews for purposes of research or publication. I also understand that while there are no foreseeable risks from participating, some interview questions may be stressful. I am aware that the researcher has referrals available for me should I desire to speak to a counselor subsequent to my interview(s).

I agree that the researcher can publish and share these findings in any and all formats common to doctoral dissertations, for example in academic journals or at conferences. Prior to publication, there will be an additional review by the principal researcher of any interview material to ensure that my identity, as well as everything I have shared, remains completely anonymous. I understand that I may inquire about steps to secure my privacy and anonymity at any phase of the research process, and I understand that I can contact the principal investigator, Clayton W. Hall, with these or other questions, at 734.274.9390. Email: chall47@emich.edu.

This research protocol and informed consent document was reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee for use on December 4th, 2012. If you have questions about the approval process, please contact the UHSRC administrative co-chair at human.subjects@emich.edu or call 734-487-0042.

Interview Respondent’s Name: ______________________________________________________________

Signature: ____________________________________________________________________________

Date:_______
APPENDIX B

Appendix A: Sample Interview Questions

1. When I was in school I encountered a range of positive and negative relationships with adults in the classroom, and in the school generally. I wonder if you could describe for me an experience you had that was either positive or negative with a teacher or administrator?

2. If you can think of a class that you enjoyed/disliked going to each day, I wonder if you might describe what that class felt like to you. What do you remember most about it?

3. Is there a particular teacher that you remember that had a positive influence on you? Describe what you remember interactions with them were like in as much detail as you can, please.

4. Is there a particular teacher that you remember had a negative influence on you? Describe what you remember interactions with them were like in as much detail as you can, please.

5. If you think back to the hallways and classrooms you walked, how would you describe the way your school felt? Was it a welcoming place? An unwelcoming place? A mixture of the two? Tell me in as much detail as you can what you remember.

6. What is your most memorable learning experience in school? It can be good or bad. What do you recall about it? Tell me as much as you can about that moment in your life.

7. Describe if you can some other interactions you had with adults in your school, for instance with security or support staff. What made these encounters positive or negative?

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1 Follow-up questions will occur during the initial and/or subsequent interview(s)
8. If you can, please describe something your favorite teacher did to make you feel welcome in their class. Be as specific as possible.