

Informing Teaching Practice through Students' Perspectives of their
Most Memorable Learning Experiences

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Dedication

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Abstract

This qualitative study answers the call to include students' voices in research on learning by listening to students' perspectives about their learning experiences. Student voice inquiries into learning typically explore students' perspectives of their learning experiences in school for enhancing teaching practice. The present study explores students' perspectives of their learning experiences both in and out of school and elicits students' voices through written narrative, in combination with more common approaches to student voice inquiry. The purpose of which is to inform teaching practice that better supports and facilitates students' learning. The two research questions that guide this inquiry are: What do senior high school students' written narratives, focus group discussion, and related written comments about their most memorable learning experiences reveal about their learning? And what do these students' voices reveal about what they have in common in their learning? The common themes across the 24 student participants are presented as a supportive framework for classroom discussion about most memorable learning experiences. Practical implications are discussed for teaching practice and research with participant co-researchers.

Keywords: constructivism, learning, narrative, student voice, teaching practice

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Introduction

The teacher who is indeed wise does not bid you to enter the house of his wisdom but rather leads you to the threshold of your mind. Kahlil Gibran

This chapter presents my perspective as teacher and researcher and introduces the conceptual framework for this study. An overview is provided of the constructivist perspective that supports this student voice inquiry, which focuses on written narrative for gaining insights into students' perspectives of their personal learning experiences. A brief chapter-by-chapter outline of the study completes this introduction.

Personal Perspective as Teacher and Researcher

I am inspired by Khalil Gibran's (1923) view of teaching as bringing students to the thresholds of their minds, which I interpret as encouraging students to fully engage and make sense of their learning. As teacher of over 25 years, from preschool through to college, I have undertaken this responsibility by creating authentic opportunities for my students and me to facilitate and explore their ongoing learning. Over the past 10 years, this has become an evermore-challenging practice given the increasing range and diversity of my high school students' academic needs. It is my most recent teaching experiences, with multifarious high school English classes, that directly informed the purpose, design, and implementation of the present study.

The multiplicity of my students' needs and learning experiences lead me to seriously consider how they could all learn better in my classroom. At one end of the spectrum, there were students facing overwhelming challenges and difficulties learning. They exhibited the devastating effects of self-doubt, discouragement, and desperation. Colleagues concurred and shared observations of these students struggling, giving up,

and not meeting academic expectations for graduation. Conversely, there were students who exhibited the willingness to learn, to do their best, and to graduate from high school to pursue work, college, or university. In drastically different ways, I came to realize the need to explore students' learning to support and facilitate better classroom learning experiences for a widening range of students.

Consequently, I invited my classes to write narratives of their most memorable learning experiences. At the beginning of each semester, students would take the time to describe a learning experience of their choice. This written activity permitted them to reflect on their own learning and allowed me to garner basic information about their learning experiences, personal interests, and writing abilities. The narratives provided a record of students' memorable learning experiences and writing competences for my consideration when planning for their learning in English class.

Given that I was teaching approximately 90 students per semester, often under very difficult circumstances, it was not possible for me to address the individual interests, learning preferences, and academic needs of every student. I focused on certain commonalities across all students, while offering one-on-one or small group tutorial or remedial sessions for those willing and able to attend outside of class time. In the face of intensifying student needs and academic expectations, I noticed a growing number of students who were struggling to learn.

This confounding situation led me to consider using students' written narratives for my research to further explore students' learning and glean insights into their complex learning experiences. As part of this research, I elicited students' perspectives through

written narrative, as an inclusive opportunity for all students to describe their learning experiences. It is my English students' narratives of their most memorable learning experiences that informed the guidelines I provided participants with when they were constructing their narratives. To ensure uncompromised responses, I procured all narratives from the students of a colleague who expressed interest in the study. In addition to eliciting students' perspectives through written narrative, I invited the same students to write comments about their learning and to join a focus group discussion. The result is the present student voice inquiry into learning—an exploration of student participants' perspectives of their most memorable learning experiences for insights into commonalities in their learning. The purpose of which is to inform better teaching practice for enhancing the learning experiences of all my students.

Conceptual Framework for this Study

Constructivism, considered to be the most appropriate epistemological underpinning for student voice inquiry (Fosnot & Perry, 2005; Thiessen, 2007), is the conceptual framework for the present research. This student voice inquiry is framed by constructivist principles that recognize the personal and social dynamics of learning, in terms of student agency and student interaction with others for constructing knowledge. In this study, students' voices are elicited mainly through written narrative to investigate the complexity of their learning, which may not be revealed through usual methods of student voice inquiry such as direct questioning, interview, recorded observation, and focus group discussion.

Constructivist epistemology is conceptualized in ways that defy a singular definition, evidenced by the fact that there is a multitude of types or branches of

constructivism (Davis, 2004; Heylighen, 1993; Prawat, 1996; Steffe & Gale, 1995; von Glaserfeld, 1996). Constructivism views learning as a continuous process of adapting and understanding, while social constructivism regards learning as a process of socialization and enculturation. The distinction can be made that constructivism focuses on the individual's learning and social constructivism highlights the context of learning (Davis, 2004). In general terms, constructivism describes learning as a dynamic ongoing process and the individual as agent of this process, while recognizing the significance of social and cultural influences on learning.

The constructivist view of the learner as constructing knowledge, within a given environment, is dominant in educational research (Fosnot & Perry, 2005). According to principles of constructivism, the learner builds knowledge and adapts to the experiential world through exploration and discovery and by internalizing and reorganizing social constructs. Knowledge, not known in absolute or objective terms, is part of the learner and part of the world in which the learner co-exists. Constructivism recognizes the learner as actively engaging in a continuous process of learning by constructing knowledge, in personal and social contexts.

Student voice inquiry naturally draws on constructivism for exploring students' perspectives of their learning experiences by acknowledging students as "scholars of their own consciousness" (Dewey, 1938, p. 123). It is in recognizing students' agency for constructing knowledge and articulating their views about their learning experiences that researchers and teachers can benefit from students' perspectives and improve teaching practice (Cook-Sather, 2002). As Cook-Sather (2002) suggested, it is important for

students' voices to be included in the conversations about how to make schools places where students want to learn and are encouraged to learn. Inquiries into students' learning experiences in elementary and secondary schools in the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, and New Zealand reveal that when treated as reputable authorities regarding their own learning experiences, students are better positioned to voice their perspectives, make their learning explicit, construct knowledge about their learning, and inform better teaching practice (Cook-Sather, 2002; Dias-Greenberg, 2003; Kane & Maw, 2005; Nagle, 2001; Rudduck, 2007; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000; Smyth et al., 2004). Although 20 years have passed since Erikson and Schultz (1992) observed that the perspectives of students are rarely expressed in education, research still needs to be done to uncover students' experiences (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007; Thiessen & Cook-Sather, 2007).

Student voice may be at its strongest when students share their lived experiences through narrative, or personal story. Narrative can provide what Bakhtin (1986) referred to as an inclusive space for voice to emerge, especially "the voices of those most often not heard" (Benham, 2007, p. 519). As those whose voices are not typically sought out in educational research, students can communicate their learning experiences through narrative for ongoing exploration of students' learning. Within the context of student voice inquiry, students' perspectives of their learning experiences can be elicited through narrative for informing teaching practice.

Personal Commentary

Fundamental to my teaching and research is the belief that students have the right to learn, the right to make sense of their learning, and the right to have their voices included in conversations about their learning. I consider that students' perspectives of their learning experiences can help inform classroom conversations about learning for better teaching practice. The present study, as framed by constructivism, explores high school students' narratives of their most memorable learning experiences, as a basis for teachers and students to discuss and co-facilitate students' learning. The unconventional approach of this student voice inquiry will be further discussed, in terms of exploring students' perspectives about their learning experiences, in and out of school, and eliciting students' voices through written narrative.

Study at a Glance

Chapter 1: Introduction presents my perspective as teacher and researcher and the constructivist framework for this student voice inquiry, with a particular focus on narrative. Chapter 2: Review of the Literature highlights student voice and narrative from the constructivist perspective that frames this study. Chapter 3: Methodology details this student voice inquiry into learning according to the following headings: student participants, participants and researcher, context, procedure, data collection, analysis and interpretation, trustworthiness, and ongoing challenges. Chapter 4: Focus Group Findings explores the four focus group participants' discussion, written narratives, and related written comments about their learning experiences. Chapter 5: Narrative Findings explores the 20 student participants' written narratives and corresponding

written comments about their learning experiences. Chapter 6: Discussion presents the findings of this study in relation to the literature on student voice inquiry, narrative, constructivism, and implications for teaching practice. Chapter 7: Conclusion completes this dissertation with practical implications for my future teaching practice and research with participant co-researchers.

Review of the Literature

The foundation of every state is the education of its youth. Diogenes Laertius

This chapter is a review of the literature across prominent perspectives and research on student voice and narrative, according to a constructivist perspective. Student voice is described in terms of the rights of students, student voice inquiry into learning, student voice and learning, and constructivism and learning. Narrative is presented in the context of human experience, adolescence, and education. The rationale for the study, statement of purpose, and research questions that guide this study complete this chapter.

Student Voice

Student voice is a developing field that promotes the rights of students to learn and to be agents of their learning (Cook-Sather, 2006). The rights and engagement of students are central to student voice, calling us to rethink our understanding and positioning of students in education (Thiessen & Cook-Sather, 2007). Although commonly associated with promoting student rights through political change and restructuring at the school level, student voice extends beyond policymaking and school reorganization to teaching practice and students' learning experiences.

There is an ongoing challenge to move beyond the politics of repositioning students for meaningful student involvement, so that listening to students can improve teaching and learning (Bishop, 2003). Student voice inquiries that do address the concern that student voice is not used enough in research on learning invite students to share their perspectives about their learning experiences, in school, through direct questioning,

interview, recorded observation, and focus group discussion, for bettering teaching practice (Bishop, 2003; Cochran-Smith, 2003; Cook-Sather, 2001; Kane & Maw, 2005; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000; Thiessen, 2007).

Student voice inquiries into learning from the United Kingdom (Arnot, McIntyre, Pedder, & Reay, 2004; Carnell, 2005), United States (Cook-Sather, 2007), and New Zealand (Kane & Maw, 2005) provide insights into students' classroom learning experiences for improving teaching practice. These findings are supported by a constructivist view of learning, knowledge, and learner. The concept of the learner as constructing knowledge for ongoing learning, mediated by sociocultural influences, supports student voice inquiries into learning.

The rights of students.

Issues surrounding the rights of students continue to impact education across the United Kingdom and New Zealand and more recently the United States and Canada (Thiessen, 2007). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (OHCHR, 1989) provided the platform for the student voice movement insofar as it declared that students are officially recognized as part of a democratic system of learning. Students were declared as having the right to be engaged in education in meaningful ways that positively influence themselves and others, as well as the right to their say in matters that directly affect their education (Lodge, 2005; Thiessen, 2007). The success of this initiative to support students' rights in education depends in large part on what is identified as student voice (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000; Thiessen, 2007).

Student voice generally refers to what is considered political agency, in terms of student representation, dialogue, and action, whereby students are collaborative stakeholders in education for youth development and successful schools (McIntyre, Pedder, & Rudduck, 2005; Mitra, 2004). Student voice is the movement that re-positions students and invites them to articulate their perspectives in ways that can inform policy, administration, and practice (Cook-Sather, 2006; Kincheloe, 2007; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000; Thiessen, 2007). As an important alternative to the positivist paradigm that focuses strictly on ‘objectively’ recorded data and observations of students, student voice harnesses “the power of listening to students” (DeFur & Korinek, 2010, p. 15). Students become more than the subject of research when they are asked to share their views about their education.

The assumption that young people do not have the right or potential to inform us about their schooling experiences continues to be seriously questioned. There is a growing sense that student voice can realistically help improve teaching and learning. The “call to authorize student perspectives is a call to count students among those who have the knowledge and position to shape what counts as education” (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 3). The student voice movement encourages students to express their views while asking educational leadership to listen to the voices that reflect students’ lives (Cook-Sather, 2002). As promoted by studies in the United Kingdom (Carnell, 2005; Fielding, 2004; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007), United States (Cook-Sather, 2006), and New Zealand (Kane & Maw, 2005), student voice inquiry aims to listen to students because they have experiences and opinions that matter.

Bishop's (2003) call for inquiries into students' experiences, through open communication and fair representation, is a challenge to put students' voices at the center of research on learning and teaching practice. Bishop (2003) and Kane and Maw (2005) have recognized that the silence of students, who as a group "have been silenced all their lives" (Giroux, 1992, p. 158), needs to be replaced by students' perspectives of their learning experiences. Emerging student voice inquiries have invited students to share their views and make their learning explicit (Bishop, 2003; Kane & Maw, 2005; Rudduck, 2007). Increasingly, it has been recognized that students' voices about their learning experiences are insightful and integral for better student engagement and enrichment (Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Kane and Maw (2005) argued that students "have well-formed and articulate views of their own learning" (p. 319), not to be ignored when considering effective teaching practices. Student voice inquiry promotes students' right to be consulted about their classroom learning experiences to enhance teaching and learning (Kane & Maw, 2005).

Student voice inquiry into learning.

Although students' voices were considered largely absent in research on student learning prior to the 1990's, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of students' perspectives in education (Cushman, 2003, 2006; DeFur & Korinek, 2010; Mitra, 2004). Over the past decade, there has been a growing number of student voice inquiries exploring students' perspectives of their learning for informing better teaching practice (Bishop, 2003; Carnell, 2005; Cook-Sather, 2001, 2002, 2006; Fielding, 2001; Kane & Maw, 2005; Kincheloe, 2007; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Rudduck, 2007; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000; Smith & Colby, 2007; Thiessen, 2007).

Student voice inquiries into learning have set the stage for listening to students' views about their classroom learning experiences to improve teaching practice (Bishop, 2003; Cook-Sather, 2006; Kane & Maw, 2005; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). These inquiries offer students opportunities to freely express their learning experiences for further insights into students' learning (Bishop, 2003; Cook-Sather, 2006; Kane & Maw, 2005; Rudduck, 2007). By listening to students, researchers and teachers can potentially better understand the consequences of certain pedagogical practices based on how the students interpret them and, in turn, can positively affect changes in the classroom to support students' learning (Bishop, 2003; Kane & Maw, 2005).

Through different approaches to student voice inquiry—direct questioning, recorded observation, and interview data of students—a range of studies have validated students' perspectives about their learning experiences for re-conceptualizing and promoting effective teaching and learning (Bishop, 2003; Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2001; Kane & Maw, 2005; Kincheloe, 2007; Mitra, 2004; Rudduck, 2007; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000; Thiessen, 2007). These and other studies suggest that students offer insightful, measured, and constructive accounts about how they do and do not learn well and that these perspectives matter for informing better teaching practice (Bishop, 2003; Kane & Maw, 2005; Smith & Colby, 2007).

Bishop (2003) and Smith and Colby (2007) questioned high school students directly about how they made sense of their learning to draw out students' understanding of their learning in schools, in New Zealand and the United States. Bishop (2003) made explicit Maori students' learning experiences using classroom conversation for authentic student involvement and the hearing of minority students' voices. Kane and Maw's

(2005) research on students' views of effective teaching and learning focused on making students' learning explicit by asking New Zealand secondary students about their classroom learning experiences. Utilizing video recordings of their classes as a stimulus, students were asked questions about how they learn, what supports their learning, and what interrupts their learning. The students articulated what for them were contexts and conditions for learning. Kane and Maw's (2005) research reinforced that teachers and researchers can better understand and improve learning and teaching by asking for and listening to the opinions and needs of students.

Student voice inquiries offer different approaches to eliciting students' voices; however, we need to continue "to find ways of harnessing [students'] insights in support of their learning" (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000, p. 82). It is when students talk directly about learning that we should be listening, so that we may learn from what they are saying (Ibid.). Student voice inquiry commonly uses direct questioning, interview, recorded observation, and focus group discussion (Theissen, 2007) as ways of gaining insights into students' learning experiences. Although narrative inquiry acknowledges the emergence of voice through narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lee et al., 2004), especially for self-narrative, life story, and narrative identity (Baddeley & Singer, 2007; Hermans, 1997), student voice inquiry does not typically use narrative for eliciting students' perspectives of their learning.

Student voice and learning.

Learning is conceptualized in comparable ways across student voice inquiries that encourage students to believe they have a voice and that they deserve to be listened to in matters that involve them (Arnot et al., 2004; Carnell, 2005; Cook-Sather, 2007; Kane & Maw, 2005). These student voice inquiries into learning highlighted high school students' views of favorable learning experiences. In these studies, students described experiences they encountered or wanted to encounter in their classrooms. Common themes across these inquiries include student engagement, knowledge of content and skills, and supportive relationships for learning.

Arnot et al.'s (2004) research regarding student consultation on classroom practice revealed the following themes from across six grade 8 classes in three different schools in the United Kingdom. Students were interviewed individually about how they preferred to learn in class. According to Arnot et al. (2004), the students wanted to be deeply engaged and supported in their learning. Students described learning that was meaningful and related to their current knowledge, tasks, and personal concerns. They valued their independence as well as their collaboration with peers who had similar motivations for learning. Students also considered social relationships among peers to be "a major positive resource for learning" (Ibid., p. 86). Overall, students wanted to be "treated like people" (Ibid.). They wanted to be trusted and respected by their peers and teachers. And students "wanted their teachers to understand their needs even if they didn't always find it easy to communicate their needs to their teachers" (Ibid.).

Arnot, et al. (2004) concluded, “explicit guidance and supportive frameworks are...likely to be useful” (p. 88) for discussing students’ learning, especially when students “find it difficult to communicate to a teacher audience about what does and does not help their learning” (ibid.).

Carnell’s (2005) United Kingdom research about understanding and enriching young people’s learning suggested, “[t]here does not seem to be any time for talking about learning” (p. 269). Carnell (2005) argued that the lack of time for classroom discussion about students’ learning contributed significantly to ineffective learning in schools, wherein “the dominant conception of learning is of ‘getting taught’” (p. 272). Across interviews of 58 participants, students deemed the focus of school to be their performance, rather than their learning. The students considered themselves successful when they were responsible, organized, strategic, and goal oriented. However, they seemed to particularly value opportunities for monitoring and reflecting on their learning, being actively engaged and having fun, and collaborating with others. According to Carnell (2005), teachers could re-conceptualize their teaching to better represent students’ values by taking the time to talk with students about what matters to them.

Cook-Sather’s (2007) research about what would happen if we treated students as those with opinions that matter involved a 13-year collaboration between principals, teachers, and students in different schools across the United States. The focus was on encouraging students to voice their views about their experiences and how they would like to learn in school. Across various interviews, students described their favorable learning experiences as having been engaging, stimulating, enjoyable, and conducive to different learning styles. They seemed to have accepted a certain responsibility for their

learning and to have valued the encouragement they received from teachers. Students highlighted their thinking skills, understanding of content, and participation in discussion. All of which teachers could draw on to promote better teaching practice. Cook-Sather (2007) also suggested that at all levels of education students could contribute to effective classroom learning through collaboration with their teachers.

Kane and Maw's (2005) New Zealand research about students making sense of learning at secondary school to improve teaching practice involved six high school classes taught by six different teachers. Students' voices were elicited from questionnaires, interviews, and videotaped observation sessions. Common views of learning across participants emphasized learning as knowledge of content and skills, learning as comprehension, and learning as application and synthesis of knowledge. Students' highlighted the importance of the teacher's attitude and relationship with students, the relevance of what was taught, the connection of material to prior knowledge and goals, the organization and clarity of instruction, timely feedback, listening to students' views, and diversity of teaching approaches. The teachers in this study became more attuned to students and the students took more agency as learners, demonstrating that both teachers and students could positively influence learning in the classroom when students shared their perspectives and were heard.

The aforementioned student voice inquiries acknowledged the rights of students' voices to be included in what counts as education. Students were shown to have had key ideas about how they did and did not want to learn, which could inform teaching practice (Arnot et al., 2004; Carnell, 2005; Cook-Sather, 2007; Kane & Maw, 2005). Students highlighted engaging learning experiences, knowledge of skills and content, respectful

relationships, and classroom discussion. These studies revealed students who recognized the importance of taking responsibility for their learning and of being supported in their learning. When students shared these views and teachers listened, students' agency increased and teachers were encouraged to improve their practices. In response to students' overall impression that schools focused more on teaching than learning, Arnot et al. (2004) and Carnell (2005) emphasized the need for student-teacher discussions about students' learning. Arnot et al. (2004) also called for explicit guidance and a supportive framework to facilitate classroom discussion about students' learning for enhancing teaching and learning.

Constructivism and learning.

Traditionally, constructivism frames student voice inquiries with a focus on student agency and student-teacher collaboration for constructing knowledge and enhancing learning, as depicted in studies from the United Kingdom (Arnot et al., 2004; Carnell, 2005), United States (Cook-Sather, 2007), and New Zealand (Kane & Maw, 2005). Constructivism focuses on knowledge and ways of knowing for an understanding of learning as personal and social, whereby the learner has ownership of learning and learning is socioculturally mediated (Ernest, 1995; Wilson & Cole, 1991; von Glaserfeld, 1996). The learner is recognized as constructing knowledge in a learning environment that is developmentally appropriate and challenging for dynamic interaction, highlighted in various ways across student voice inquiries into learning.

Constructivism views knowledge as part of a world that cannot be known in an absolute or objective way. Knowledge is not about absolute truth based in objective reality; it is about practical validity according to subjective experiences. Knowledge is

considered (inter)subjective and not discovered as objective truth independent of subjective experience. Knowledge is construed and re-construed to organize, understand, and adapt to an experiential world that is more than personal (von Glaserfeld, 1996).

Knowledge may refer to information, concepts, values, and beliefs as well as intellectual, physical, and psychosocial abilities. We are reminded that knowledge of content and skills are integral to learning (Hansman, 2001; Hopkins, 2002; Marsick & Watkins, 2001; Meyers & Rust, 2003). Currie's (2003) case study of community college students in the United States highlighted the importance of focusing on the knowledge of content and skills for effective teaching and learning. This concurred with Honey and Mumford (1986) who suggested that learning is understanding and applying knowledge of content and skill, thus inviting further research into knowledge and learning.

From a constructivist perspective, learning is based on personal engagement, trial and error, exploration, and discovery, as well as social interaction, enculturation, shared experience, and negotiated interpretation (Cobb, 2005). Constructivism recognizes learning as involving genuine curiosity, experimentation, and manipulation of the learning environment, whereby the learner adapts to the world through processes of assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1970). Learning is also thought to involve the appropriation or internalization of practices and structures that are socially and culturally situated, whereby social and cultural influences are considered integral to development and learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Accordingly, it is the learner's agency and interactions in challenging and supportive environments that provide the foundations of learning for ongoing construction of knowledge. It is this perspective of learning that supports

student voice inquiries, those exploring students' learning experiences as the construction of personal and social knowledge.

Narrative

The possibility of employing narrative to elicit students' views about their actual learning experiences, in and out of school, will be considered according to a constructivist perspective of learning. For purposes of qualitative research, narrative provides an opportunity for exploring lived experiences for insights into human phenomena (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Lee et al., 2004; Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009; Riessman, 2008; Riessman & Speedy, 2007; van Manen et al., 2007). Narrative is often used in research with adolescents for exploring concepts of identity development and self-awareness (Baddeley & Singer, 2007; Blagov & Singer, 2004; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McLean, 2005; Sutin & Robins, 2005; Thorne, 2000), as well as for exploring complex personal realities (Baddeley & Singer, 2007; Cortazzi, 1993; Hermans, 1997; Riessman, 2008; van Manen, 1999; van Manen et al., 2007). Narrative has also been used in education for pedagogy, teacher education, and professional development (Ayala & Galletta, 2009; Ciuffetelli Parker, 2010; Cortazzi, 1993; Hazel, 2008; Jupp & Slattery, 2010; Maarten & Den Hertog, 2008; van Manen, 1999).

Narrative and human experience.

Narrative is commonly referred to as a story that is personal in nature for expressing and sharing human experience. Narrative is story lived and told to discover the personal and human dimensions of a given phenomenon (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), considered instrumental for insights into lived experience (Freeman, 2007;

Riessman, 2008; van Manen et al., 2007). If we consider that “human life is narratively structured” (Freeman, 2004, p. 63), narrative may be a window into human experience. That is, the dynamics and complexity of human experience may be illuminated through personal narrative.

Narrative is an expression of complex phenomena that might not be as readily accessible through interview, questionnaire, recorded observation, or focus group approaches to inquiry. Cortazzi (1993) suggested that narrative focuses on what one sees, thinks, feels, and does to expose the workings of the mind in action, offering what Bakhtin (1986) referred to as a vantage point from which to view the complexities of the mind. As a story of personal thoughts, feelings, and actions, narrative is an authentic telling of one’s life experience, which allows for insights into personal and shared realities (Craig & Huber, 2007; Riessman, 2008), especially during adolescence (Baddeley & Singer, 2007; McLean, 2005; Mclean & Thorne, 2003). When individuals are asked to share their stories, they are encouraged to make meaning of their experiences (Lee et al., 2004; Morris, 1994). Meaning can be shaped and shared from a personal and cultural perspective that is coherent and comprehensible to provide continuity of one’s life story, as well as connections to others’ stories.

Narrative and adolescence.

The exploration of adolescents’ lived experiences traditionally involves narrative, or personal stories (van Manen et al., 2007). As stories of lived experience, narratives are commonly used in research on adolescent identity development. It is considered timely for adolescents to engage in narrative, so they can use personal stories

to develop understandings of themselves and their personal experiences (Habermas & Bluck, 2000).

Adolescents can genuinely express themselves in narratives of “memor[ies], feelings, ideas, beliefs, and subjectivit[ies]” (Bruner, 1990). Their narratives often reveal aspects of their personality, self-awareness, goals, and ambitions (Blagov & Singer, 2004; McLean, 2005; Sutin & Robins, 2005; Thorne, 2000). Adolescents’ narratives also reflect change, confusion, and exploration (Erikson, 1982) and may be marked by complex personal and social tensions (Baddeley & Singer, 2007). Adolescents are in a favorable position to benefit from explorations of their lived experiences, which can help them “develop a more robust sense of reality around them and their agency within that reality” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 47). Narrative affords adolescents a rich opportunity for exploring lived experience and personal identity.

Through narrative, adolescents have a venue for authorship and identity formation (Baddeley & Singer, 2007). Narrative draws out adolescents’ views through personal story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman & Speedy, 2007), revealing who they are and what they are experiencing on a deeper level (van Manen et al., 2007). When adolescents embrace the opportunity to freely and genuinely express themselves and share their experiences through narrative, we can get a glimpse into their complex realities.

Narrative in education.

When narrative is valued in educational research, researchers and teachers can learn from students’ stories. According to Craig and Huber (2007), inquiries “negotiated in the midst of storied lives and contexts might transform educational research” (p. 252).

Lee et al. (2004) and Riessman and Speedy (2007) argued that narrative is vital for meaningfully exploring critical issues and gaining insights into human phenomenon. In education, written narrative, in particular, has been used as a pedagogical tool (Ayala & Galletta, 2009; Cortazzi & Lixian, 2007; Hazel, 2008; Helg & Matre, 2005; Mendelowitz & Ferreira, 2007; van Manen, 1999) and for teacher professional development and teacher education (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2010; Cortazzi, 1993; Jupp & Slattery, 2010; Maarten & den Hertog, 2008; Skumnes, 2007). A cited exception is Ball's (1998) study that explored students' and teachers' narratives about education for informing policy reform.

Hermans (1997) specifically identified written narrative as “among the most powerful instruments for ordering human experience” (p. 223), in that narrative represents principled and organized construction of personal memory (Cortazzi, 1993). The coherent organization and construction of personal narratives is considered conducive to the exploration of human experience (Rubin, 2007). Constructing narrative involves the sequencing of interrelated events that collectively express the meaningfulness of a given experience (Elliot, 2005). Written narrative can be effectively constructed when recalling vivid experiences that relay tone, personality, feeling, thought, action, subjectivity, and complexity (Baddeley & Singer, 2007; Morris, 1994). In this way, narrative is a rich, detailed construction of personal knowledge based on personal experience (Baddeley & Singer, 2007).

According to van Manen (1999), when students used written narrative to explore how they experienced teaching, they overwhelmingly emphasized how the teacher related to them. The students wanted the teacher to be encouraging, to believe in them, and to

give them recognition. They also wanted to receive praise and approval for their work. van Manen (1999) concluded that, in order to better humanize pedagogy, we should focus on students' needs by being in tune with how students experience life in the classroom.

Hazel (2008) studied students' use of written narratives in interactive learning environments (ILEs), in the United Kingdom. Hazel's (2008) findings suggested that students' narratives about their use of educational computer-based software seemed to allow them to be more personally involved with their learning materials, meaning making, and interpretations. Students were reported to have co-constructed knowledge with peers for significant learning, based on their narratives. Hazel (2008) proposed a rationale for the use of narrative in ILEs, referred to as narrative pedagogy, and suggested that the use of narratives in ILEs needed to be formalized for effective pedagogical use.

Ball's (1998) study showcased narratives for creating "spaces for the sharing of knowledge" (p. 178) to affect policy change in education, in the United States. Ball's (1998) research focused on teachers' and students' narratives, also referred to as interviews, and their implications for policy reform. This research in inner city schools, in the United States and South Africa, analyzed what students and teachers thought counted as learning, teaching, and schooling. Ball (1998) elicited students' responses about their learning experiences by asking them direct questions about their learning and schooling. Ball (1998) also asked teachers questions about teaching and compared the students' and teachers' responses. According to Ball (1998), teachers' views of effective practices and students' views of influential learning experiences needed to be better understood to inform educational policy. Ball (1998) argued that teacher and student

narratives about schooling should inform educational reform for more synchrony between teaching practice and student learning.

Maarten and den Hertog (2008) used student teachers' narratives to study primary teacher education in a multimedia-learning environment, in the Netherlands. The student teachers used their narratives to construct meaning from their teaching practice and to discuss learning and teaching with their peers to help lessen the gap between theory and practice. Maarten and den Hertog (2008) concluded that student teachers would benefit from a framework, such as their six-step curriculum design framework, to construct narratives with educational meaning.

Within the context of teacher education in the United Kingdom, Cortazzi (1993) suggested that through a mapping of their experiences teachers' written narratives, as stories of their actual teaching experiences, were considered useful for both theoretical and practical purposes. Teachers' narratives presented ways of "seeing and thinking" that were important to know about for teaching practice (Cortazzi, 1993). By extension students' written narratives of their actual learning experiences could also present ways of "seeing and thinking" for informing teacher practice. That is to say, if teachers' written narratives offered insights into their teaching experiences, then students' written narratives could offer insights into their learning experiences, with the goal of improving teacher practice to enhance student learning.

Narrative has been used in education to explore the interactive dimension of teaching (van Manen, 1999), narrative pedagogy (Hazel, 2008), development of educational policy (Ball, 1998), teacher education (Maarten & den Hertog, 2008), and

professional development (Cortazzi, 1993). In these varied studies, students and teachers used narrative to construct knowledge about their classroom experiences, primarily for improving pedagogy. It was also concluded that students and teachers could benefit from a guideline or framework for constructing their narratives (Maarten & den Hertog, 2008; van Manen, 1999). Despite the commonly held view that narrative can provide a rich account of human experience (Thiessen, 2007), narrative is not typically used to elicit students' perspectives of their learning experiences both in and out of school for insights into their learning.

Rationale for the Study

The research potential of student voice and narrative is recognized in this study, given their complementary contributions to research in education, according to a constructivist perspective of learning. Increasingly, student voice inquiries are inviting students to make explicit their classroom learning experiences for improving teaching practice. In recent studies from the United Kingdom, United States, and New Zealand, students demonstrated that their agency as learners and genuine support of their teachers were important for co-facilitating learning. By listening to students' perspectives, teachers were able to construct knowledge about students' learning for refining their practice. It was suggested that students and teachers could benefit from classroom discussion about students' learning and that a supportive framework could facilitate this process. Although student voice inquiries explore students' experiences in school, they do not typically explore out-of-school learning experiences for improving teaching practice, nor do they commonly elicit students' voices through written narrative.

Narrative may be a valuable approach to student voice inquiry for researching the phenomenon of students' learning. If human lives are considered naturally storied, the complexity of human experience may be genuinely expressed and well-represented through narrative. In education, narrative is used for pedagogical purposes such as humanizing pedagogy based on students' actual needs in the classroom and constructing knowledge for meaningful use of instructional materials. It was suggested that guidelines for writing narratives might help students create representations of their in-school learning experiences for positive changes in pedagogy. As with student voice, narrative is not characteristically used to explore out-of-school learning experiences for improving teaching practice.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research is to gain insights into participants' learning experiences and commonalities in their learning. Common themes across participants' accounts may provide the basis for a supportive framework for classroom discussion about students' memorable learning experiences, in order to inform teaching practice.

Research Questions

Two research questions guide this inquiry. Firstly, what do senior high school students' written narratives, focus group discussion, and corresponding written comments about their most memorable learning experiences reveal about their learning? Secondly, what do these students' voices reveal about what they have in common in their learning?

Methodology

It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.
Aristotle

The present student voice inquiry into learning elicits and explores students' voices through the written narratives of their most memorable learning experiences, focus group discussion, and related written comments. This study is based on a qualitative methodology, presented in this chapter according to the following headings: student participants, participants and researcher, context, procedure, data collection, analysis and interpretation, trustworthiness, ongoing challenges, and limitations of the design.

Student Participants

The participants of this study were in their graduating year at an inner city public high school. There were 24 senior high school students who volunteered to participate from across three different grade 12 English classes, all taught by the same English teacher. Each class was comprised of a heterogeneous grouping of 18 to 20 students. One class was enrolled in the Grade 12 University Preparation English Course (ENG4U) and the two other classes were enrolled in the Grade 12 College Preparation English Course (ENG4C). There were 10 students who volunteered from the ENG4U course and 14 students who volunteered from the ENG4C course. Of the 24 research participants, across all three classes, 14 were female and 10 were male, ranging from 17 to 19 years of age. This was a heterogeneous group, in terms of academic and personal background. In an effort to protect the anonymity of the students, no personal information was obtained apart from what was gleaned from participants' descriptions of their personal learning experiences.

Participants were planning to enroll in extra high school courses or pursue work, college, or university the following year. Their academic performances ranged from below average to above average. They were fluent in English, as either a first or second language. The learning experiences they found particularly memorable dated as far back as preschool to as recently as their grade 12 graduating year.

Participants and Researcher

The participants and I did not have a teacher-student relationship, even though we were part of the same high school. Consequently, our participant-researcher relationship was defined by this student voice inquiry. As researcher, my intention was to elicit from participants what Hadjioannou (2007) and McCombs (2004) refer to as genuine student perspectives, which I consider instrumental for exploring lived experiences such as learning. Empathy and respect for each student participant is demonstrated by the nature and design of this student voice inquiry. Student participants were invited to share perspectives of their personal learning experiences through activities that were intended to encourage authentic participant involvement, within an environment that was familiar and non-threatening.

Context

During the first week of the semester, the English teacher of all three grade 12 English classes had instructed her students to brainstorm their most memorable learning experiences. They were to select only one for a narrative piece that they would be asked to write the following day. The students were provided with guidelines for brainstorming, writing, and commenting on their learning experiences (see Appendix G). The next day students wrote narratives about their most memorable learning experiences.

Most students also chose to respond to written questions related to their narratives (see Appendix G). At the end of their respective 75-minute English class, all students submitted a printed copy of their work to the teacher. This initial writing assignment of the semester was not intended for purposes of formal evaluation.

Procedure

Subsequently, I visited all three grade 12 English classes and introduced the present student voice inquiry to the senior students. I told them that I valued students' perspectives about their own learning, especially for finding ways to improve teaching practice. Then I explained the study and provided each student with the corresponding documentation: recruitment letter, information letter, consent form, and invitation for a focus group discussion (see Appendices A, B, C, D). I answered questions and cordially invited all students to participate in this study. I assured them that participation in the study could simply consist of submitting a second copy of the narratives and comments they had already submitted to their teacher. The extra copy could be reprinted, as saved in their writing file, and forwarded to me via their teacher. Across all three classes, there were 24 students who volunteered to participate in this study and share personal stories about their learning. By the end of the third week of school, all 24 participants had submitted their consent forms along with a duplicate copy of their written narratives and comments. This signaled the end of participation for 20 of the 24 participants.

The volunteers for the focus group discussion consisted of four females, in the academic stream (ENG4U). These focus group participants had been asked to consider the learning experiences they had previously described in their written narratives, as a starting point for their self-directed, open-ended discussion (see Appendix H). The entire

60-minute audiotaped discussion took place after school, without any researcher involvement. After the focus group discussion, the four participants were invited to debrief by responding to final questions about their discussion and their participation in the study (see Appendix I). The focus group participants completed their responses at home and submitted them to me the following day, which signaled the end of the study.

Data Collection

Qualitative research benefits from multiple sources of information and rich descriptions (Berg, 2007; Creswell, 1998; Somekh & Lewin, 2005). In this study, the various data was generated from the participants' voices. The participants' own words and perspectives about their lived experiences were elicited through: 1) written narratives of their most memorable learning experiences (250 – 1200 words each); 2) written comments about their narrative accounts (50 – 150 words each; 3) self-directed, open-ended focus group discussion about their learning (audiotaped and transcribed, 4500 words); and 4) final comments about the focus group discussion and participation in the study (100 – 200 words each).

In this student voice inquiry, the participants' written narratives and focus group discussion are presented as complementary data. They offer depth and breadth to the analysis of participants' learning experiences from early childhood to late adolescence, in school and out of school. The 24 participants' written narratives offer a window into various learning experiences out of school, while the focus group discussion reveals the four participants' issues and concerns about their learning experiences in school. The focus group discussion and written narratives present different perspectives of learning, in and out of school. The participants' written comments further highlight their learning.

Analysis and Interpretation

Participants' descriptive stories of specific learning experiences, were analyzed thematically based on their written and spoken words. This descriptive content analysis identified what participants were literally saying about their learning, in their narratives and focus group discussion (see Appendix L). The narratives were analyzed individually and as a set of stories for commonalities across all learners, regardless of age, endeavor, or context. Contextualization of participants' perspectives within their own learning experiences, and across learning experiences, facilitated authentic interpretations of their stories. Participants' actual words, descriptions, and content were interwoven throughout my researcher interpretation. To ensure authenticity, I used contextualized quotes, personal details, and vivid descriptions from participants' narratives and discussion of their most memorable learning experiences.

In qualitative research, it can be said that the meaning and value of researcher interpretation are derived from the perspectives of researcher and participant (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Knoeller, 2004). As demonstrated in this student voice inquiry, my interpretation of participants' learning was informed by the participants' accounts of their learning experiences. My intention was to develop an open-minded and broad interpretive account of participants' learning experiences, one that substantiated researcher interpretation and minimized researcher bias, for an authentic representation of participants' perspectives of their learning experiences (see Appendix H). Throughout this study I made a conscious effort to represent each student's voice as clearly and as richly as possible. My committee was instrumental in ensuring that my interpretation reflected an empathetic exploration of the students' voices across their written narratives,

focus group discussion, and related written comments about their most memorable learning experiences.

The efforts for ensuring authenticity of researcher interpretation in this student voice inquiry were ongoing. As identified by Cook-Sather (2007), authenticity of interpretation has to be worked out on a continuous basis and re-worked at each stage of interpretation, through meta-awareness of potential biases and how they can be manifested in terms of the presentation of the findings and subsequent analysis and discussion of the findings. Throughout this study, I ensured routine self-checking for researcher bias by making a concerted effort to not impose biased interpretations on the data, to not impose stereotypes on the participants, and to not superimpose my voice, as researcher, on the participants' voices. The authenticity of interpretation was further encouraged by my extensive use of quotes and direct references to participants' ideas, feelings, issues, and events, within the context of their own learning experiences.

My contextualization of students' perspectives within their own learning experiences and across learning experiences facilitated a meaningful and inclusive interpretation of their learning. I remembered that "[e]very reading is an interpretation, and every interpretation is an association" (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 135). My interpretation was an exploration of learning, based on countless re-readings of participants' stories as individual descriptions and as a collection of descriptions of their most memorable learning experiences, from early childhood to late adolescence (see Appendix H). I also kept in mind that coherent interpretations and clear insights could be attained from similar as well as different data (Czarniawska, 2004). It is by listening intently to all the students' voices throughout their written narratives, focus group

discussion, and written comments that I gained insights into their learning experiences and what they had in common in their learning.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, “[t]wo levels of validity [, or trustworthiness,] are important—the story told by a research participant and the validity of the analysis, or the story told by the researcher” (Riessman, 2008, p. 184). As previously demonstrated, I promoted trustworthiness through transparency of how I made my methodological decisions, of how I produced my interpretations, and of what tools I used for collecting my data (see Appendices G, I & J). This approach to trustworthiness may be outlined as: 1) making explicit methodological decisions, 2) demonstrating how interpretations are directly informed by participants, and 3) providing all tools for data collection for other investigators (Ibid.).

Trustworthiness depends on participant evidence and researcher ethics (Riessman, 2008; Thomson & Gunter, 2006). In the present study, trustworthiness was developed through the students’ voices, or participant evidence, via quotes, descriptions, and anecdotes from the personal accounts of their learning experiences—written narratives, focus group discussion, and written comments. In this way, students’ voices were clearly evident and presented as genuine, discursive, and heterogeneous to further promote trustworthiness of analysis.

From the perspective of researcher ethics, the different methods used to collect data from various sources help increase trustworthiness (Berg, 2007; Creswell, 1998; Somekh & Lewin, 2005). I used multiple sources of data and cross-referencing of data for triangulation of the findings to promote transparency and research integrity for

enhancing the trustworthiness of this student voice inquiry. Notably, the documentation of this study was cross-referenced for an analysis of what participants had in common in their learning (see Appendix L). Interpretations and assertions about each participant and across participants included elements of what might have facilitated and hindered students' learning. Multiple instances and single instances were considered significant and analyzed accordingly. No relevant data was disregarded whether grouped as a collection of instances or examined as a single instance.

Ongoing Challenges

A challenge with qualitative research occurs when “readers must assume, for example, that everyone in a thematic cluster means the same thing by what they say (or write), obscuring particularities of meaning-in-context. The investigator’s role in constructing narratives they then analyze tends to remain obscure” (Riessman, 2008, p. 76). For authentic researcher interpretation, it is important to consider different interpretations and contextualizations of the data, in terms of what is being expressed by participants and its significance. In the present student voice inquiry, it was important to ensure that my analysis was informed, meaningful, and highly developed with respect to the “nature of the phenomenon, what [was] interesting about it, and what [was] worth saying” (Gergen, 2004, p. 71). In addressing this issue, it was important to “keep the story intact for interpretive purposes” (Riessman, 2008, p. 74), especially for authentic researcher interpretation.

Student voice inquiry does not come without challenges regarding authentic interpretation of students' voices. A particular challenge was to avoid what Freeman (2007) called, “highly schematized, conventionalized, even clichéd portraits” (p. 141) of

a given group of participants. For purposes of authenticity, the participants' genuine, subjective, and contemplated personal accounts were revealed as part of my researcher interpretation, through contextualized quotes, personal details, and vivid descriptions of their lived experiences. Given that authenticity of researcher interpretation cannot be 100% guaranteed, it needs to be facilitated by a research practice that is ethical and transparent.

Limitations of the Design

Writing about a 'most memorable learning experience' may have led student participants to consider positive learning experiences over negative learning experiences. And the personal reasons students had for writing their narratives to their teacher may have influenced them to write safe stories, instead of stories that might have been more difficult to share within the context of school. Participants were not asked to write personal profiles, or brief personal histories, which may have contextualized their experiences for different analyses of their learning.

Due to the parameters established by the ethical approval process at the time of this study, I was positioned as an outsider researcher for data collection of the narrative findings and the focus group findings. The data for this study was generated without my direct input or participation with the student participants. A senior colleague in the English department facilitated collection of the narrative data, supported by explicit guidelines (see Appendix G). Participants received these guidelines to structure and contextualize their written narratives and comments about their most memorable learning experiences and to ensure they stayed on task, within a specific timeframe. The use of said guidelines may be seen as a limitation because they might have constrained

participant writing to a certain format and time limit, which may have limited deeper levels of student voice from being expressed. Under different circumstances, I would have conducted research with my own students. In this way, I would have been positioned to situate their narratives within their personal histories and invite them to write more freely about their most memorable learning experiences, as well as facilitate focus group discussions and post-focus group discussions with all the students.

Focus Group Participants' Discussion and Narrative Findings

Whatever it is, School Shouldn't Make You Feel Stupid—Ever! Ya. Ya. Ya. Ya!

Focus Group Participants

The student participants' perspectives of their most memorable learning experiences were analyzed as two sets of data. This chapter presents the four focus group participants' discussion and narrative findings, including their corresponding written comments. The subsequent chapter presents the narrative findings and corresponding written comments of the 20 participants who were not part of the focus group discussion.

The findings are presented according to the two research questions that guided this study. Firstly, what do senior high school students' written narratives, focus group discussion, and corresponding written comments about their most memorable learning experiences reveal about their learning? Secondly, what do these students' voices reveal about what they have in common in their learning? Both sets of data were analyzed for common themes across participants' various learning experiences.

Introduction

This chapter begins by presenting the findings of the four focus group participants' discussion and final comments (see Appendices H & I), followed by their written narratives and corresponding written comments (see Appendix G). In their written comments, participants often reiterated or further substantiated ideas and content previously detailed in their discussion or written narratives. Overall, the focus group discussion spoke to the tensions participants experienced in school, while the written narratives highlighted their out-of-school learning experiences. The presentation of key themes from the focus group participants' discussion and written narratives completes this chapter.

Focus Group Discussion Findings

The four focus group participants mainly discussed their most memorable in-school learning experiences. Although they focused on their concerns about difficult classroom experiences, they did recognize teachers who made learning interesting and enjoyable. In addition to talking about teachers who influenced their learning, the focus group talked about their preferred ways of learning. Tensions were evident when they discussed hindrances to their learning and whether they learned similarly or differently from one another. Common themes throughout the focus group discussion were: learning from their mistakes, meaningful connections to their learning experiences, teacher responsibility for their learning, confusion about their learning, and discussing learning with peers and teachers. Each focus group participant also responded to final written questions about their discussion and participation in the study (see Appendix I). The thrust of the discussion and final comments was tension surrounding their schooling and confusion about their learning, as well as interest in discussing their learning.

Learning from mistakes.

When the participants discussed their learning experiences in school, they wholeheartedly agreed with Brenda that, “Whatever it is, school shouldn’t make you feel stupid—Ever! Ya. Ya. Ya. Ya!” (Raylene, Irene, Giselle, Brenda). They were passionate about their right to learn and feel confident in school. “There are so many things about school we could talk about” (Brenda). “Ya, there are so many flaws. Unfortunately, it’s true” (Irene). In this regard, they conversed extensively about the concept of making mistakes, which they considered to be an integral part of their learning. They expected to be allowed to make mistakes and encouraged to learn from

their mistakes. When they were reprimanded or discouraged from making mistakes in class, they felt diminished. They were critical of teachers who instilled in them the fear of making mistakes, which they concluded was a hindrance to their learning and made them feel stupid as students.

My dislike of French to this day stems from my mean and intimidating first grade French teacher who did not allow us to make any mistakes. It was really intimidating for me. I was so afraid to make a mistake in French class. (Brenda)

Ya, I absolutely hate French because my grade four teacher was the same way. She made us stand in front of the class and recite the verbs and if you couldn't do it, she'd say, "No, no! Sit down!" You would have to sit down right away.

(Raylene)

Brenda and Raylene were most vocal about feeling discouraged and intimidated by teachers who scolded them for making mistakes. They dialogued about French teachers preventing them from learning from their own mistakes by not allowing for mistakes in the classroom. They considered that making mistakes was part of learning and that to be denied this opportunity, in school, hindered their learning and diminished their confidence as students.

The participants remembered, at different times throughout their schooling, not having been encouraged to learn from their mistakes and not having been permitted to make mistakes. They regarded their fear of making mistakes to be a demoralizing experience. "It's degrading. It makes you feel stupid. It makes you feel horrible" (Giselle). As Brenda expressed, "It just discourages you and makes you not want to do school." Fear of making mistakes was shown to have affected their confidence as

students. “It’s not that I can’t do it. It’s just that I don’t have the confidence. I don’t have the confidence for French” (Brenda). “Ya, I don’t have the confidence either. I know what you mean” (Giselle). “I don’t have confidence either” (Raylene). The participants commiserated about their lack of self-confidence that led them to want to give up when they were fearful about making mistakes. They were emphatic that learning from their mistakes gave them confidence as students, and that when denied this aspect of their learning they felt incapable.

Meaningful connections.

Participants discussed at length the importance of meaningful connections to what they were learning and how they were learning. One such example was engaging in interesting conversations, with teachers and students, as part of their learning experiences. Irene appreciated her law teacher’s manner of conversation with his students. “He keeps you interested like he’s just having a conversation.” Raylene valued learning through conversation with her peers. “If I talk about it and have a good conversation about it like we’re doing right now, then that’s the best thing for me to learn.” Participants preferred being taught by teachers who conversed with students and who encouraged them to have conversations with each other about what they were learning. Brenda wanted to focus more on meaningful conversation, in school, for making personal connections to what was being taught. “Debating, discussing and even talking is important to find out what you think and feel and believe and why” (Brenda). Participants agreed that more opportunities for conversation, as part of their learning endeavors, could have facilitated meaningful connections to what was being taught in all subjects.

Across subjects there was a sense that students wanted to be taught something and that they wanted to connect to what they were being taught. They wanted to be told the significance of what they were being taught, be given the overall picture, and be directed accordingly. They preferred when teachers started with the big picture and broke information down into manageable details. “They should explain the big picture and then go into detail. They don’t do that. They don’t break it down” (Brenda). They appreciated teachers who explained the relevance of what they were teaching and how it connected to the students and the world. “Teachers should make connections to the real world” (Giselle). Moreover, participants thought that teachers should make connections across subject areas to benefit student learning. “I don’t find teachers make good connections between subjects. It should all connect. There’s so much and it’s so interesting and I really find they don’t focus enough on that kind of thing” (Brenda).

It’s like you can’t do a puzzle without seeing what the picture looks like. We need to see the big picture with structure and meaning to consolidate ideas with direction and purpose. (Irene)

It’s so important to learn in meaningful ways—what is meaningful to us and how that relates to the world, past and present. To learn is to connect by learning about what the world is about and who we are. (Brenda)

Participants wanted to be taught meaningful things in meaningful ways. They blamed teachers for not teaching about subject matter and the world in ways that were relevant to students. It was considered important for teachers to provide ‘the big picture and then break it down’, so that students could understand better what they were being taught. Participants were interested in the interconnectedness of subject matter across the

disciplines for a better understanding of the world and their place in it. “Whatever history you’re learning should relate to the literature you’re reading and the music you’re learning” (Brenda). “That’s why a lot of people don’t like history. It’s the same thing over and over again” (Raylene). Brenda did acknowledge that one of her teachers made English more interesting by connecting what she taught to the world they lived in. “Ms. G. tries to make people interested in current events so we don’t get bored. She brings in articles, movies...I haven’t had many teachers like that” (Brenda). According to Brenda, when learning “[i]t is important to be interested, passionate and enthusiastic”, which her peers concurred should have been more integral to their learning experiences in school. The focus group considered that it was the teacher’s responsibility to make subjects interesting, relevant to students’ lives, and interrelated with other subjects.

Responsibility for learning.

Participants placed the responsibility for their learning, in school, in the hands of their teachers, and regarded teachers as having authority over their learning. They discussed teachers and teaching methods that they considered to have directly impacted their learning, or lack thereof, without claiming responsibility for their own learning. Raylene and Brenda described their difficulties when teaching methods were contrary to their preferred ways of learning or when classes were simply boring. “I think a lot of the learning kind of has to do with the teacher. I think that’s why I suck at some courses. To have someone just sit there talking is almost the worst thing...it pains me. When courses are boring, I can’t learn” (Raylene). Brenda concurred, “When classes are boring, I can’t learn.” Brenda also expressed lack of motivation when classes were distracting or stressful and when teachers did not teach the way she preferred to be taught.

I'm not the kind of person that can learn in class. There's too much distraction!

Well, it's harder under pressure. I think in a different way and I don't think they get it, which is why I don't succeed as well as I should on exams and essays. I'm able to learn better if it's explained to me all at once—if it's all laid out for me.

They don't do that. I've asked so many teachers to do that. (Brenda)

Brenda and Raylene did not consider ways they could have compensated for their difficult learning experiences in class. Instead, they tended to criticize the teacher.

Brenda was overwhelmed when it came to essay writing, which she believed was due to the way she was taught. "When I was in elementary school, I was taught to write without thinking ahead. Oh, I just hate the way I was taught English. When I'm asked to write an essay in class, it's like the worst part of my life." (Brenda). Brenda further suggested that students did not take the initiative to learn in school, because they depended on the teacher to learn.

We all say we want a lot of freedom, but would you do the work if it was slack?

If you would do the work, then why don't you? We don't do stuff on our own.

Why don't we do the politics or history on our own? Have you ever read in a math or history textbook without a teacher assigning pages? No, that doesn't happen. (Brenda)

Irene and Giselle praised teachers when they did learn. "I used to never like law. Then I had this teacher, great teacher. He knows his stuff and is hilarious." (Irene).

Giselle also spoke favorably of her math and history teachers in light of her success in their classes. "I had a good math teacher, like a really good math teacher. She was

awesome. And now I like math. I'm also taking history this semester and I absolutely hate history, but Mr. B. is teaching it and I really, really like it" (Giselle).

The focus group discussed how influential teachers were, while revealing an attitude of passivity toward their own learning and success as students. During the discussion, participants credited their teachers when they learned and blamed them when they did not learn. The perspective of the teacher as responsible for causing or restricting learning positioned the participants into a passive role as students.

The participants considered that they should be responsible for their learning as they got older. "As you get older, you need to guide yourself. You need to start learning for yourself" (Giselle). Irene agreed, "As you get older, you need to learn for yourself." It seemed that learning only became their responsibility at the end of their schooling. Raylene concurred that as they got older they should be taking more responsibility for their learning. "It gets to a point when you're at an age when you need to learn for yourself." They did not elaborate on how they would 'learn for themselves', nor did they address how their schooling might have been different had they taken more responsibility for their learning throughout their academic career.

In their final comments, participants focused less on their learning, in school, and more on the teacher's responsibility for their learning. They recognized teachers as having significantly influenced their learning, without highlighting their own ability and responsibility to learn. "I noticed from the learning experiences of my peers and my own that childhood experiences leave a lasting impression. Many of us possessed similar stories of intimidating grade school teachers" (Brenda). These tensions were carried over

from their discussion when they described themselves in a passive role, in school, and focused on the impact teachers had in facilitating or hindering their learning.

Teachers are a huge influence, one way or another. Teachers played a huge role. Often when we had a teacher we didn't like, we did not like the subject we were learning. A fun teacher equals a fun subject. Early experiences can determine whether we will enjoy a subject in the future or not. (Giselle)

Irene's comment summarized the group's view of the teacher's responsibility for their learning, "We all thought we learn better if we enjoy the class and the teacher." Their learning seemed dependent upon the teacher and the way the class was taught.

Confusion about learning.

The focus group participants seemed confused about their learning. On the one hand, they referred to themselves as visual learners, with reference to learning styles terminology. On the other hand, they described the ways they learned by doing. Brenda stated that teaching learning styles was common in high school, but was not useful to her. "Remember Mme F. gave us eight tests—What kind of learner are you? Ya, it's done a lot now. Every result was different. Ya, it wasn't helpful. Really, I don't think I learned anything" (Brenda). The focus group proceeded to discuss how they thought they learned according to the learning styles taught in school. This part of the conversation was difficult to decipher and ended as confusingly as it had started. "I learn visually. Like I have to be doing it. I actually learn by doing. I learn two ways, memorizing and talking about it" (Raylene). Giselle responded, "Oh, I can't do that. I really can't do that!" They expressed certain confusion about how they learned within the context of trying to determine what types of learners they were and whether they learned similarly or

differently from one another. Brenda's response further illustrated this general sense of confusion about their learning.

I learn audio-visually, but I don't consider myself gifted musically or artistically.

I like summarizing by writing everything I learned. It just makes sense to me after

I've done all these practice tests, made mistakes...Everyone is just a different

combination of each learning style. Everyone learns differently and it's just

something they need to do more research on. (Brenda)

Reference to popularized notions of learning styles offered less insight into participants' learning than did the accounts of their learning experiences. Although the participants were taught about learning styles, they seemed unclear how this related to their actual learning. Everyone agreed with Brenda that teachers should "tailor the education to each student, to the individual", according to each student's learning preferences. This entrenched notion may have helped solidify their passivity as students and lack of personal responsibility for their learning, as well as their criticism of teachers for not teaching according to their learning styles.

Confusion about learning was reiterated by the participants in their final comments. Raylene wrote, "It was a nice and warm feeling to know that I am not the only visual learner. We all learn visually or by actually participating in the task that is being taught." Irene seemed less convinced than Raylene was about her own learning and that of her peers. At one point, Raylene expressed, "I learned how my friends learned and that people learn things differently." Later she wrote, "I did not really notice any differences." By comparison Giselle stated, "I truly realized that everyone learns differently." Brenda concurred,

I learned that everyone learns in a different way, which allowed me to appreciate why people have strengths in some areas and weaknesses in others. The differences I noticed from the learning experiences of my peers and my own would be that some people responded well to strict teaching methods, while I found overly structured learning to turn me off the subject altogether. I now realize that a person must not classify other people because everyone has a unique style of learning. (Brenda)

The participants' views about whether they learned similarly or differently seemed unresolved. This tension was apparent from their final comments, whereby Raylene thought they learned similarly; Irene thought they learned differently and similarly; Giselle and Brenda thought they learned differently, but sometimes made conflicting general comments about their similarities and differences as learners. It is possible that popularized notions of learning styles may have further confounded their views about their learning.

Discussing learning with peers.

The focus group participants' final comments highlighted the importance of discussing learning with peers. "It was interesting to see the different experiences people went through during memorable learning experiences. Their points of view were interesting to hear about too" (Giselle). They enjoyed this endeavor and found it worthwhile to share their stories. "It was fun and interesting to discuss how my friends learned." (Irene). They credited their discussion with having helped them become more aware of their learning. "I learned not to give up just because someone does not teach you a certain way that you learn. Try to make every learning experience a positive

learning experience” (Raylene). Brenda stated that discussing learning allows “students to understand...themselves and others”. “I found discussing learning with my peers to be fascinating. My overall participation in this study has been informative and has provided me with a greater understanding of other people.” (Brenda). Participants saw value in having conversations about their learning with each other and their teachers.

Discussing learning with teachers.

Participants thought that teachers should invite students to share their views about their learning. “I think professionals should ask students how they learn to help professionals expand their way of teaching” (Raylene). Through discussion with teachers, students could help inform teachers about their learning, so that teachers could better teach students. “If students tell teachers about how they learn, it would be easier for the teacher” (Irene).

I believe professionals in the field of education should ask students about their learning experiences. Adolescents’ perspectives on learning should be heard because each student should be given the opportunity to share with teachers the way they should be taught in order for them to succeed. (Brenda)

Participants regarded student-teacher discussions about learning noteworthy for helping teachers help students learn. It was not clear how students would inform teachers about their learning when faced with confusion or misconceptions about how they learned. The focus group participants concentrated on teachers helping students learn better, without considering ways of helping themselves learn better.

In summary, participants commonly referred to difficult learning experiences in school. According to them, schooling sometimes interfered with their learning and self-

confidence. Despite having described themselves as above average academic achievers, the focus group participants did not take responsibility for their learning. It was the teacher who had authority over student learning. It was due to the teacher they did not like French. It was due to the teacher they were bored. And it was due to the teacher they did or did not learn. They expected teachers to make learning meaningful, to accommodate teaching to students' learning preferences, and to allow students to learn from their mistakes. In their view, students could learn better if teachers met the needs of each student. They concluded that it was worthwhile discussing their learning in the focus group and that it would be advantageous to discuss their learning with their teachers to better promote learning in the classroom.

Focus Group Narrative Findings in Relation to the Discussion Findings

The focus group narrative findings, consisting of each focus group participant's written narrative and corresponding written comments, are presented in relation to the discussion findings. Of particular note is the tension between accounts of their learning experiences in school, as discussed in the focus group, and their out-of-school learning experiences, as described in their narratives. Common themes across participants' narratives were meaningful connections, support of significant others, responsibility for learning, and learning as process.

Brenda: Meaningful connections.

In her written narrative, Brenda described wanting to learn how to draw as a way of creatively expressing herself. "My mind was free of inhibitions and, therefore, what I emphasized symbolized what was important to me at that time." She also stated in her written comments that creativity was important to her. "I believe that developing my

creativity as a child will be of benefit to me in many fields for my entire life.” Drawing was of personal interest to her, contrary to subject matter taught in school. As discussed in the focus group, one of Brenda’s main criticisms of school was not being interested in what was being taught or how it was being taught. Brenda thought teachers should make clear connections within and across subject matter to make learning meaningful. In the focus group, she explained that the relevance of subject matter and related activities was not emphasized enough in classes. As a result, she felt easily distracted and pressured by a one-size-fits-all approach to education that did not accommodate her needs. In her discussion, Brenda was critical of school for not supporting her learning in the ways she would have preferred.

Brenda: Support of significant others.

Brenda’s narrative detailed her mother’s support. “My mother encouraged me to express myself artistically. The key thing I remember about this experience was my mother laying out the blank paper on the ground, handing me the chalk, and leaving the room.” Her mother also instilled in her the value of creativity and independence, and she provided Brenda with the opportunity to create artwork for purposes of self-expression. “Creativity is an open-minded way of thinking that must be instilled in a child at a young age. I believe that the positive encouragement that accompanied my artistic expression throughout my life has also provided me with confidence.” According to Brenda, the ongoing support she received from her mother allowed her to be “creative and self-assured” when learning visual arts. As she mentioned in the focus group, her self-expression was encouraged at home, but it was deterred in French class when she was too afraid to make mistakes and lacked confidence in her ability to learn French.

Brenda: Responsibility for learning.

As described in her narrative, Brenda took more responsibility for learning to draw at home, even at a young age, than she did for her studies in school. Her effort, hard work, and pride in accomplishing her goals spoke to the responsibility she took for learning visual arts. Even though Brenda met with trepidation when initially learning to draw, she persevered. She vividly recalled her fear of the blank page and her consternation about how to draw and create her first artwork.

I was very confused. I was not sure what to do at first, but once I commenced the drawing, the hesitation disappeared. I actually remember myself overcoming the fear of the blank page. The resulting masterpiece was a picture of my family that is to this day mounted above the fireplace in our living room. (Brenda)

As further stated in her written comments, “I chose to describe this particular learning experience because I am reminded of it everyday when I see the painting hanging on my wall. The black and white canvas reminds me to think differently than the average person.” Brenda was proud of her artistic accomplishments and creativity. In school, as discussed in the focus group, she did not experience this sense of pride in her learning. Instead, she tended to criticize teachers for her lack of success because they did not teach her according to her interests, goals, and learning preferences. Brenda described taking charge of her learning, out of school, and being proud of her success. She did not typically express this sense of responsibility and pride in her learning at school.

Brenda: Learning as process.

In her narrative and written comments, Brenda did not seem confused about her learning, contrary to her discussion about learning in the focus group and final comments.

Brenda's narrative highlighted ways she developed "creativity from ongoing artistic experiences [and] technical skills with repetition and many years of practice." In addition to "seeing the results of [her] efforts" over time, Brenda thought she learned best by visualizing, listening, and doing. "I retained information visually...had knowledge presented to me aloud [and] had first hand experience." As further emphasized in her written comments, "I know that the best way for me to learn is through first hand experience, as opposed to just listening to the experience of another." Brenda would have appreciated having had more opportunities, in school, to learn according to her preferred ways of learning.

Raylene: Meaningful connections.

Raylene's narrative of her most memorable learning experience was about learning to ride her bicycle on her own, at four years of age. It was very important to her to be able to ride around the neighborhood with her friends. "I really wanted to play with the other kids riding their bikes." The significance of learning to ride her bicycle made her learning experience personally meaningful and relevant. She felt connected to this learning experience and motivated to learn, in ways that she did not in school. It was out of school that learning equated with what was important to her. Raylene concurred with the focus group that school should not be boring. School should be about "opening minds, not memorizing adult's facts". She proposed that teachers start from the big picture so that students could connect to what, how and why they learned and not be expected to just absorb information delivered by the teacher.

Raylene: Support of significant others.

After asking her father to remove her training wheels, Raylene realized that she “had no idea how to ride or what to do”. Then she asked her sister for assistance. “She put me on my bike and held the back of my seat until I felt balanced. She let go of the bike, gave me a big shove and screamed, ‘Just keep peddling and you will be fine!’” Unfortunately, Raylene’s sister never told her to “squeeze the top of the handle bars in order to stop, so [she] just kept peddling until she crashed”. Although Raylene received some assistance from her older sister, in her narrative and comments, she proudly wrote that she learned mainly on her own.

Raylene: Responsibility for learning.

Raylene commented that she took charge of learning to bicycle. “I learned how to ride my bike by teaching myself and taking some limited instruction from my sister. I knew I learned once I kept peddling by myself.” She took responsibility for her learning by mastering bits of a task and then putting it all together to achieve her desired goal. “I was under pressure and just had to do it.” As further described in her narrative and written comments, Raylene was particularly proud of having met her goal through determination, concerted effort, and hard work. “Even though I had a huge scar after my first two-wheeler experience, I was still really proud that I managed to teach myself how to ride a two-wheeler...I still have a bit of a scar.” As she explained in her narrative, “[i]t was my most memorable experience because it was my first self-taught learning experience.” By contrast, in the focus group discussion, Raylene did not highlight pride in her achievements or responsibility for her learning, in school. Instead, she focused on teachers and their teaching methods. Consequently, she agreed with her peers that

students would learn better if teachers taught according to students' preferred ways of learning.

Raylene: Learning as process.

In her written narrative, Raylene described learning "by watching and by actually doing things [her]self." In the focus group discussion, however, Raylene identified herself as a visual learner who learned by memorizing. By contrast, her narrative seemed to present a view of learning as mastery, or as a series of steps to be mastered. She thought learning through actual experience and practice should be emphasized in school. She also suggested that there be increased opportunities for students to learn from their mistakes. In the focus group discussion, she agreed with her peers that no one should feel stupid making mistakes because mistakes are part of learning, as she experienced when learning to ride her bicycle through trial and error.

Irene: Meaningful connections.

Irene's written comments clearly expressed the importance of learning how to write her name. "This was a step towards my independence as a child. It is so important because, as mentioned in my narrative, people write every day, and if you have the ability to write then it opens up many opportunities later in life." She emphasized the overall significance that writing had in her life, at the tender age of five. "I think this experience is one of the most memorable because it was the first time that I felt proud to have accomplished something so important. It was one of the most important things I learned in my life." In the focus group, Irene agreed with her peers that, in school, they would have benefitted from learning more about what was important to them.

Irene: Support of significant others.

Irene's narrative was illustrative of the support she received from her father. She watched him write her name and then traced over the letters he had written. "My dad was patient and kept showing me how to write the correct way. Admittedly, I became frustrated, so my dad would rewrite my name. He told me to write my name just as he did." Irene described her father's modeling and encouragement as having supported her learning. "I know I learned because I could see that I spelled everything the same as my dad had and because my teacher and my parents congratulated me. I also remember my dad telling me how proud he was of me." In the focus group, she also discussed the importance of teacher support. "In English, we learned to be organized for exams and things." She was particularly grateful for the support she received from her English teacher.

Irene: Responsibility for learning.

In her narrative, Irene described taking responsibility for her learning through hard work, hours of practice, and pride in having overcome challenges to accomplish her goal. "I had been working on writing my name for a few hours and after awhile I grew tired and frustrated. It was important to have discipline. If you do everything you can to learn something, the result will be better." Although she acknowledged her father's support, she did not attribute her success to him and she was proud of having achieved her goal. "In the end, I felt fabulous that I succeeded in my goal of learning how to write my name." In contrast, she positioned herself as a passive learner, in school. In the focus group discussion, she tended to credit her teachers for her successes and did not openly express pride in her learning.

Irene: Learning as process.

Irene's narrative detailed her learning. "Once I knew my alphabet, I began to learn how to write my own name. I learned by listening, watching and doing. I know from experience that there is more than one way to learn things." Irene clearly described her process of learning through observation and practice. "I watched carefully, and I traced over the letters so I could have a sense of the way the different letters were shaped. It took me many tries to write the letters the proper way." In her discussion, she later told her peers that learning involved watching and doing. "If I'm watching someone doing it, I can do it after." She agreed with the group that there were less opportunities for learning by watching and doing in class because school tended to focus more on listening to the teacher. In her discussion and final comments, Irene seemed to be confused about her learning and which learning style best exemplified how she learned.

Giselle: Meaningful connections.

Giselle learned piano from the age of five until she was fifteen years old. "When I was growing up, a relatively large part of my life was spent in front of a piano." After initially wanting to quit her lessons, she developed a genuine interest and enthusiasm for playing piano. As stated in her written comments, "I learned that if you focus on something and truly put your heart and soul into it, anything is possible." Giselle learned "not only to master the piano, but also to appreciate music and its foundations." As she explained, "I chose to describe this particular learning experience because I felt it contained the most learning that would not only affect my piano career, but also my education, my jobs, and ultimately my entire life." As written in her narrative and comments, Giselle valued mastering the piano for many reasons. As she mentioned in

the focus group discussion, it was in school that she could not always see the value of what she was being taught.

Giselle: Support of significant others.

When learning to play piano, Giselle felt supported by her mother and her tutor. Although Giselle was initially opposed to taking piano lessons, with her mother's encouragement she chose not give up. "I did not like it at all as a kid and my mom is like, 'You'll love me for this.' Then I said, 'Okay mom.' And I appreciated it more and liked it more." In Giselle's narrative, she also expressed her gratitude to her piano teacher.

Today, I thank Sister M. for guiding me through that learning experience, which will follow me for the rest of my music career and the rest of my life. She taught me to value discipline [as well as]...to take constructive criticism and develop my abilities from it.

In her written comments, Giselle further emphasized her parents' support and her piano teacher's one-on-one instruction, as having significantly influenced her learning and overall success. "I truly appreciate what my parents and Sister M. have done for me to succeed." With the focus group, Giselle discussed the influence that teachers had on her learning, in ways that helped and hindered her learning. She suggested that, in postsecondary education, they should be relying less on teachers and be more independent and responsible for their own learning.

Giselle: Responsibility for learning.

Giselle took responsibility for learning to play piano, during her childhood and adolescence, evidenced by her steady determination, concerted effort, and pride in her

successes. As she wrote in her comments, “I remember many key elements from this experience. I remember feeling very upset much of the time, angry and frustrated. In contrast, I also remember delight, satisfaction and confidence when I succeeded at my examinations.” In her narrative, she elaborated on the challenges she faced. “There were often many times when I felt emotionally drained by my training, often going home crying after grueling hour-long lessons.” Through hard work and perseverance, she overcame various obstacles and became increasingly more confident. “It was very difficult at times, but I realized the difficulty was often necessary to understand what it is you are trying to accomplish. I knew I had to play one hour a day, and eventually I stopped complaining and saw it as something of a necessity, like eating or sleeping.” Giselle was especially proud of her accomplishments at the Royal Conservatory. As discussed with her peers, it was in the context of out-of-school learning experiences that she took responsibility for her learning and took pride in her accomplishments.

Giselle: Learning as process.

Giselle’s narrative showcased her dedication to mastering the piano, over the course of ten years. In describing her process of learning, she detailed concepts, skills, and values that she had learned during this time.

I learned the theory of music, intricate concepts, technicality, correct posture, scales, discipline and the actual music. The discipline factor of learning became routine and virtually natural. Over time, I discovered that learning the piano is a package deal that included discipline, dedication and concentration. (Giselle)

Giselle highlighted her knowledge of music theory, technical skills, and discipline, providing for a rich description of her learning experience. She valued learning about the

piano, as well as learning how to excel at playing the piano. A comparable descriptive view of learning was not evident in her focus group discussion about learning, in school. Instead, her discussion with peers underscored her concerns about teachers and their methods of teaching.

Conclusion: Focus Group Participants

The focus group participants' discussion and written narratives of their most memorable learning experiences revealed differences and similarities between their in-school and out-of-school learning experiences. Within the context of school, participants took a more passive stance toward their learning than they did when learning outside of school. This general finding was reflected in the accounts of all four focus group participants, regardless of age or endeavor.

The focus group discussion, and corresponding final comments, revealed that participants did not take ownership of their learning, in school. They seemed to equate teacher authority with teacher control of student learning. They relied on their teachers to teach them something and to teach them according to their learning preferences. They emphasized that being afraid to make mistakes and being denied opportunities to learn from their mistakes, in school, hindered their learning. They discussed preferred ways of learning that were more in line with how they learned out of school, based on personal interests and personal goals. They especially wanted their learning endeavors to be meaningful and engaging, and they wanted to be supported in their learning. They valued discussion and thought that discussing learning with teachers could improve teaching and learning. The focus group discussion revealed participants' confusion about their learning when they referred to popular notions of learning styles that they were taught in

school. Within the context of school, participants' confusion about how they learned may have further distanced them from assuming responsibility for their learning.

The focus group participants' written narratives, and corresponding written comments, demonstrated their learning as multifaceted. They described learning outside of school by watching, listening, and doing when drawing, riding a bicycle, writing, and playing piano. They also demonstrated initiative, perseverance, and responsibility for their learning, in order to achieve their goals of self-expression and creativity, bicycling with friends, becoming more independent, and mastering piano. The participants were involved in meaningful endeavors, took responsibility for their learning, engaged fully in the process of learning, and overcame various challenges to achieve their goals, independently and with support from significant others.

An important similarity between participants' in-school and out-of-school learning experiences was that participants wanted meaningful connections to what they were learning. The difference was that, in school, they expected teachers to make those connections for them. Out of school, participants made those connections themselves, based on what they considered interesting, fun, and important. Another similarity was participants' recognition of the influence significant others had on their learning. The narratives emphasized the importance of significant others for guidance, encouragement, modeling, and instruction. In the discussion, participants focused on teaching methods that hindered their learning and were not conducive to their preferred ways of learning.

Participants took more responsibility for their learning out of school than they did for their learning in school. Their lack of motivation and connection to learning, in school, revealed a more passive stance to in-school learning, where they focused more on

the teacher and teaching than on themselves and their learning. Consequently, they appeared to value their learning experiences out of school more than their learning experiences in school. Perhaps the most striking contrast between the discussion findings of in-school learning experiences and the narrative findings of out-of-school learning experiences was that within the context of school, participants did not highlight pride in their achievements, confidence as learners, and responsibility as students. It was the narratives of learning experiences outside of school that reflected learners who were goal oriented, self-motivated, and actively engaged in learning.

The focus group participants discussed their most memorable learning experiences, in school, according to affordances and constraints to their learning, with a particular emphasis on teachers, teaching methods, and concerns about their schooling. According to participants, their learning was facilitated when teachers made classes interesting and fun, and when teachers taught according to students' learning preferences. Their learning was hindered when their learning preferences were not taken into account and they were not encouraged to learn from their mistakes. The thrust of the four participants' focus group discussion was their depiction of themselves in a passive role, as students. By contrast, they took a more active role in their out-of-school learning. The focus group participants' written narratives, as well as the narratives of the remaining 20 participants, detailed their most memorable learning experiences, out of school, when they connected meaningfully to what they were learning, took personal responsibility for their learning, engaged in learning as a process, and were supported in their learning by significant others.

Narrative Findings

I never let my schooling interfere with my education. Mark Twain

This chapter presents the findings of the 20 participants' written narratives of their most memorable learning experiences and corresponding written comments. The presentation of key themes from the narrative findings completes this chapter.

Introduction

As previously noted, the findings are presented according to the two research questions that guided this study. Firstly, what do senior high school students' written narratives, focus group discussion, and corresponding written comments about their most memorable learning experiences reveal about their learning? Secondly, what do these students' voices reveal about what they have in common in their learning?

The participants of this study wrote narratives about their most memorable learning experiences, detailing their interests, goals, challenges, efforts, and accomplishments. They described why they wanted to learn, who influenced their learning, how they learned, and what they learned. Participants' corresponding written comments consisted of their responses to written questions about their learning narratives (see Appendix G). These written comments typically reiterated or further substantiated what participants had previously described in their written narratives.

Participant narratives overwhelmingly described out-of-school learning experiences, which occurred during childhood or adolescence (see Appendix J). The narrative findings reveal similarities and differences in learning experiences from early childhood to late adolescence. For purposes of organization, the narrative findings are presented in two clusters: the 9 narrative findings about learning experiences during

childhood, followed by the 11 narrative findings about learning experiences during adolescence. The presentation of common themes for learning experiences in childhood and learning experiences in adolescence completes said sections.

Narrative Findings about Most Memorable Learning Experiences during Childhood

Margarita learning to sew.

When Margarita was about five years old her parents returned to El Salvador for an extended visit. For three months, she lived with her grandmother who was a talented seamstress. “My grandma showed me how to sew when I was young.” As stated in her written comments, “I chose to describe this moment in my life because it is one of the moments that I can never forget. If it wasn’t for my grandmother, I wouldn’t be making clothes or doing fashion shows.”

Margarita learned the basics of sewing, starting with threading a needle and sewing by hand. She never gave up even though she became very frustrated at times. “The thing that got me really mad and made me want to give up was when I couldn’t get the thread in the needle, but time went by and I got it.” She enjoyed sewing and later found using the sewing machine both challenging and rewarding. “The most important part I remember was learning how to use the sewing machine. It was really hard at first. In time, I got really good. I spent most of my time using the sewing machine.” She learned to sew from watching her grandmother design and make custom-made clothes and through careful practice on her own, using different tools and materials.

Margarita’s passion for sewing continued through her adolescence. “I still use a needle and thread; it’s better for detail than a sewing machine.” Margarita acknowledged learning from her grandmother every day they were together. “My grandma taught me so

much by showing me the proper way to sew by hand and by machine. I learned so much from her. I learned to take my time to do my best. That gave me patience with everything I do in life.”

Betty learning to make cinnamon rolls.

Betty’s passion for cooking started at five years old when she first learned to bake with her grandmother. “My grandmother had called and asked if I wanted to come over. I said yes in a heartbeat.” As written in her comments, “I chose to describe this learning experience because it was the earliest memory I had about learning something. It was also the first learning experience I remember that had to do with cooking.” Remembering this time helped her realize how important this experience really was. “I love this memory because I was able to do something that I love with someone that I love. I know this will be one of my most cherished memories for the rest of my life. I learned that I love to cook and that it’s my passion in life.”

Betty recalled that learning to make cinnamon rolls with her grandmother was a very involved process of measuring, mixing, kneading, rolling, cutting, and baking that lasted throughout the afternoon. “I learned just by doing what I was shown and told to do. For example, I was not to mix too much or the dough would become tough.” She completed the entire process with her grandmother’s instruction and guidance. “I learned how to make cinnamon rolls. They were sweet, and it was perfect.” In her comments she wrote, “I learned that I love to cook and that it’s my passion in life.”

It was a few years later, when Betty had to make cinnamon rolls on her own without a recipe, that she realized what she had learned from working with her grandmother on that fateful day. At the time, she just thought she was having fun making

delicious cinnamon rolls with her grandmother. “I don’t think I really knew I learned until I looked back on it a few years ago. I had that memory, but it had only kicked in that I had learned something when I needed to make some cinnamon rolls and I didn’t have a recipe.”

Syd learning violin.

Syd and his parents shared a love of music. His parents started him on violin lessons at the age of seven, after carefully selecting a qualified violin teacher who shared their cultural heritage, appreciation of music, and view of the importance of discipline and formal instruction. Syd attributed much of his success at mastering the violin to his parents’ support, as stated in his written comments. “I learned that parents have a huge role in the learning of the child...I learned with discipline, fear and importantly love. Parents need to be involved and help their children develop a will to learn.” He remembered, initially, not understanding why everyone was so tough on him. At times, “I wanted to quit, but with the kick of my parents I never did. They used discipline for me to excel.” He learned by being hard working and focused, with limited access to toys, television, and video games. “The way I was taught was to never give up and to practice every day. I would practice for long hours. If my work was not done properly, I was disciplined. In order for me to stay focused, all distractions were eliminated.”

Syd acknowledged the importance of routine practice sessions, parental support, and discipline for mastering the violin. “Music is part of my everyday life and I still go at it as much as I can. I find the best thing to do is to keep on repeating, reviewing and putting my learning into practice.” He continued to pursue his joy of music on a regular basis. “The key thing I learned is that you can never stop learning.”

Jane learning to ride a bicycle.

Jane's wish came true for her seventh birthday. "It looked perfect to me, and I was excited to ride my shiny new pink bicycle." As she wrote in her comments, "I chose this particular learning because it was what I had wanted for my birthday. It took me a day to ride my bicycle and I didn't give up. I was so proud of myself that this memory is so clear to me."

Jane was determined to ride her two-wheeler, not knowing what that entailed. Once she got the bicycle, she expected to hop on and ride away. "It never occurred to me that I was going to have to practice and learn the mechanics of riding a bicycle." Being alone and unfamiliar with the basics of riding a bicycle was overwhelming. "I was frustrated and wanted to give up." However, she was so determined to learn that even her injuries did not discourage her from achieving her goal. "I never gave up even though it was painful."

Initially, Jane kept falling off and getting back on, without any idea of how to keep her balance. She tried repeatedly, but nothing was working. "Right when I was about to give up, I decided to watch how the other kids in the neighborhood rode their bikes and observed them for about an hour. When I felt comfortable, I decided to get up and try again, and I succeeded at maintaining my balance." After observing her friends in action, Jane continued to practice until she managed to keep her balance.

Jane's next tasks were to ride straight, turn around, and ride back. She attempted this for about an hour and a half without success. She began to feel very discouraged and wanted to give up. Instead of quitting, she took a break. "I decided to call my favorite cousin to help me learn how to ride a bike. She showed me how to achieve the next step,

so I repeated what she showed me for about twenty minutes and I completed the task.”

Jane benefited from her cousin’s direct instruction and modeling of how to go straight and turn, without falling off or crashing.

Finally, Jane was determined to learn how to stop. “I wasn’t planning on giving up just yet, so my cousin showed me how to stop and once again I had achieved another task.” Whether learning how to balance, turn, or stop Jane admitted to learning the hard and painful way from many falls. She continued practicing on her own for the rest of the day, until she was riding her bike like the other children in the neighborhood.

Daniel learning to drive.

Daniel started learning to drive while living in South America, at eight years of age. His father wanted him to be able to get around more on his own and help out the family. “It was an important time in my life knowing my dad cared to teach me and not wait till I was older. Once I turned eight, my dad said to me that I was getting older and that I needed to start to learn how to drive.” His father began by showing him how the clutch worked and when to shift the gears and so on. Daniel was soon sitting on his father’s lap to steer, while his father controlled the pedals. By the time he was eleven, his father let him shift and steer at the same time because he had enough experience. “Then I finally turned thirteen and that is when he let me sit on the driver’s side and let me drive all by myself, but of course he would sit beside me, in case anything went wrong.”

Daniel’s father took driving very seriously and would discipline him for his mistakes. Daniel remembered learning mainly out of pride and fear of punishment. As he recalled, “If anything came close to going wrong, he would pinch or yell at me so I

wouldn't mess up again." His father would be quite angry when Daniel put the car in the wrong gear or when he stepped too quickly on the brakes.

Daniel realized he knew how to drive the day his father asked him to pick him up from work. Although his father reassured him that he was ready to drive on his own at the age of thirteen, Daniel remained afraid that something would go wrong. "I was terrified of what could have happened if I had been stopped by police, but luckily nothing went wrong." In addition to learning the mechanics of how to drive, Daniel learned the importance of taking the necessary precautions to drive responsibly. He learned what to do and what not to do from his family's driving experiences.

Sandra learning a French grammar rule.

Sandra remembered learning her first grammar rule in her grade three French class. "We were learning our verbs and other parts of speech." Initially, along with most of her peers, she was frustrated and having difficulty learning French verbs. The teacher was presenting the rules out of context and without any explanations or examples. He copied the rules out on the board and expected the students to do the same, "instead of actually explaining them." This made it very difficult for her to "grasp the whole concept".

Finally, when someone expressed confusion, the teacher sang out the rule and everyone sang it in return. He said, "toujours a toujours un 's'." Sandra found this to be an improvement. She liked learning this way and it stayed with her. As written in her comments, "I knew I learned it when I didn't forget it after class."

Sandra remembered this grammar rule because of the teacher's fun sing-a-long approach. "It just goes to show that once you learn something in a certain way and it

sticks with you, you'll never forget it." According to Sandra, it stuck with her when the teacher said it in a playful way. "I think that little sayings help me learn better because they make learning more fun."

Andreas learning English as a second language.

Andreas was born in Cuba and moved to Canada with his parents when he was in grade three. At eight years of age, he faced the challenges of learning English as a second language at a new school in a foreign country. "It was weird at first attending school and stuff, because I didn't speak a word of English." He credited his ESL teacher, television, and his father with having helped him learn English. He recalled this learning experience with pride, and admitted that mastering English was the hardest thing he had ever had to do.

Andreas' initial experience at school was somewhat overwhelming because he only spoke Spanish. He was very grateful to his ESL teacher for her support. "Luckily the school I went to had a great ESL program. The ESL teacher was really nice, patient and worked with me a lot to help me learn the language." In addition to ESL class, he learned English from his favorite television shows. While listening and watching television, he would "fill in the blanks using common sense to get the gist of the sentence and learn new words."

Andreas was most influenced by his father's overall, ongoing support of his education, which included a homework regime. "Out of everything, the most important factor has to have been my dad.". Every day Andreas had to sit down and practice writing phrases or do math before he could go out to play. "It felt like a punishment back then, and was really quite a nuisance, but now looking back I'm glad he did it, because

not only did it help to teach me English, but continuation of this process actually helped put me ahead of the curve.” In retrospect, he realized that this daily routine helped him to learn English, as well as develop a good work ethic for his future studies.

Andreas chose to write about succeeding at something very challenging, as stated in his written comments. “It’s not easy to learn a language, so when you finally do master one you tend to be pretty proud of it...it was probably the hardest thing I’ve had to learn.” He remembered sitting in class, just staring blankly and not understanding anything. This motivated him to learn how to speak English, so he could actually participate in class and make friends. He learned English through various methods that helped him communicate fluently with others. “I think I learned most of my English through a mix of some of the knowledge I had already gained from ESL and applying it.”

Carl learning to draw.

Carl started learning to draw when he was little. He shared his passion and talent for drawing with his whole family. “My whole family could draw [and] I wanted to be the same, so I worked harder to become a better drawer.” He and his family would often draw together and he remembered learning by “seeing how [his] family did it and also from watching art shows”. He found drawing an interesting, challenging, and calming experience. It was a way for him to clear his mind. He could spend hours focusing on each line of a drawing in order to duplicate it perfectly. “I think it’s a skill I’m good at.”

Carl continued to develop his talent throughout his adolescence. “When I got to high school, I took my first art class and found [that] I learned a lot.” In art class, he learned about perspective, still life, and shading from the teacher’s demonstrations and

from his routine practice. Still life proved most challenging because he was used to drawing mostly cartoons, at home on his own.

Carl chose this topic because he was good at drawing and he wanted to continue improving. Drawing with family was a special time that he fondly remembered. He routinely kept track of his progress. “I know I’ve learned how to draw because I’ve compared my work to previous work and have noticed a big improvement.” He considered learning to be about “practicing often, taking the time, and watching others.”

Flora learning piano.

Flora was very glad to have learned to play the piano. “Playing the piano was one of my biggest accomplishments...always something that interested me ever since I was young.” Flora highlighted her piano lessons, which lasted over roughly a seven-year period, from early childhood to early adolescence, amidst challenges and obstacles that she had to face. “After a bit of difficulty and struggling, it was something that I was able to learn and enjoy.”

During Flora’s first year of piano, she learned the basics of reading simple music notes and playing them. She did activities that simulated piano playing. “[W]e would complete a series of activities using handouts and little magnetic boards.” And after several weeks, she learned to play short simple songs. She experimented on the piano and practiced at home on a regular basis. “We were encouraged to practice at home a few times a week.”

“During the second year, we learned a bit more about chords, sharps, flats, the treble clef, and the base clef.” Over time, Flora became unhappy with her group lessons and became discouraged with her lack of progress. She described not having teacher

support for extra help. She began struggling, feeling overwhelmed, and falling behind. Eventually, she lost interest and motivation for learning to play the piano. “So naturally, like any other discouraged nine-year-old, I did not enjoy going to piano class anymore, and I was not motivated to practice at home either.” As soon as her mother noticed her lack of enthusiasm, she changed piano schools.

During the next five years Flora had private one-on-one instruction, “which seemed to be a better idea”. This was best suited to her. “My teacher and I would work on things that I originally had trouble with and within no time I was enjoying piano lessons again and motivated to practice at home again”. She worked well with her teacher and routinely practiced to improve her piano playing. Once she was comfortable with each different section, she would put it all together and play the complete piece. She felt supported and encouraged in this process and regained her eagerness to learn. “I stayed with my piano teacher for five years, and he gradually taught me much more difficult and complex pieces.” Flora’s concerted efforts led to her successful completion of subsequent levels of piano.

As Flora expressed in her written comments, “I learned that I work much better in a one-on-one class, as opposed to learning with a group of people who are not all at the same pace. This way, your needs are better focused on, and you can get all of your questions answered.” She valued the opportunity to focus on her learning with the individualized support, guidance, and expertise of her piano teacher. “I still play the piano at home when I have spare time...playing the piano is something I’ll never forget.”

Common Themes across Learning Experiences in Childhood

The written narratives of these nine participants' most memorable learning experiences in childhood illuminate how they collectively viewed learning from a variety of learning experiences, which may have lasted one day, several days, or a few years. Common themes from this analysis are: meaningful connections, support from significant others, responsibility for learning, and learning as process.

Meaningful connections.

The participants described meaningful connections they had to their most memorable learning experiences. They detailed different experiences that were interesting, important, and enjoyable for various reasons.

At a young age, Margarita desired to sew and later made her own designs for local fashion shows. "Even though I was really young, I enjoyed sewing." Betty could not have been happier than to have made cinnamon rolls, with her grandmother. "I said yes in a heartbeat. Making cinnamon rolls was amazing." Syd had a passion for playing music. "Music was part of my everyday life." Jane wanted learn to ride her new bicycle and be able to ride with her friends. "I was so excited to ride my shiny new pink bike." Singsongs helped Sandra learn French better because "it made learning more fun". Andreas was eager to learn English. "I had a lot of motivation to learn how to speak English, so I could actually participate and make friends". Carl had a passion for drawing that started in childhood and continued into adolescence. "I think drawing for me is like a relaxing zone...it clears my mind of everything." Flora learned piano during her childhood and adolescence. "It was always something that interested me, ever since I

was young. Within no time I was enjoying piano lessons and motivated to practice at home.”

The participants’ learning experiences were personally meaningful to them. Sometimes they had fun while learning, other times they did not. They seemed to have learned out of passion, interest, enjoyment, and/or a need to belong.

Support of significant others.

All the participants recognized the support of significant others for purposes of instruction, modeling, guidance, and encouragement. They described key ways others significantly influenced their learning.

While working from home, Margarita’s grandmother taught her how to sew. “I learned by seeing the proper way. My grandmother taught me so much. She showed me how to sew the simple way first. If it weren’t for my grandmother, I wouldn’t be making clothes and doing fashion shows.” Betty worked alongside her grandmother who guided her through the process of baking cinnamon rolls. “I love this memory because I was able to do something that I love with someone that I love. It has prompted me to want to become a chef.” Syd was taught violin by his tutor, and he was both encouraged and disciplined by his parents who routinely supervised his violin practices. “I learned with discipline...and importantly love.” When learning to ride her bicycle for the first time, Jane received some basic instruction and encouragement from her cousin. “I called my favorite cousin to come help me learn to ride a bike. She agreed to come over in a few minutes to teach me how to ride.” Daniel’s father instructed him on how to drive and supervised his driving practice. “It was an important time in my life knowing my dad cared to teach me.” Sandra’s teacher sang the grammar rules to make them more fun to

learn. Andreas' ESL teacher provided instruction and encouragement at school, and his father oversaw his daily practice sessions at home. "The ESL teacher was really nice, patient and worked a lot to help me learn the language. My father taught me words that I didn't know and would not have learned at that age. My dad has always been around to push my education." Carl received guidance and modeling from his family when drawing during weekly arts-and-crafts evenings. When Carl reached high school, his art teacher provided detailed instruction and demonstration. "In art class, I learned how to draw perspective and still life." Flora's parents supervised her piano practice, and her piano teacher "gradually taught [her] more difficult and complex pieces."

The participants commonly described the support they received from their families during their most memorable learning experiences, in childhood. Family members typically encouraged participants to do their best to succeed. Many provided instruction to participants and/or modeled how to do something. Some inspired participants to continue in their endeavors and possibly pursue related goals.

Responsibility for learning.

The participants overcame the challenges, frustrations, and disappointments they faced during their learning experiences by taking responsibility for their learning. They were confident, persistent, and hardworking learners who were proud of achieving their goals.

From the start, Margarita found it challenging to learn how to sew, especially at such a young age. "I wanted to give up when I couldn't get the thread in the needle, but eventually I got it." Syd worked hard every day to master the violin and learned "to never give up". Jane persevered to overcome challenges, injury, and disappointments

when learning to ride her bicycle, and she was proud of her hard-won success. “It took me a day to ride my bicycle and I didn’t give up. I learned the hard way on the ground and in pain”. Daniel was very proud of having earned his driver’s license. “I got it now, which I am proud of.” Andreas detailed his struggle to learn English as a second language (ESL) and was proud of his achievement. “ESL was probably the hardest thing I had to learn. I didn’t speak a word of English, staring blankly, not understanding anything. I was pretty proud [that] I learned to speak English perfectly, with no accent and good vocabulary”. Carl kept track of his progress, on a regular basis. “Learning to draw was about practicing different techniques to improve”. Flora worked hard to learn piano and was very proud of her successes. “After a bit of difficulty and struggling, piano was something I was able to learn. Playing the piano was one of my biggest accomplishments.”

The participants took responsibility for their learning, as demonstrated by their personal goals and their effort and determination to reach these goals. The more independent and committed they were as learners, the more confident and proud they seemed of their successes. Two exceptions may have been Betty and Sandra. Betty did not seem to take responsibility for her learning endeavor. Perhaps this is because Betty’s grandmother took charge, while she worked alongside her, or because Betty so enjoyed her day baking with her grandmother that she only realized years later that she had actually learned how to make cinnamon buns. Sandra seemed focused on her teacher and his methods of teaching. She did not express a sense of responsibility for learning French grammar, nor did she express being proud of her endeavor.

Learning as process.

Participants' narratives of most memorable childhood learning experiences revealed their learning as a process of knowing how to do something. They specifically described learning as doing something well or as mastering a set of skills. For the most part, they proceeded step-by-step, completing specific tasks to achieve their goals. Over time, they learned how to sew, bake, play violin, ride a bicycle, drive, remember a grammar rule, speak English, play piano, and draw. They commonly described their learning as a process of attentive listening and watching as well as actively doing and practicing.

Margarita learned by “watching her grandmother sew” and by practicing on her own. She also learned to “take time and do it well and not to hurry...to have patience with everything”. Betty learned by watching, following instructions, and sharing in some of the baking. “I learned just by doing what I was shown and told to do.” She remembered learning “not to mix too much or the dough would become tough”. Syd listened carefully to instructions and practiced religiously to master the violin. “I learned by practicing every day for long hours”. Jane learned to cycle by following basic instructions, through trial and error, and from ongoing observation.

Right when I was about to give up, I decided to watch how the other kids in the neighborhood rode their bikes. I observed the kids biking for about an hour.

Then I realized that I was going to have to practice and learn the mechanics of riding a bicycle. I repeated what I saw and completed the task. (Jane)

Daniel listened to instructions and practiced every aspect of driving, until he could drive on his own. Sandra copied down notes and listened to a singsong about French “verbs

and other parts of speech”. Out of school, Andreas learned English by playing with friends, watching television, and practicing during his after-school tutorials.

In school, Andreas “gained knowledge of new words by listening carefully in ESL class. I was able to take some of the words that I already knew and then just fill in the blanks, using commonsense to get the gist of the sentences.” Carl described learning to draw “by watching others and practicing”. He watched live demonstrations and art shows on television, and he practiced drawing every day. In school, Carl “watched the teacher and was able to pick up on it pretty fast.” Flora described learning content as well as technique during ten years of piano lessons, in order to complete her exams and master the piano. She learned music theory through study and learned technique through extensive practice. “Once I was comfortable with all the different sections, I would put them all together to play the complete piece.”

The participants also detailed their learning as a process of knowing about something. They mentioned their knowledge of procedure, theory, helpful tips, grammar, vocabulary, rules, values, and life skills. Overall, participants detailed their learning as an engaging process of focused attention and concerted effort to reach their various goals.

In summary, the participants’ most memorable learning experiences during childhood occurred mainly out of school. Their narratives spoke to the strong connections they had to their learning experiences, the invaluable support of significant others, especially parents, their responsibility for their own learning, and the process of learning.

Narrative Findings about Most Memorable Learning Experiences during Adolescence

Vito learning some Japanese.

Vito chose to describe his experience of learning some Japanese during his senior high school years, because it was of genuine interest to him. “I’ve always been interested in learning how to read a little Japanese. Learning it would be a challenge, but I knew it was something I had to do.” He highlighted his hard work and determination to achieve his goal. “Knowing it would be difficult to memorize them, I stayed up during the night and would write the Japanese characters over and over until I would get them stuck in my head.” Vito demonstrated a strong desire to succeed through his perseverance and routine practice. As stated in his written comments, “I always knew that if I were interested in something, I would try as hard as I can to achieve my goal.”

Not knowing anything about the language, he began searching on the Internet for related information, graphics and images. He learned different aspects of the language on his own through repetition and memorization, with the use of audiovisual technology. “I would watch Japanese anime and play video games corresponding to the anime.” He described having learned how to read and write some Japanese with the use of computer technology by basically “re-reading the Japanese characters over and over, and then re-writing them over and over” until he had them memorized. This helped him with aural and written pattern recognition that he repeated and recopied until he was satisfied with his work. The degree of his comprehension of the meanings of these characters was not clear from his narrative.

Translating from English to Japanese was the final challenging step, involving breaking words into syllables to figure out a given number of characters. After figuring

out patterns, he felt ready for basic translation. “I remember trying to write some names of people I knew into Katakana.” Eventually, he could translate friends’ names for fun, from English to Japanese. “It still takes a bit of time to translate it, but I learned how to read a bit of Japanese, and I was proud of myself.” As Vito commented, “I chose to describe this learning experience, because I felt that learning some Japanese is one of the most useful things I have done with my spare time...and it would probably help me in the future.”

Catarina learning family values.

In grade nine, Catarina spent her first Christmas without snow. She was eager to spend the holidays in the summer warmth with wonderful foods, dancing, singing, fireworks, and family, but she was disappointed that there would be “no exchange of gifts”. “My parents told me that Christmas would be different to the ones we had in Canada.” Her family in El Salvador didn’t have the money to buy one another gifts for Christmas. They would usually spend what little money they had on food, so she helped to prepare food for everyone. “Despite being people of low income, they enjoyed a wonderful time with the food they had and the people in their lives.”

“At first, I was disappointed that I was not going to get any gifts, but as Christmas Eve arrived so many things were starting to change my mind.” To her surprise, she had a very special celebration with her numerous relatives, many of whom she had never met before. They enjoyed a wonderful time together sharing what they had with one another. Her Christmas was more special than ever. “I was having the best time of my life with my cousins. I did not need presents to make me happy. Happiness is found when you’re with the ones you love.” As Catarina wrote in her comments, “I

described this learning experience because it is one of the experiences that had a big impact on me and I consider myself lucky because not everyone gets to experience it.”

Mary learning about relationships.

Mary learned valuable life lessons from her friends, through good times and through bad times. “It’s all about friends, no matter how long or short you have them for.” She explained that her friends taught her “more than school ever could have ever done”. She learned so much with her friends that without even one of them she didn’t think she would be the same person today. “Without them I would know little about myself and what I want to do and be in life.” As Mary stated in her comments, “I chose this learning experience because it’s the one that has changed me the most.”

Through her friendships Mary realized what she liked and did not like about people and the kinds of relationships she did and did not want to have. When “the rough times came around, it was like I didn’t even know them at all.” She learned her life lessons the hard way about not staying in an unhappy relationship and about getting out of a bad relationship if both people refused to see the problem and work on it together. “That’s the last time I stayed unhappy for any amount of time. From that I learned to be very independent and to get along on my own.”

Mary felt truer to herself when she was more independent and selective about her relationships. “I finally started to realize that all that time I wasn’t always true to myself and that these people aren’t the people I thought they were.” From difficult life lessons, she became more aware of when she was deceiving herself and when people were deceiving her. Now “I know what I want and what I like and what I look for in a friend.

I chose this learning experience because it's the one that changed me the most...friends have always been a major factor in the way that I see things.”

Mary came to believe that the seemingly small things in life could end up making the biggest impact on one's life, and that people really got to know each other during the rough times in their lives. She knew that she had learned something important when she witnessed a change in herself, particularly in terms of her own personal growth and maturity. As Mary concluded in her written comments,

I know I've learned something because I've changed. Some of that comes with time and maturity. Maturity comes from getting an eye opener. That's what friends in my past have taught me, and what I learned from them. I learned this from experience and a lot of hard times and lonely days.

Cate learning to snowboard.

Cate was very excited to go snowboarding with friends at a local skill hill. As soon as they arrived, they rented their snowboarding equipment, bought their lift tickets, and headed for the hill.

I somehow managed to finally get myself on the lift. When I reached the top, I fell down the little hill. When I thought I was ready, I got up and tried to balance myself, but it did not work at all. A rush of adrenaline came through me when I started to go down the hill. I went down the hill rapidly, but constantly falling. It took me about half an hour to reach the bottom of the bunny hill.

Cate described learning as she went, with only a few basic tips from friends. She spent most of the time watching people snowboarding around her and practicing on her own. She tried to follow the crowd, but it was a struggle. She worked hard every step of the

way, starting with balancing herself on the snowboard. “I struggled and almost tripped trying to balance myself. It was very hard!” She was afraid of going too fast. Her strategy was simply to fall when she was picking up too much speed for fear of crashing. It was a day of falling and somehow managing to get up, and trying over and over again. “Snowboarding wasn’t as easy as I thought it would be.”

Cate was independent and perseverant in pursuing her goal of going down at least once without falling. After lunch, she began to notice some improvement. By the end, she was successful on one run. “Finally, the goal I had for the day was accomplished! I went downhill without falling! I was very proud of myself and couldn’t be happier.” Her friends congratulated her at the end of the day. Despite the many aches and pains, “Snowboarding was all worth it! It was fun and daring and I would do it anytime. I learned how to be daring and how to never give up! I learned by trusting myself to accomplish the task I planned for myself at the beginning.”

What Cate remembered most was constantly falling down the hill, eventually reaching her goal, and being very sore the following day. She learned to be daring and to never give up. “It is all about having fun in life!” In writing about this experience, she was reminded of how much she enjoyed snowboarding and that her success was worth all the pain. As she commented, “I chose this particular learning experience because I enjoyed it from the first time I tried it. It was a very enjoyable activity I could do with my close friends.”

Simon learning to wakeboard.

Simon’s father wanted him to learn to water ski. Even though he was not particularly interested in this sport, Simon felt he could not refuse his father’s request.

He remembered being in the water thinking, “[h]ow can I learn this if I don’t even want to do this?” After a long twenty minutes of getting dragged almost up and then falling back down, Simon finally said, “[t]hat’s enough! I quit this! I don’t like it!”

The next day his father suggested wakeboarding. He said he would buy a wakeboard if Simon agreed to learn. Simon thought this was a good deal. “This thing looked really cool to me.” Simon was excited to learn how to wakeboard. He got into the water, yelled that he was ready, and was thrown head first through the water. He tried three or four more times with no luck. He was determined to try again the following day and succeed. “I know I’ll get up.”

That evening his father researched wakeboarding and compiled some helpful tips to share with Simon the next day. “That’s how I learn, when people describe and tell me things. I listened carefully and got in the water remembering everything he said.” The second day, Simon was up and wakeboarding “after about two tries.”

Simon improved so much over the summer that his father bought a wakeboarding boat the following year when he was in junior high school. Subsequently, he got offers to teach wakeboarding to the cottagers on the lake. He explained, “All it took was my dad to push me a little bit [at] something I really like that allows me to have the best time possible in the summer months.”

As Simon expressed in his comments, “I chose to describe this learning experience because it is the one that I have the most vivid memory of.” The key things he remembered were how much he actually wanted to learn and his genuine interest in wakeboarding, which is why he “picked up on it so fast”.

Khan learning on the job.

Khan was proud to have completed his training at a local fast food restaurant, in record time. In one day, he completed what recruits were generally given three days to complete. “I had three work days to learn everything with my trainer, but I completed it all in one day. I memorized all the sandwiches and what goes on them by paying attention, watching, and learning from my mistakes the first time.”

Khan emphasized the importance of learning step-by-step and learning from his mistakes, not to make the same mistake twice. As reiterated in his comments, “The biggest part of learning for me is making mistakes. I learned by making mistakes, being patient, and understanding a lot of small things I needed to know.” He stayed on task and did exactly what was expected of him. This way, he avoided being distracted and overwhelmed. “Without these basic steps it would be very hard to understand all the other things that I needed to learn.”

Khan remembered the training process for learning all the basic steps before mastering the advanced steps, which eventually lead to his promotion. Khan reached his goal of attaining a managerial position. This was his opportunity for advancement, taking on more responsibilities and being a leader. “I am allowed to be independent while working and can tell others what should be done, and take control of the back crew as their leader.”

Juan learning auto mechanics.

Juan had a genuine interest in automobiles, starting with drawing and building model cars. Ever “since I can remember my hobby and interests have revolved around

automobiles.” He shared this passion for cars with his father. Juan learned a lot by watching and working alongside his dad.

During senior high school, Juan decided to do a co-op placement at a local garage because he was interested in auto mechanics. “During high school I applied for a co-op course which lets you choose to a career path you want to explore to see if it’s right for you or not.” At the start, he found it difficult to get adjusted to the new environment because it was unfamiliar and overwhelming. Juan slowly began by watching his mentor. “I had to start off somewhere, so I observed him and handed him the tools that he needed for certain jobs he was doing. Then I assisted him in some small jobs”.

Juan had to learn about all the tools and parts of the car as well as how to do an oil change, rotate and change tires, and lubricate brakes. Surprisingly, by the end of his co-op placement, he realized “that it was not the right type of career” for him, even though it was still his favorite hobby. He was glad that his co-op placement helped him out with that decision early on.

As Juan explained in his written comments, “I chose to describe this particular learning experience because it was one of my greatest passions and hobbies. Although it’s not my first priority anymore, it’s still one of my hobbies.” The key things that he remembered about this experience were the information he acquired and small jobs that he learned to perform on the cars that rolled into the bay at the auto body shop. He learned by listening and watching his mentor and by completing his assigned jobs. He knew he learned when he was able to work on his own without direct supervision.

Pierre learning football.

Pierre's dream was to become a professional football player. He started learning everything he could about football from an early age—positions, strategies, techniques, equipment, and scholarship opportunities. “When I was young, football was my dream and I worked hard every day to be good when I got older. I learned about all the football positions.” Pierre chose to write about learning football because his goal was to become a good enough player to earn a scholarship for college and become an NFL player.

When he started training with the high school football team, he learned to play different positions. He soon realized that neither quarterback nor offensive lineman was suited to him, given his particular skill set and aptitude. “That’s where running back came in.” He concluded that he was best suited to the position of running back, due to his quickness and running speed. Pierre trained extensively with the team, which involved many hours a week of grueling practice. Football is a very physical sport to play. I learned a lot of techniques.” He learned the hard way in practices and games. As expressed in his comments, “The key thing I remember about this experience was that when you get the ball you should put your head low enough to take the guy down who is trying to tackle you”, which he found to be “very dangerous.”

Jeremiah learning a new video game, football, and English.

Jeremiah described playing video games and football because they were his passions. He included school in his descriptions of learning because of its importance for his future. His sense of accomplishment came from achieving his goals in these areas by doing something fun, challenging and important. As emphasized in his written comments, “All key thing I remember about my experience is that I felt a sense of

accomplishment when I succeeded at my goals. I chose to describe these three different learning experiences because they really illustrate my learning capabilities and learning habits.”

“I have always had a great interest in video games...to master the game.” He indulged in each new game he challenged himself to learn. He began through trial and error, pressing each button “to see what action it would make”. Once he knew what he was doing, everything began to work smoothly. With some practice he would master the game very quickly. “I usually learned techniques by trying them on my own. Once I found my technique was working, I dominated the drill.”

When learning to play football, Jeremiah also picked up the techniques and strategies very quickly by watching the others and then practicing. He would “mimic the football moves right off the bat”. He explained that he was a very quick learner when he “saw something done”. “I learn by trying and practicing. All my life I have been a very hands-on person. I learn by doing.”

In school, Jeremiah learned best from writing notes about what he read on the board and what he heard the teacher say. This way, he was better able to pay attention in class. “As I am writing, I am able to process the information.” This was a helpful strategy to focus him away from any extraneous sounds in the room that distracted him from learning. In his comments he wrote, “I am a person who learns quicker when I am actually doing something, not just reading. Repetition was also something that helped me remember and learn.”

Martina learning to juggle.

Martina was initially quite distraught about having to learn to juggle as part of her exercise science class. “When we were assigned this activity, I was very nervous and scared. I knew it was going to be very difficult because I have horrible hand-eye coordination.” She was also afraid to juggle in front of her peers. “This was the most difficult obstacle to overcome because I am a very shy person.” As she wrote in her comments, “I chose to describe this particular learning experience because it taught me to overcome my fear of presenting in front of the class.”

Martina found it helpful to keep a daily learning journal to record her progress and plan her practice sessions. “It helped me learn a lot more about my strengths, weaknesses, abilities. I learned to reflect on what I accomplished and what I could possibly improve on.” She practiced techniques with and without music, watched video clips of jugglers, and gained confidence with every sign of improvement. “Video clips of people juggling helped me learn visually. As I practiced more, I was more confident in my routine.”

In her written comments, Martina highlighted her teacher’s encouragement and her pride in her achievement. “Mr. P. helped me have a positive attitude when I was frustrated about not being able to juggle three balls. I did really well and I was really proud that I had accomplished my most important goal.” She was grateful for her teacher’s guidance and excited to have succeeded at presenting her juggling routine to the class.

Jasmine learning to juggle.

As part of Jasmine's exercise science class on psychological training in sports, "every student was to learn how to do the three-ball juggle and to learn how to create a juggling routine to present to the class." Having never even attempted to juggle, Jasmine was apprehensive and overwhelmed. "I was thoroughly convinced that I would never be able to do a three-ball juggle." She started from point zero and recalled not being able to juggle even two balls on the first day. Practice at home was strongly encouraged. She soon learned an important lesson, "Sometimes practice makes perfect".

Most classes throughout this unit were devoted to different types of practice sessions such as visualization exercises, watching videos, and working to music. "The environment filled with peers, music and videos was not the right thing for me." Jasmine found it extremely difficult to concentrate and stay focused during class, so she practiced at home for hours every day. It was during these extensive practice sessions that she made progress and actually noticed herself getting better. "After countless long hours of practicing and frustration, I finally found myself juggling three balls successfully. I was able to develop a few simple tricks, put a routine together and perform in front of class."

Jasmine went from someone who couldn't catch two balls to juggling three balls. She learned that all she needed was the right learning environment that was quiet with nobody around. "From there, simple practice was the key to success." She credited her concentrated effort and practice at home in a quiet private space as critical to her learning. Even though she did not enjoy learning how to juggle, she was excited about her successful class presentation. Her performance was an "enjoyable and proud moment." She learned that the process of learning something isn't always fun. However,

“that one moment where you are successfully able to do something you’ve been practicing for so long is exhilarating”.

In her written comments, Jasmine emphasized three things about this experience that she remembered most. “The first day...I was simply distraught by my lack of skills.” However, being able to juggle is an “unforgettable key memory because it was the fruit of so much labor!” The performance was memorable. “I was able to show what I learned.”

Common Themes across Learning Experiences in Adolescence

The narrative descriptions of these participants’ most memorable learning experiences in adolescence illustrate how they collectively viewed learning from a variety of learning experiences, which may have lasted one day, several days, or a few years. Similar to the learning experiences of their peers who described their learning experiences in childhood, common themes from the present analysis include meaningful connections to their learning, support from significant others, responsibility for their own learning, and learning as process.

Meaningful connections.

Participants’ narratives revealed many ways they meaningfully connected to their learning experiences. They were interested in what they were learning. They had a passion for something. They desired to do something. And they were excited about their endeavors.

Vito “had always been interested in learning how to read a little bit of Japanese” for future career options. Catarina described Christmas with family as “the best time of [her] life” when she learned family values and important life lessons. Mary valued the

lessons she learned about friendship and herself from her many relationships with friends. Cate was excited to learn how to snowboard. “Snowboarding was fun and daring. It was all about having fun.” Simon recalled his “interest in wakeboarding and how much [he] actually wanted to wakeboard. As he described, “This thing looked really cool to me. I found something I really liked that allowed me to have the best time possible.” Khan completed his job training in record time because he was excited about his promotion to the position of crew trainer. Juan’s favorite hobby was working on cars. “Ever since I could remember my hobby and interest revolved around automobiles.” Pierre learned football because “when [he] was young, football was [his] dream.” Jeremiah shared a similar passion for football. Martina and Jasmine both wanted to do well in their exercise science class, and they wanted to perform well in front of their peers.

The participants learned for many personal reasons, which made their learning meaningful to them. They described learning valuable life lessons through their meaningful relationships with family and friends. They enjoyed playing various sports and pursuing hobbies of personal interest. The participants wanted to learn and were motivated to succeed in many meaningful ways.

Support of significant others.

Participants described the support they received from significant others, in the way of encouragement, guidance, modeling, and instruction. They felt supported by their families, parents, friends, tutors, and teachers. Participants recognized and appreciated the influence that other people had on their learning.

Catarina described the important family values that she learned from her time with family. Mary attributed much of her learning of life lessons to her relationships with

friends. “They all taught me so much that without even one of them I don’t think I would be the same...without them I would know little about myself and what I want to do and be in life.” Cate’s friends supported her snowboarding endeavor. “I got some basic tips from a couple of friends. Later, they congratulated me with open arms.” Simon’s father encouraged him to wakeboard. “All it took was my dad to push me a little bit and I found wakeboarding the best time possible in the summer months.” Simon’s father also provided him with information and helpful tips for learning to wakeboard. “My dad told me all the pointers and key words he [had] researched the night before.” Kahn pursued on-the-job training under the supervision of his manager. Juan shared a passion for cars with his father, which eventually led to a high school co-op placement at an auto body shop. Martina and Jasmine acknowledged their teacher’s encouragement and guidance when they were learning to juggle. According to Jasmine, her “teacher greatly encouraged [her] to practice at home on [her] own free time.” Martina recognized “Mr. P. for helping [her] have a positive attitude when [she] was frustrated about not being able to juggle three balls.”

Participants recognized the support of others as part of their learning experiences, across a variety of endeavors. During adolescence significant others were friends and family members as well as tutors and teachers. They served as role models, mentors, and instructors, supporting participants in their learning.

Responsibility for learning.

Participant responsibility for learning was evident across learning experiences. Participants described having overcome challenges, fears, frustrations, and setbacks by

persevering, practicing, and working hard. They were determined to reach their goals and were proud of their achievements.

Vito described his commitment to learn Japanese and pride in doing so on his own. “I tried as hard as I could to achieve my goal. I knew it was something I had to do...I learned how to read a bit of Japanese and I was proud of myself.” Catarina overcame her disappointment about her Christmas without presents. She changed her attitude, made the best of the situation, and learned important family values. Mary was mindful about her relationships and learned from the good times and bad times she had with friends. “Having so many friends over the years has not been easy; however, you learn a lot from different sorts of people. Cate overcame her fear of snowboarding. “I learned to be daring and to never give up. Finally, the goal I had for the day was accomplished. I went downhill without falling! I was very proud of myself and couldn’t be happier.” Simon was determined to wakeboard. “I was ready to try tomorrow and I knew I would get up”. After his promotion, Khan was very proud “to take control of the back crew”. When Juan “started off [in the auto body shop], it was really hard because it was just a whole new environment”, but soon he learned to work on the cars. Pierre researched football and trained tirelessly every day. “I would work hard every day to be good when I got older.” Jeremiah detailed his self-discipline, training and pride in his success. “A key thing I remember is when I succeeded at my goal”. Martina worked very hard to improve her “horrible hand-eye coordination” for her three-ball juggling routine. “I was really proud to have overcome my fear of presenting in front of the class.” Jasmine agreed, “My performance was a key thing I remembered because it was simply an enjoyable and proud moment. I was able to show what I learned”.

Participants demonstrated self-motivation, independence, and enthusiasm for learning. They were committed to reaching their goals for their success. As responsible, confident learners, they took charge of their learning through self-discipline, perseverance, and consistent effort.

Learning as process.

Participants detailed their learning as knowing about something and knowing how to do something. Learning of content and skills was commonly described in terms of new ideas and step-by-step procedures. Participant learning took place over time and involved attentive and ongoing listening, watching, doing, and practicing.

Vito learned some Japanese by “re-reading the Japanese characters over and over, and then re-writing them over and over until [he] got it and memorized it”. He practiced translations until he was able to translate friends’ names into Japanese. Through her interactions with family, Catarina “became a better person and learned a valuable lesson in life—happiness is found when you’re with the ones you love.” For Mary learning about relationships was ongoing and sometimes life changing. “Maturity comes from getting an eye-opener and independence”. Cate learned snowboarding from some basic information, by watching others on the hill, and by trial and error. “I went down the hill still falling, but improving over time.” Simon learned to wakeboard by “listening carefully to a whole bunch of pointers,” trial and error, and continuous practice for “as much air as you can get and as many tricks as you can do.” Khan learned on the job by “paying attention, watching, and learning from his mistakes.” He followed instructions, memorized procedures, and did not make the same mistake twice. Juan “learned by first watching others” on the job. “I had to start off somewhere, so I observed my boss at

work and handed him the tools that he needed for certain jobs.” Pierre and Jeremiah learned to play football by watching players in action, through trial and error, by practicing with teammates, and in competitions against other teams. Jeremiah was “a very quick learner when [he] saw it done. [He] would be able to mimic the football moves right off the bat”. Martina and Jasmine learned to juggle by listening to instructions in class as well as by trial and error and routine practice at home. They also kept “a journal documenting [their] success and/or lack thereof following every practice.” In addition, Martina learned by “watching videos of jugglers and listening to music”. Jasmine noted the importance reflecting on her learning to “learn a lot more about [her] strengths, weaknesses, abilities and learning”. She came to realize “that the process of learning something isn’t always fun [and that] sometimes practice does make perfect”.

Overall, participants described their learning during adolescence as mastering a set of tasks or techniques and understanding important content, ideas, values, and life lessons. Learning was revealed as knowing and doing something well, arrived at through observation, practice, and trial and error. Participants were proud when they met their goals related to sport, language, relationship, family, work, co-op, and school, which involved new information, techniques, self-improvement, and independence.

For the most part, participants highlighted their most memorable learning experiences in adolescence as having occurred outside of school. They spoke about learning successfully when their learning experiences were meaningful to them, when they were supported in their learning, when they were responsible for their learning, and when they engaged in the process of learning. As previously described, these common

views of learning were also shared by their peers' detailed descriptions of their learning experiences in childhood.

Conclusion: Narrative Findings

As detailed in their written narratives, participants' most memorable learning experiences took place out of school, during childhood and adolescence (see Appendix J). Collectively, they described a variety of learning endeavors, occurring at different ages, in many contexts, and under various circumstances. Despite differences in situation, there were commonalities across all participants' learning experiences.

Across the narratives of learning experiences in childhood and adolescence, participants revealed their determination to learn, their learning as a dynamic process, their pride in their successes, and their gratitude to significant others for their support. Participants wanted to learn when they considered a learning experience to be meaningful—important, interesting, or fun. What was deemed personally meaningful varied among participants. Some desired to learn in order to make friends, to pursue something of interest, to have an exciting time, to explore family values, to become more independent, or to complete an assigned task. Their learning experiences revealed evidence of them taking responsibility for their learning by setting goals, working hard, and persevering to overcome the difficulties they faced. They were committed to reach challenging goals in the arts, athletics, academics, and relationships. Their confidence and determination were demonstrated by their consistent effort, focused attention, and resolute action.

Participants described mastering a set of tasks, understanding life lessons, and gaining information through observation by listening and watching, as well as through

doing by working in manageable steps and routine practice. Most of the participants learned at their own pace, with one-on-one support from more knowledgeable significant others. They described the invaluable support they received as that of encouragement, modeling, guidance, and instruction, specifically from family, friends, teachers, and tutors. Significant others encouraged participants to do their best, modeled or demonstrated what to do, guided them in their learning, and provided helpful information and instruction. Across the narratives, participants most commonly highlighted the support of significant others with reference to (in)direct modeling of tasks, attitudes, and values. There was only one participant who described learning in isolation, without human mediation.

Although participants described having the desire to learn, not all initiated their learning endeavors. At an early age, some participants were required to learn a musical instrument. Other participants were required to learn a specific task or new concept. Whether or not participants initiated their own learning experiences, they portrayed themselves as self-motivated. They described being motivated to learn, taking ownership of their learning, and having done their best to reach their goals. They detailed their desire, commitment, determination and perseverance to learn by overcoming obstacles and achieving challenging goals. One exception neither initiated nor took ownership of her learning endeavor. Instead, she focused on her grade three teacher's methods of teaching grammar and concluded that she was more likely to learn when the teacher made the lesson fun. By contrast, a marked similarity among participants was that they demonstrated agency as learners.

Differences that were evident between the narratives of childhood and adolescent learning experiences pertained to what participants learned, who most supported their learning, and their degree of independence as learners. When compared with their peers, participants' descriptions of their learning experiences in childhood appeared to focus more on learning to do a task or set of tasks well and mastering a skill or set of skills, with somewhat less emphasis on learning about values, ideas, and concepts. The exception was the participant who described learning family values during childhood. Participants who described their learning experiences in adolescence seemed to focus on both content and skills; they highlighted learning information and concepts, as well as abilities and techniques. The participant who described learning piano over roughly a seven-year period, from early childhood to early adolescence, described learning *about* piano, music, and discipline, as well as learning *how* to play the piano.

Although participants commonly recognized that families, friends, and teachers/tutors significantly influenced their learning, the support from (grand)parents was emphasized in the narratives about childhood learning experiences. The narratives from childhood tended to reflect knowledgeable others with a more significant role than seemed evident in the narratives from adolescence. This suggests that adolescents may have experienced a greater degree of independence as learners or may have undertaken their learning experiences more independently than did their counterparts. An exception was the participant who learned to ride a bicycle on her own at the age of five.

Overall, participants' written narratives of their most memorable learning experiences, across different ages, personal experiences, and learning endeavors reveal notable commonalities in their out-of-school learning. According to the participants'

narrative descriptions, they wanted to learn, took ownership of their learning, worked hard work to reach challenging goals, and received one-on-one support from significant others. Common themes across all participants' narratives of diverse learning experiences are presented as: meaningful connections, responsibility for learning, learning as process, and support from significant others. The theme Meaningful Connections is used to highlight participants' detailed descriptions of the meaningful connections they had to their learning experiences through personal interest, fun, and fellowship. The theme Responsibility for Learning refers to participants' emphasis on their personal responsibility for learning—their agency as learners, ownership of their learning, and determination to succeed. The theme Learning as Process speaks to participants' narratives of actively engaging in the process of learning to accomplish challenging goals—constructing knowledge of content and skills through discovery, trial and error, mistakes, observation, hard work, and practice. The theme Support from Significant Others speaks to the ways significant others reportedly facilitated and supported participants' learning experiences through modeling, encouragement, guidance, and instruction.

Discussion

*We want to see the child in pursuit of knowledge,
not knowledge in the pursuit of the child.* George Bernard Shaw

This chapter consists of a discussion of the findings in relation to the literature on student voice inquiry, narrative, constructivism, and implications for teaching practice. A review of the study sets the stage for the present discussion.

Review of the Study

There is a two-fold difference between the present study and traditional student voice inquiries that elicit students' perspectives about their learning, in school, through interviews, questionnaires, recorded observations, and focus groups. Firstly, in this study students' perspectives were elicited through the written narratives of participants' most memorable learning experiences, in combination with more common approaches to student voice inquiry. Secondly, these experiences were reported as having occurred both in and out of school. Conversely, student voice inquiries do not typically explore students' views of their learning outside of school as a means of improving teacher practice nor are students' voices typically elicited through written narrative for gaining insights into students' learning.

The present student voice inquiry builds on research by Arnot et al. (2004), Carnell (2005), Cochran-Smith (2003); Cook-Sather (2007), and Kane and Maw (2005), in response to Rudduck and Flutter's (2000) call to give voice to students' perspectives of their learning experiences for re-conceptualizing teaching practice. This study also addresses Fielding's (2004) concern about students' voices not being elicited through other approaches to inquiry, while concurring with Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Clandinin and Rosiek (2007), Pasupathi and Hoyt (2009), Riessman (2008), and van

Manen et al. (2007) that participants can authentically share lived experiences through narrative. Written narrative is considered a “powerful tool for improving understanding” (Ball, 1998, p. 176), in education and is presented here as an inclusive opportunity for all students to openly share their personal stories for insights into their learning experiences.

Within a constructivist framework, this student voice inquiry elicited students’ perspectives through written narrative, focus group discussion, and related written comments about their most memorable learning experiences, in and out of school. Narratives elaborated on engaging learning experiences, out of school, while the focus group discussion explored issues and concerns about school, as concurred by their written comments. Participants generally described their out-of-school learning experiences more favorably than they did their in-school learning experiences. The findings of this study highlight affordances to participants’ learning, out of school, and constraints to their learning, in school, for a reconsideration of pedagogical practices.

Common Themes

Student participants provided detailed accounts of diverse learning experiences, in and out of school, from early childhood to late adolescence. Analysis of this landscape of learning revealed commonalities across all participants’ descriptions of their most memorable experiences. According to a constructivist perspective of the personal and social dimensions of learning, the commonalities in their learning are classified according to four common themes: meaningful connections, responsibility for learning, learning as process, and support from significant others. These themes speak to the learner constructing knowledge, in supportive and challenging environments. From this constructivist perspective, individuals are considered agents of their own learning,

facilitating their learning with knowledgeable others. This inquiry considers the learner to have what Steffe and Gale (1995) refer to as ownership of their learning, whereby learners are engaged in constructing knowledge, which is socially and culturally mediated (Ball, 1998; Cobb, 2005; Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008; Proulx, 2006).

Meaningful connections.

Participants described wanting to learn when learning was meaningful to them or when learning connected to their lives in a meaningful way. Generally speaking, learning about the arts, life, athletics, hobbies, and relationships was meaningful to them. They recounted out-of-school learning experiences when learning was interesting, exciting, and important, when they learned out of curiosity, for fun, and to belong. In these cases, participants expressed learning out of passion for a certain endeavor, excitement for a specific activity, and desire to be part of a group of peers, friends, or family. The significance of students having meaningful connections to their learning was also reported in recent student voice inquiries (Arnot et al. 2004; Conley, 2004; Cushman, 2006; Kane & Maw, 2005; Kroth & Boverie, 2000; Leung & Kember, 2003; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). Additionally, Arnot et al. (2004), Kane and Maw (2005), and Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) highlighted the value of teachers and students making connections between classroom learning and students' personal, social, and vocational interests. Arnot et al.'s (2004) research focused on teachers "contextualizing learning more appropriately" (p. 14) for students to engage in meaningful and authentic learning experiences.

The focus group participants discussed their frustration and lack of motivation to learn, in school, when they did not personally connect to what they were being taught and

did not find learning important, interesting, or enjoyable. These four participants seemed to depend on teachers to make learning meaningful to them and to teach them according to their learning preferences. They relied on teachers to make meaningful connections to their learning and tended to attribute their success or lack of success to teachers and their teaching methods. The implication is that participants were not motivated to learn without personal connections and agency, and they were motivated to learn when learning was meaningful to them and when they had a sense of responsibility for their learning, which was also demonstrated in student voice inquiries by Arnot et al. (2004), Carnell (2005), Cook-Sather (2007), and Rudduck and McIntyre (2007).

Responsibility for learning.

Arnot et al. (2004) suggested that learning can improve when students have a strong “sense of agency and ownership” (p. 15) of their learning, based on a personal responsibility for learning. Participants’ written narratives detailed ways they took ownership of their learning, out of school, to reach their personal goals and experience a sense of success. They detailed their determination to reach their goals through consistent effort, hard work, and perseverance in the face of fear, uncertainty, confusion, injury, and failure. These descriptions of commitment, dedication, and pride in their learning revealed a personal responsibility for learning.

Participants’ narratives highlighted their ongoing challenges and personal successes, which support Pink’s (2009) and Rigby, Deci, Patrick, and Ryan’s (1992) claims that motivation is based on the individual’s drive to succeed and self-determination. According to Deci and Ryan (2000) and Deci, Koestner, and Ryan (2000), the more intrinsic motivation and control students have over their learning, the

more motivated they are to learn. Participants can be said to have been self-motivated learners, out of school, as evidenced by their determination to succeed and perseverance in overcoming obstacles. These findings also support Kohn's (1999), Yip's (2009), and Zimmerman's (2000) views that self-motivation, or intrinsic motivation, speaks directly to the agency, engagement, and success of the learner.

By contrast, the focus group participants did not appear to take ownership of their learning in school, as they did out of school. As with Arnot et al.'s (2004) research, students in this study also "tended to see the nature of their learning opportunities as overwhelmingly determined by their teachers, so it was primarily their teachers' approaches and dispositions about which they spoke" (p. 9). Students expressed their passivity in the classroom, in terms of a lack of agency as learners and lack of personal responsibility for their learning. The comparison of participants' motivation for learning out of school and lack of motivation for learning in school underscores Huitt's (2001) call for more research on motivation with respect to learning in school contexts.

Learning as process.

Participants' written narratives of their learning experiences out of school, during childhood and adolescence, provided details of how they were actively engaged in learning as a process. They described learning over time, from their mistakes, trial and error, and practice. Regardless of age or endeavor, participants detailed their hard work and perseverance, as well as their attentiveness and focus, across a landscape of various out-of-school learning experiences. They recounted various challenging learning endeavors, many of which involved learning a task or a set of tasks step-by-step by focusing on a specific goal or set of goals. In addition to learning by doing, participants

learned by observing, which is also recognized as vital to the learning process (Bandura, 1989; Hadjioannou, 2007; Hazel, 2008).

As part of their learning process, participants constructed knowledge of ideas, information, techniques, and strategies; however, there may have been more emphasis on concrete learning experiences during childhood compared to adolescence. Active engagement in learning through the construction of knowledge is also evident in student voice inquiries by Arnot et al. (2004), Cook-Sather (2007), and Kane and Maw (2005), which recognized that student learning involves learning *about* something as well as learning *how* to do something. Currie (2003), Hansman (2001), and Hopkins (2002) reminded us of how critical it is that schools focus on the knowledge of both content and skills for students' overall success. Knowledge of content and skills is considered integral to learning (Bereiter; 2002; McMillan, 2010; Meyers & Rust, 2003).

Participants' narratives provided rich retrospective accounts of their lived experiences, in childhood and adolescence—riding a bicycle, learning piano, sewing, speaking a second language, and navigating the trials and tribulations of relationships—illustrating the diversity and authenticity of their learning. They applied their knowledge of content and skills to their conversations, exhibits, relationships, presentations, art works, performances, and day-to-day life. These findings reaffirmed the value of what is referred to in education as situated cognition and authentic learning activities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lombardi, 2007; Resnick, 1987).

The focus group participants did not highlight the process of learning in relation to their in-school learning experiences as they had in connection to the out-of-school learning experiences recorded in their written narratives. Instead, the focus group

discussion highlighted subject matter, test performance, and studying to do well on tests by reading, (re)copying notes, memorizing content, and doing practice tests. This finding concurs with Carnell (2005) who suggested that in school the dominant conception is getting taught, not learning. Arnot et al.'s (2004) work also drew attention to the idea of students needing to “engage more deeply in their learning” (p. 10) for their success in school.

As proposed by Piaget (1970), learning involves first-hand experience, exploration, and trial and error. Similarly, the findings of this study imply that learning involves a process of discovery, taking chances, and learning from one's mistakes, as highlighted throughout participants' narratives. By comparison, within the context of their most difficult classroom learning experiences, the focus group participants spoke emphatically about their fear of making mistakes and not learning from the mistakes they did make. The issue of learning from one's mistakes may be an area of future research in education, as it has been in psychology (Casement, 2002) and linguistics (Corder, 2009), when individuals are encouraged to learn from their mistakes in psychotherapy and second language learning, respectively.

Support of significant others.

In the written narratives, participants noted the support they received from significant others, at one time or another during their learning experiences. They highlighted ways that human relationship and personal interaction significantly influenced their learning. They specifically acknowledged support from family, friends, tutors, and teachers. With reference to their childhood, participants most commonly described the one-on-one support of parents and grandparents. Across childhood and

adolescence, significant others seemed to have facilitated participant learning through modeling, encouragement, guidance, and instruction. In other words, learners benefitted from social interaction with more knowledgeable others, within challenging, stimulating, and supportive learning environments (Bandura, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978). Student voice research by Arnot et al. (2004), Carnell (2005), and Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) also highlighted social experience and interaction, based on relationships of mutual respect and trust, as having a strong influence on learning in the classroom for cooperation, collaboration, and construction of knowledge among students and their teachers. The direct influence of human beings is considered critical to human learning (Alexander & Schallert, 2009; Bandura, 1997; Carnell, 2005; Erikson, 1982; McMillan, 2010; Rogoff, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978).

In the focus group discussion, participants tended to praise teachers when they met with success and blame teachers when they did not meet with success. They recounted times, in childhood and adolescence, when teaching had interfered with their learning. It was under these circumstances that they expressed having felt incapable and demoralized. These above average academic achievers, with parental support and ambitions to attend post secondary institutions, described the greatest hindrance to their learning as being the teaching practices that, rather than being facilitative, were constraining. It was these experiences that they described as having negatively impacted their confidence and self-esteem. It is surprising that these students, with above average academic profiles, questioned their ability to learn and to be successful in class. These findings underscore the importance of student agency and self-assurance as well as

teacher support and respect for students for co-facilitating learning, as also recognized by Arnot et al. (2004) and Rudduck and McIntyre (2007).

Commentary on Common Themes

The written narratives of this student voice inquiry provided a window into the complexity of participants' out-of-school learning experiences. Analysis revealed four common themes from across all participants' descriptions of their most memorable learning experiences: meaningful connections, responsibility for learning, learning as process, and support of significant others. These themes were mainly reported in the context of participants' out-of-school learning experiences. Constraints to learning were discussed by the focus group, within the context of school experiences that hindered their learning, especially those experiences that left them questioning their ability to learn. This is not to say that participants did not experience constraints to their learning outside of school; however, the thrust of the narratives was their engaging out-of-school learning experiences. Although the focus group participants experienced positive learning experiences in school, the thrust of their discussion was their difficulties learning in school. This positive stance toward out-of-school learning experiences, in contrast with in-school learning experiences, invites further research into students' most memorable learning experiences, in and out of school, for enhancing student learning.

Participants' descriptive narratives highlighted dynamic out-of-school learning experiences. They reported a desire to learn, ownership of their learning, engagement in learning, and support from knowledgeable others. In this context, participants had a personal connection to what they were learning out of interest, enjoyment, and sense of belonging. They had agency and took personal responsibility for their learning. They

actively engaged in learning as a process of discovery, achieving goals, and overcoming challenges. And they received support from significant others through modeling, guidance, encouragement, and instruction. These insights into participants' learning experiences may further inform teaching practices for students' benefit.

Although the focus group participants began their discussion talking about their most memorable learning experiences out of school, as previously described in their written narratives, the nature of their conversation soon changed to their concerns and issues with school. While they did mention select teachers or teaching methods that they valued, the focus of their discussion was the difficulties they had learning in school. They considered it difficult to learn when they were discouraged from making mistakes and, as a result, not encouraged to learn from their mistakes. They also discussed the negative impact of not connecting to what and how teachers were teaching. In these cases, participants did not seem motivated and engaged in learning, nor did they assume responsibility for their learning or consider themselves successful students.

The findings from the focus group discussion are important reminders of the constraints to learning that sometimes take place in the classroom. The focus group participants emphasized practices that might be avoided in the classroom, such as discouraging students from making mistakes and, therefore, from learning from their mistakes as part of the process of learning. Tensions surrounding making mistakes in the classroom seemed to undermine participants' confidence and inhibit their learning. Further analysis of the focus group discussion exposed participants' confusion about how they learn, as well as their limited vocabulary for discussing their learning. In their final written comments, the focus group participants expressed their enthusiasm about having

discussed their learning with one another. They also welcomed an opportunity to discuss learning with their teachers and peers. They thought that from such discussions teachers could better help students learn in the classroom.

It is not implied from this study that students will better understand their learning from having written or discussed their learning. Although the student participants described and discussed their learning in detail, many were noncommittal about whether or not they had learned about their learning simply from writing their personal narratives or from the focus group discussion. In the focus group discussion, in particular, participants revealed confusion about their learning and expressed their desire to understand how they learned and to learn better. These findings concur with Arnot et al. (2004) that students could benefit from “explicit guidelines and a supportive framework” (p. 88) for discussing their learning. Through informed discussion, students may become more aware and better facilitate their learning.

Implications for Teaching Practice

The focus group participants expressed interest in discussing their learning with teachers and peers. This request for talking more about learning is supported by student voice inquiries that recognize the importance of discussing students’ learning and the power that learning conversations can have for informing teaching practice (Bishop, 2003; Carnell, 2005; Flutter, Kershner, & Rudduck, 1998; Rudduck, 2007; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Research has also recommended that conversations about students’ learning be based on language that is meaningful to students (Arnot et al., 2004; Kane & Maw, 2005) and that a supportive framework for discussions about learning may be derived from student voice inquiry (Herman, 2003).

There is a need for learning conversations that include authentic student involvement and the hearing of students' perspectives for better learning in schools (Bishop, 2003). However, "there does not seem to be any time for talking....with young people about their learning" (Carnell, 2005, p. 269). Rudduck (2007) and Rudduck and Flutter (2000) have called for more to be done to facilitate students talking about learning. Students need to be encouraged and supported to share their views about their learning experiences to "feel that they are members of a learning community, that they matter, and that they have something valuable to offer" (Rudduck, 2007, p. 587). It is when students think that they can make worthwhile contributions to classroom discussions about their own learning that they become more willing to express themselves (Kane & Maw, 2005).

When students are recognized as having something valuable to say and the authority to speak, they are more likely to discuss their learning using language that is meaningful to them (Kane & Maw, 2005). As put forth by Kane and Maw (2005) and Macbeath, Myers, and Demetriou (2001), students could benefit from a meaningful language to talk about their learning—one that can be shared with peers and teachers. As Herman (2003) suggested, it may be through student voice inquiry that an understanding of learning can be reframed to allow for a meaningful language for students and teachers to talk about learning. More specifically, student voice inquiry can inform a supportive framework for discussing students' learning in the classroom (Ibid.).

The present student voice inquiry into learning showcases students' written narratives of their most memorable learning experiences for an exploration of their learning. This study also suggests that commonalities, or common themes, across

participant narratives may provide a supportive framework for discussions about student learning (see Appendix N). Collaborative exploration between students and teachers for constructing knowledge about students' learning may lead to insights for better teaching practices. For this purpose, teachers may also refer to guidelines for constructing and reflecting on learning narratives (see Appendix M).

Teachers may initiate a learning conversation with students by inviting them to write narratives of their most memorable learning experiences, in and out of school, and then asking them to share these stories in pairs, small groups, and as a class (see Appendix M). Teachers and students may explore what facilitated students' learning and share their ideas (see Appendix N). This process may include asking students to consider their own responsibility for learning and the value of committing to their learning through consistent effort, ongoing practice, and focused attention. Students and teachers may also discuss the interpersonal dynamics of learning to highlight the importance of their shared responsibility for learning, especially in working together to create authentic learning activities, challenging goals, and engaging learning experiences. Students may also be encouraged to share ways they can be best supported by teachers and each other for constructing knowledge and facilitating their learning, as an ongoing process.

The present study presents a supportive framework for exploring all students' learning through classroom conversation (see Appendix N). This supportive framework, based on commonalities across students' actual learning experiences, can help ensure that all students are represented in student-teacher conversations about learning. According to Arnot et al. (2004),

...lower-attaining [students] tend to find it difficult to communicate to a teacher audience about what does and does not help their learning. Yet it is they who by definition most need to be able to explain their learning needs to teachers....

explicit guidance and supportive frameworks are...likely to be useful. (p. 88)

Use of a supportive framework for learning conversations also addresses the concern that in discussing learning with their peers, students may be hindered by limited knowledge or misconceptions about learning. A supportive framework based on students' lived experiences may facilitate student-teacher understandings of students' learning and co-construction of knowledge for improving teaching practice and learning.

Participation in student-teacher discussions about students' learning is supported by a constructivist approach to education that focuses on creating authentic activities, genuine communication, learning communities, and a shared responsibility for learning in the classroom (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lombardi, 2007; Resnick, 1987; Rogoff, 1994; Weis & Fine, 2001). Learning-centered discussion can allow for informed conversation, exploration, and conceptual understanding of students' learning, based on a supportive framework or shared language of learning. This approach to talking about learning also addresses Weis and Fine's (2001) appeal to focus more on the substance of learning in education.

Commentary on Implications for Teaching Practice

The present inquiry supports student-teacher discussion about students' memorable learning experiences, informed by a supportive framework or shared language of learning. As members of a learning community and stakeholders in their own education students should freely participate in discourse about their learning

(Fosnot, 2005; Lodge, 2005). By respecting the right of students to discuss their learning experiences for positively influencing teaching practice, students' discovery of their learning can be profound and far reaching (Cook-Sather, 2002) and may encourage them to have a stronger sense of commitment to their learning (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000 p. 82). Watkins, Carnell, Lodge, Wagner, and Whalley (2004) have argued that it is through a shared understanding of learning, facilitated by a supportive framework for discussing learning, that teachers and students can better inform teaching practices for enhanced learning.

The findings of this study suggest that the participants' written narratives, focus group discussion, and related written comments about their most memorable learning experiences, in and out of school, reveal commonalities across their diverse learning experiences for insights into how they learned and what facilitated their learning. It is further suggested that such commonalities, or common themes, provide the basis for a supportive framework for discussing students' memorable learning experiences (see Appendix N). Classroom discussion about students' learning, informed by a supportive framework, may encourage students to be more aware and actively engaged in their learning, while helping teachers better support and co-facilitate the dynamic and complex process of students' learning. The following chapter focuses on how the findings of this study can inform my future teaching practice and research with participant co-researchers.

Conclusion

The only person who is educated is the one who has learned how to learn and change.
 Carl Rogers

This chapter describes the practical implications of the findings of this study, with reference to guidelines for constructing and reflecting on learning narratives and a supportive framework for discussing most memorable learning experiences (see Appendices M & N). An overview of the findings better situates the implications for my future teaching practice and research with my students as participant co-researchers.

Overview of the Findings

In the present student voice inquiry, participants' written narratives, focus group discussion, and related written comments about their most memorable learning experiences, in and out of school, reveal commonalities in their learning. The common themes across participants' personal experiences—meaningful connections, responsibility for learning, learning as process, and support from significant others—are presented as a supportive framework for informing better teaching practice.

Overwhelmingly, participants' narratives detailed their most memorable learning experiences as having occurred out of school when they were engaged in endeavors that were meaningful to them. These learning experiences involved challenges, failures, and successes as well as concerted effort, careful observation, and ongoing practice. Participants described overcoming obstacles to achieve their goals, often progressing in manageable steps, persisting through trial and error, and learning from their mistakes. They also detailed the encouragement, guidance, modeling, and instruction of those who supported and co-facilitated their knowledge of content and skills. The participants' narratives highlighted affordances to their learning, specifically the personal relevance of

their experiences, their commitment to learn, their active involvement in learning, and the support of knowledgeable others.

The focus group participants' discussion emphasized constraints to learning to be avoided in the classroom. They highlighted hindrances to their learning at different times throughout their schooling. Their discussion centered on the difficulties they experienced, in primary and secondary school, when they did not find learning worthwhile, when they resented being in class, when they were afraid to make mistakes, and when they were not supported by their teachers. The participants did not seem to take ownership of their learning in the school setting, as they had out of school. They emphasized the teacher and teaching methods when referring to their in-school learning experiences, implying that the responsibility for learning rested with the teacher. The focus group participants suggested that teachers could better teach their students if they took the time to talk to them about their learning.

Informing my Future Teaching Practice

Facilitating and exploring students' learning experiences is integral to creating a learning-centered classroom for all my students. I am inspired to professionalize and personalize my teaching practice for this purpose based on the findings of this study. As informed by this study, my future teaching practice will focus on written narrative as an inclusive way of eliciting and exploring students' perspectives about their learning experiences, in and out of school. I concur that every student, without exception, deserves a chance to voice his/her views for bettering teaching and learning (Bland, 2011; Campbell, 2011; Chadderton, 2011; Cheminais, 2011; Czerniawski & Garlick, 2011), and

I consider the use of written narrative to be an inclusive practice in this endeavor, one that invites all students to share their own stories.

The personal narratives of students' most memorable learning experiences can contextualize and familiarize our classroom discussions about students' learning, in pairs, small groups, as a class, and one-on-one with me. To sustain this dynamic process of student-student and student-teacher conversation about student learning, the common themes from this study will be used as a supportive framework. Lodge's (2005) work on teacher-led inquiries into learning further supports this teaching practice aimed at constructing knowledge about learning through dialogue and discussion and "building of shared narrative" (p. 134). As Lodge (2005) suggests, "[t]hrough this connection the individual can make more sense of his or her experience" (Ibid.).

It is when we listen and dialogue with students that they are more inclined to be actively engaged and responsible for their learning (Lodge, 2005; 2008). According to Rudduck and Flutter (2004), "more opportunities for talking about learning can help [students] to understand their own learning and working habits so that they feel more in control of their learning—and this in turn seems to enhance their motivation and engagement" (p.133). With this purpose in mind, I will elicit students' voices through written narratives of their most memorable learning experiences, in and out of school, as a basis for authentic student-student and student-teacher conversations about their learning. Students will be encouraged to construct narratives of their learning experiences and refer to a supportive framework for subsequently discussing their learning (see Appendices M & N).

Constructing written narratives.

Prior to this study I did not consider using written narrative to engage in discussions with students about their learning and explore ways we could facilitate their learning together. Instead, I began each semester asking students to share their most memorable learning experiences through written narrative for an overview of their writing abilities, general interests, and learning preferences. I would then share one of my most memorable learning experiences or one from a former student. Subsequently, everyone was invited to brainstorm vivid recollections of their learning experiences. After further consideration, students decided on a most memorable learning experience to write about for our next English class. The students wrote for about 60 – 75 minutes, after which time they submitted their narratives. This signaled the end of this written activity.

I will continue the aforementioned approach with future students, allowing them whatever time they need to write their narratives. A guideline will be on hand for constructing learning narratives, based on my research and adaptation of van Manen's (1999) work (see Appendix M, Part A). This guideline may help certain students, possibly those requiring differentiated instruction, to contextualize and structure their narratives with a clear beginning, middle, and end to their personal stories. From previous experience, I expect most students will not require explicit guidance for writing their narratives.

Students' narratives will provide the context for exploring their learning and a springboard for our ensuing conversation. Before entering into student-student or teacher-student discussions about students' learning, I will encourage students to reflect

on their learning narratives, based on reflection questions drawn from the findings of this study (see Appendix M, Part B). Students' personal reflections about their learning experiences, guided by their answers to said questions, are expected to ease them into subsequent discussion about their learning, whether in pairs, groups, or as a class. Answers to these questions may enable students to develop a level of comfort for thinking about and talking about their learning, especially within the familiar context of their learning experiences. Arnot et al.'s (2004) findings suggest that students willingly engage in discussion about their classroom learning experiences but would likely benefit from explicit guidelines as well as a supportive framework to better understand their learning.

Common themes as a supportive framework.

The students' written narratives will contextualize a "learning-focused dialogue" (Flutter, 2007), based on the common themes presented in this study. The four common themes—meaningful connections, responsibility for learning, learning as process and support from others, provide the framework for our conversation and collaboration. I will explain to the students that this framework is based on what students, like themselves, have been shown to have in common in their learning experiences and that this framework can inform our discussions about how they learn and how to facilitate their learning (see Appendix N).

As previously mentioned, the common themes presented in this study are considered accessible and familiar to students for discussing their learning because they are derived from student participants' descriptions of their actual learning experiences. These themes are expressed in a multitude of ways relative to the students' individual

experiences and are not intended, therefore, to be definitive, prescriptive, exclusive, or reductionist. The common themes are presented as a framework for exploring my students' learning and informing my teaching practice for the benefit of all my students.

The supportive framework will be presented, within the context of my students' written narratives, by highlighting each theme as follows and encouraging students to share examples from their narratives (see Appendix N). The theme *Meaningful Connections* will highlight the ways students personally connected to their learning endeavors, why they wanted to learn, and why it was important to them that they learned. The theme *Responsibility for Learning* will highlight students' agency and ownership of their learning for overcoming challenges and accomplishing their goals. The theme *Learning as Process* will highlight how they were actively engaged in learning—including their thoughts, actions, and observations. And the theme *Support from Others* will highlight how knowledgeable others supported and facilitated their learning through guidance, encouragement, modeling, and instruction.

After students become familiar with this framework, they may want to code their individual learning experiences, as an optional activity. They can code directly on their narrative texts, using different colored highlighters, or on a worksheet provided to them in chart form (see Appendix N). The category labeled '*Other*' can be used to code experiences that are not included or that exceed the framework. A class chart of the framework will be posted on the wall with examples from students' narratives, at their discretion. By coding their learning according to said framework and exploring their learning with the class, students may come to realize key aspects of their learning, with

less chances of oversimplifying the (inter)personal dynamics of their learning or of becoming overwhelmed by the complexity of their learning experiences.

Discussing learning with a supportive framework.

The resulting conversations are expected to be genuine and insightful, allowing students to make sense of their learning in pairs, small groups, and as a class. As part of this process, students and I can develop a shared knowledge and be better positioned to co-facilitate their learning. Based on the findings of this study, we will discuss the importance of making personal connections to their learning, realizing their agency as learners, engaging their learning as an ongoing process, and receiving support for their learning (see Appendix N). This will include discussions about meaningful and authentic learning activities, strategies for overcoming challenges, specific and general learning goals, and knowledge of content and skills. I agree that through learning-centered discussion students and teachers can learn about learning together, with ongoing implications for improved teaching and learning (Cheminais, 2011; Cook, 2011; Demetriou & Wilson, 2010; Ferguson, Hanreddy, & Draxton, 2011; Grant, 2007; Lodge, 2005; Rudduck, Demetriou, & Pedder, 2003; Waterhouse, 2011).

I concur with Arnot et al. (2004) and Macbeath, Myers, and Demetriou (2001) that a supportive framework can inform classroom discussion about students' learning for the benefit of students. The framework presented here may better position my students and myself to clearly communicate our ideas and directly address areas of key concern related to their learning (see Appendix N). It is through a shared language of students' learning that we can discuss and address their needs and concerns as learners. Through informed discussions about students' learning, students and I can better explore and

facilitate their learning for their benefit. It is important for them to know they are naturally endowed to learn, they have the right to learn, and their learning is a personal and shared responsibility. Consequently, they may be more inclined to actively engage and take ownership of their learning.

Informing my Future Research with Participant Co-researchers

For future research, I plan to repeat this study with students as participant co-researchers, from across different ages, backgrounds, and learning experiences. As participant co-researchers, students can increase their awareness and gain insights into their learning, which can inform my ongoing teaching and research. Through participant co-research, students and I can create new opportunities for co-facilitating their learning.

Participant co-researchers will be encouraged to write narratives about their learning experiences and to reflect on their narratives for subsequent discussion. They may choose to refer to the guidelines for constructing and reflecting on their learning narratives, based on the findings of this study (see Appendix M). Participant co-researchers' initial interpretations of their narratives are expected to provide insights into different aspects of their learning experiences.

Subsequently, I will present the common themes from this study, presented here as a supportive framework, for discussing memorable learning experiences (see Appendix N). The participant co-researchers will be invited to use this framework to code their written narratives for analyzing their learning experiences. This framework is intended to inform ongoing researcher and participant-co-researcher conversations, interpretations, and co-constructions of knowledge about learning, which may, in turn, inform new understandings of their learning.

According to Kincheloe (2007), when “[s]tudent researchers are involved in learning activities that facilitate the development of cognitive sophistication...nothing [is] more important than the insight student researchers gain into themselves” (pp. 770-771). Kincheloe (2007) highlights participatory research, or participant co-research, as having the potential to increase awareness in education when student participants are included in the research process. Participatory research studies show that active involvement of students in research benefits the students, teachers, and policy makers who recognize students as co-creators of knowledge with the voices to affect change (Fielding & Bragg, 2003).

Commentary on Informing my Teaching and Research

The findings of this study support informed classroom discussions about students’ learning for the benefit of all my students (see Appendix N). The shared responsibility for student learning, characteristic of learning-centered discussion, builds on the constructivist view of the learner as actively engaged in the process of learning and the teacher as co-facilitator of students’ learning. This perspective of student agency and teacher support for co-constructing knowledge about learning is the basis of my future teaching practice and research.

A consideration for future research is to repeat this study with participant co-researchers. As co-researchers, student participants can explore, facilitate, and transform their learning through discussion, analysis, and interpretation of data. This approach to research addresses Patti Lather’s (1986) call for “empowering research designs...[and] a research process [that] reorients, focuses, and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it, a process Freire called conscientization” (p. 272).

Fielding and Bragg (2003), Harding (2001), Kirby (2001), and Raymond (2001) concur that participatory research, or participant co-research, can make a difference and contribute to knowledge in the field of education.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Letter

Hello _____:

I have been an English teacher at _____ High School for over 15 years. And for the past three years I have also been a PhD candidate at the University of Ottawa. My present research project focuses on senior high school students' descriptions of their most memorable learning experiences. I am particularly interested in what you and your peers have to say about your learning experiences, in and out of school, to better understand your learning and improve my teaching practice.

It is as researcher that I invite you to participate in this study entitled: **Informing Teaching Practice through Students' Perspectives of their most Memorable Learning Experiences**. For this purpose, I am forwarding to you an information letter, consent form, and student invitation for you and your parent/guardian to read and sign if you would like to participate in this study (see Appendices B, C & D).

It is with the approval of the university, school board, principal and your teacher that you are invited to participate in this study. Consenting to participate in this study at the beginning of the semester does not obligate you to participate at a later date. You may change your mind at any time and have any previously submitted work returned to you immediately. No participant is under any obligation to remain in the study and may withdraw at any time without providing a reason for their choice.

I would like to emphasize that the confidentiality of all participants is of utmost importance to me. As a researcher who teaches at _____ High School I may be aware of your identity; however, I will be using a designated pseudonym for each participant for all written work for this research project. Actual names will **not** be used.

Whether or not you choose to participate in this study will not in any way influence your mark in your English course. Your participation in this project is completely voluntary and confidential. You reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time or request the removal of all or part of your data without giving a reason and with no adverse consequences.

If you have any questions about this study you are welcome to contact me in room N206.

If you would like to participate in this study you are asked to return your consent form and, if interested, your invitation for the focus group discussion **by** _____.

Sincerely,

Ms. Anne-Louise Andrade (N206)

Appendix B

Information Letter

Title of the study: Informing Teaching Practice through Students' Perspectives of their most Memorable Learning Experiences

Name of researcher: Anne-Louise Andrade
PhD candidate, University of Ottawa

Thesis supervisor: Dr. Ruth Kane, University of Ottawa

Ms. _____'s three Grade 12 English classes are invited to participate in the aforementioned research study conducted by researcher Ms. Anne-Louise Andrade and supervised by Dr. Ruth Kane.

This project has been approved by the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board, the Ottawa-Carleton Advisory Committee, the Executive Committee of our School Board, and the principal of our high school.

Purpose of the Study: The present study is an inquiry into senior high school students' perspectives of their most memorable learning experiences, in and out of school, for informing better teaching practice.

Participation: Students are invited to submit the following work to the researcher by _____ in room N206. This initial writing activity for the grade 12 English classes will have been completed during regular class time at the start of the second semester and submitted to the regular English teacher.

Copies will be stored electronically by the students in their own Grade 12 English file:

- 1) Written narrative about one most memorable learning experience
- 2) Related written comments.

Students are also invited to participate in a focus group discussion with peers about their most memorable learning experiences. This will be scheduled to take place after school (approximately 30 - 60 minutes) and will be audiotaped with parent/guardian permission during the final week of _____ (see Appendix D).

At the end of the focus group discussion, students will be invited to complete final written comments about their learning and participation in this study (approximately 15 minutes).

Participation in this project is completely voluntary. Participants reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time or request the removal of all or part of their data without giving a reason and with no adverse consequences.

Participation will not be evaluated in any way for the final mark in the grade 12 English courses, and the study results will not appear in any school records.

The researcher and her supervisor support the entire research process. Importantly, students will not be disadvantaged in any way for their participation, or lack thereof, in this study.

Potential Risks: There are no known risks or discomforts associated with participation in the present research study.

Benefits: Participation in this study can benefit students who take the time to reflect on their most memorable learning experiences. In the process they may learn more about themselves. This study can contribute to the advancement of knowledge by shedding light on how students learn, in and out of school, for the purpose of improving teaching practice.

Confidentiality and anonymity: Importantly, all participant identities and information shared will remain strictly confidential. Students' actual names will **not** be used for the purposes of this research. The contents will be used only for purposes for which the data was collected, and confidentiality will be protected by each student's pseudonym. Confidentiality of all written work and conversations will be protected as data for this study.

Conservation of data: The data collected, both hard copy and electronic data, of all contributions will be kept in a secure manner under lock and key in the researcher's office for a minimum of 5 years. The data collected will not be shared with anyone inside or outside of the study, with the exception of the researcher's PhD thesis supervisor, Dr. Ruth Kane.

Voluntary Participation: Students are under no obligation to participate. If they do choose to participate at the start of this study, they can withdraw at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences.

Questions about this research project can be directed to the researcher, Ms. A-L Andrade, by telephone or her thesis supervisor, Dr. R. Kane, by email or by telephone.

Any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study can be directed to the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa.

Appendix C

Consent Form

The information collected for this project is confidential and protected under the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, 1989.

I have read and understood the request for my child to participate in this study entitled: **Informing Teaching Practice through Students' Perspectives of their most Memorable Learning Experiences.** I have discussed it with my child and

I give my son/daughter, _____ (Name of student participant), permission to participate in the above research study conducted by Ms. Anne-Louise Andrade, PhD candidate, University of Ottawa under the supervision of Dr. Ruth Kane, University of Ottawa.

I give my child permission to be audiotaped. Parent/Guardian initials: _____

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher, Ms. A-L Andrade, by telephone or her thesis supervisor, Dr. R. Kane, by email or by telephone.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa.

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Parent/Guardian's signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Name of Parent/Guardian: *(please print)* _____ and/or

Student's signature (if 18 years or older): _____ **Date:** _____

Name of Student: *(please print)* _____

Researcher's signature: _____ **Date:** _____

All consent forms are to be returned the first week of classes _____.

N.B. Consenting to participate in this study at the beginning of the semester does not obligate the student to participate at a later date. Participation in this project is completely voluntary. Participants reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time or request the removal of all or part of their data without giving a reason and with no adverse consequences.

Appendix D

Invitation: Focus Group Discussion

Hello senior students,

You are invited to participate in a focus group discussion about learning, which will take place with your peers after school for approximately 30 - 60 minutes in room N206. The date will be finalized based on participant availability. Treats and refreshments will be provided, so please identify any **food allergies** that you have.

Although the discussion is student led and open-ended, you may begin by sharing your most memorable learning experiences and/or written responses that you previously wrote about as part of your writing activity for your grade 12 English class earlier this month.

Your focus group discussion will be audiotaped for purposes of data collection. Your identity will remain confidential for the purposes of this study. **No** actual names will be used. Each student will be given a pseudonym in the written report of this study for purposes of confidentiality.

You will also be invited to write final comments about your learning and participation in this study. (Take home: approximately 15 minutes).

If you wish to participate in this research project, please submit both your consent form and this invitation to Ms. A-L. Andrade in room N206 by _____. You are reminded that you may withdraw from this study at any time.

Please identify the weekday(s) and time(s) you would be available to meet after school for 30 – 60 minutes. Please indicate your date and time preferences for the focus group discussion.

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

Sincerely,

Ms. A-L Andrade (N206)

Appendix E

Confirmation: Focus Group Discussion

Dear _____,

This is to confirm your focus group discussion with some of your peers from _____'s Grade 12 English class.

This discussion will be audiotaped, and everyone's identity will remain confidential for the purposes of this study. **No** actual names will be used.

At the end of the discussion session you are invited to complete a final comment sheet about your learning and participation in this study.

Date:

Time: 2:30 – 3:30 (You will be called down at the end of fourth period at 2:25).

Location: N206

Treats and refreshments: to be provided.

Your participation is truly appreciated.

Thank you in advance,

Ms. A-L Andrade

Appendix F

Debriefing Text

As an initial writing activity for your English course you wrote a personal narrative about one of your most memorable learning experiences, and you wrote related written comments. This session took place in the computer lab during a regular class period and did not count toward your mark for the course. The purpose of this assignment was for you to demonstrate your written style, fluency, and accuracy while sharing your learning experiences, background, and interests with your teacher.

As a participant in this study you submitted a copy of your written narrative and related written comments to the researcher. Some of you also participated in the focus group discussion and wrote final comments about your learning and participation in this study.

I would like to thank you for your participation in this study entitled: **Informing Teaching Practice through Students' Perspectives of their most Memorable Learning Experiences.**

I would like to emphasize that the confidentiality of all participants in this study is of utmost importance to my supervisor and me. As a teacher at your high school I, Ms. Anne-Louise Andrade, may be aware of your identity; however, as a researcher I will be using a designated pseudonym for each participant for all my written work for this research project. No student's actual name will be used for the purposes of this research.

Appendix G

A Most Memorable Learning Experience: Guidelines for Brainstorming, Written Narrative, and Written Comments**Part A: Brainstorming** (take home: approximately 10 minutes)

You are asked to brainstorm about one or more most memorable learning experiences. Identify key things that you remember about each learning experience and what you learned.

Your learning experience may involve formal learning in the classroom or informal learning outside of the classroom (i.e., an extracurricular activity, school trip, hobby, relationship, job, vacation, or leisure activity).

Consider learning to: understand a concept, respect others, play a sport, play an instrument, respect yourself, be independent, be a leader, be a friend, do math, fix something, study, ski, skate, cycle, swim, write, debate, draw, dance, perform, present, volunteer...

Part B: Written Narrative (approximately 60 minutes)

Write about **one** of your most memorable learning experiences. Keep in mind that this experience is about something that you have learned. Describe in detail your learning experience and what you learned.

You are encouraged to be as descriptive as possible about your experience and to write as much as you can in the time allotted.

Part C: Written Comments (approximately 15 minutes)

Re-read the narrative you wrote in Part B about your most memorable learning experience, and answer the following questions to the best of your ability. Please number your answers accordingly.

1. Why did you choose to describe this particular learning experience?
2. What are the most important things you remember?
3. What did you learn? How did you learn? How did you know that you had learned?
4. What did you learn from writing a narrative about your most memorable learning experience?
5. Other comments you may have:

Appendix H

Most Memorable Learning Experiences: A Focus Group Discussion (60 minutes)

You are invited to share your most memorable learning experience to begin this focus group discussion about learning.

Consider key things about the learning experience you described in your written narrative (i.e., what you learned, how you learned, and how you knew that you had learned).

You are welcome to share any ideas, questions and comments about learning that you may have such as the similarities and differences you notice about each other's learning.

Appendix I

Questions for Final Comments: Focus Group (take home: 15 minutes)

1. What was it like discussing your learning with peers?
2. What did you learn from this experience?
3. Consider your most memorable learning experience and the learning experiences of your peers.
 - a) What similarities did you notice?
 - b) What differences did you notice?
4. Should professionals in the field of education ask students about their learning experiences and have students share their own perspectives of their learning? Should students' voices about learning be heard? Why/why not?
5. What has your overall participation in this study been like? Explain.

Appendix J

Situating the 24 Participants' Most Memorable Learning Experiences**Childhood:**

Margarita sewing
 Betty cooking
 Jane biking
 Andreas ESL
 Sandra grammar
Syd violin
Flora piano
Daniel driving
Carl drawing
 *Giselle piano
 *Irene writing
 *Raylene biking
 *Brenda visual art

Adolescence:

Vito Japanese
 Catarina life lessons
 Mary relationships
 Cate snowboarding
 Simon wakeboarding
 Khan job training
 Jeremiah football
 Jasmine juggling
 Martina juggling
Juan mechanics
Pierre football

Out of School:

Daniel driving
 Vito Japanese
 Catarina life lessons
 Mary relationships
 Cate snowboarding
 Simon wakeboarding
 Khan job training
 Juan mechanics
 Pierre football
 Jeremiah football
 Flora piano
 Margarita sewing
 Betty cooking
 Syd violin
 Jane biking
Andreas ESL
Carl drawing
Martina juggling
Jasmine juggling
 *Giselle piano
 *Irene writing
 *Raylene biking
 *Brenda visual art

In School:

Sandra grammar

Human Mediation: All participants, except Vito **Non-human Mediation:** Vito Japanese

N.B. *Italicized* names identify the participants whose learning experiences fall under said category, despite their brief mention or reference to another time or context of learning.

*Asterisk identifies the focus group participants.

Appendix K

Summaries of the 24 Participants' Written Narratives of their Most Memorable Learning Experiences

Childhood

Margarita was inspired by her grandmother's talent and appreciative of her support. She practiced to sew on her own after watching her grandmother make clothes to measure for her customers. She found it challenging to learn the basics of sewing, from threading a needle to using a sewing machine, especially at such a young age. Margarita genuinely enjoyed sewing and eventually created her own clothes for local fashion shows.

Betty enjoyed making cinnamon rolls with her grandmother for "something sweet to eat" on their day together. She described learning by listening, watching, and working alongside her grandmother, over the course of the afternoon. She followed specific instructions for measuring, mixing, and baking. Betty was so influenced by this learning experience that she did her high school co-op placement with the pastry chef of an upscale downtown restaurant. She later planned to study at Le Cordon Bleu to be a pastry chef.

Syd described his parents as disciplinarians who ensured that he had the necessary work ethic to succeed. They helped him concentrate on the violin by keeping him to his routine practice and review, especially when he was younger. He came to appreciate lifelong learning and continued to pursue his love of music. Music remained part of his everyday life. He learned to play different and more challenging pieces for the violin and learned to play other musical instruments.

Jane was very proud to learn how to ride a bicycle like her friends in the neighborhood. She watched her friends riding their bicycles and tried to ride like they did. She persevered in the face of recurring setbacks, frustrations, disappointments and injuries. When Jane got overwhelmed trying to balance, turn, and stop, she sought support from her cousin who offered her basic instruction and encouragement. Then Jane continued practicing on her own.

Driving was very important to Daniel, and he was very proud the day he got his driver's license. He recognized the time his father spent over the years teaching him to drive and supervising his practice sessions. Although Daniel faced challenges while learning to drive, such as the fear of being disciplined or having an accident, being able to drive made him feel freer and more independent.

Sandra very briefly described learning a grammar rule in her grade three French class. She was upset about just writing down rules from the board, without knowing what she was doing. The teacher eventually responded to the consternation expressed throughout the class and sang out the rule. It stuck with her like a jingle. She realized that she liked

learning this way because it was enjoyable. Sandra became more enthusiastic about French grammar when she found the lesson fun, and she remembered it for years.

The patience, kindness, and assistance Andreas received from his ESL teacher helped him overcome his fears at his new school, allowing him to learn English in a welcoming and safe environment. He was determined to learn English to do well in class and make friends. He watched television as a fun way to develop an ear for English and increase his vocabulary for everyday conversation. His father made him practice writing phrases every day after school before going out to play. Although this was the most dreaded part of his day, he later recognized it as having been very beneficial for learning.

Carl was enthusiastic about drawing. He learned from watching his family draw and from watching televised art shows. Later in high school, he learned techniques from visual demonstrations and ongoing practice. He continued drawing cartoons and realism out of interest and for relaxation, and he practiced new and challenging techniques that he taught himself on a regular basis to keep improving.

Flora had wanted to play the piano ever since she was very young, and she was proud of her eventual accomplishments. During her second year of piano theory and practice, she became discouraged. With the necessary interventions, she came to realize that she learned best one-on-one and by working closely with her teacher, without being distracted by other students. She learned technique and theory through hard work, routine practice, and individualized instruction. She faced her many challenges with the support of her parents and her piano teacher.

Adolescence

Vito learned Japanese out of personal interest. Despite the inherent challenges of this goal, he was determined to learn the basics, step by step, through memorization, repetition, and ongoing practice. He tested himself regularly on key information that he had memorized from different technological sources. He learned the basics of this foreign language by researching websites, watching cartoons, and playing video games, which he was proud to have accomplished on his own.

Catarina learned important life lessons from visiting with family. Her holiday with relatives exposed her to the wealth of love and family values, which made her Christmas that year more special than ever. She learned to love more and buy less and was committed to putting this into practice in her daily life. She realized that to be happy she did not need materialistic things.

Mary considered her friends to be a major influence in her life. Through many personal experiences with different friends she learned many life lessons, such as the importance of taking responsibility for her own relationships. Her primary focus was being true to herself by learning more about herself, others, and life. Her growing sense of independence signaled to her that she was learning.

Cate was very excited to learn how to snowboard to be with her friends. After receiving some initial tips, she spent most of the day watching snowboarders and practicing. Over the course of the day, she noticed herself improving from one run to the next, through trial and error. This required trusting herself, taking risks, and trying new things outside of her comfort zone. She realized she had learned when she finally reached her goal of going down at least once without falling. She was very proud of her accomplishment.

Despite his father's original plan, Simon was determined to learn how to wakeboard rather than water-ski. After two days of putting into practice his father's careful instructions, Simon was wakeboarding. The rest of the summer Simon developed his wakeboarding techniques and improved his performance through ongoing practice. The following summer he was approached to give wakeboarding lessons to fellow vacationers at the lake.

Khan described his job training at a local fast food chain. He completed all the requirements for advancement, which included memorization, step-by-step procedure, and efficient performance. Based on protocol and procedure, his personal strategy was to complete each task correctly by keeping track of his performance and learning from his mistakes. He was proud of his promotion and of having completed his training ahead of schedule.

Juan's interest in mechanics developed from childhood. He first learned about car mechanics from watching and working with his dad. He continued learning during his high school co-op placement by observing mechanics at work and assisting them on small jobs, before working on his own. Although it seemed to be the obvious career choice for him, he realized through co-op that he did not want to be a professional mechanic; he preferred to work on cars only as a hobby.

From a young age, Pierre learned everything he could about NFL football. In high school, he routinely practiced many hours a week, working his hardest to keep improving. He admitted to mainly learning what to do and what not to do through trial and error, in practices and games.

Jeremiah learned more quickly through physical involvement, even if that meant simply writing down ideas versus just listening in the classroom. Evidence of his learning came when he could "do things alone and quicker", especially with regard to football. He considered learning to be very much about doing, mastery, and independence.

Martina overcame her fears with steady practice and support from her teacher. She also developed her technical skills, gained confidence, and performed her juggling routine in front of the entire class. She was very proud of her success.

Jasmine realized that her concentrated effort and practice, at home on her own, helped her succeed. Although learning to juggle was neither fun nor of any particular interest to her, she was determined to succeed in her course and was thrilled with her overall accomplishment.

Focus Group Participants' Written Narratives

Brenda's mother encouraged her to be creative and to develop her artistic talents, from a very young age, which she later realized could help her in many ways throughout her life. She began by overcoming her fear of the blank page to thinking out-of-the-box, in order to express herself and her vision. She was given the freedom, materials, and emotional support to explore visual arts in ways that made her increasingly more confident about who she was and what she could do. She described being a visual learner who is hands-on and who likes having knowledge presented to her orally. She recognized that practice, meaningfulness of her work, and love of art were key to her success. (Childhood)

Giselle resented being forced to take piano lessons at five years of age. She initially disliked her very strict piano teacher, the one who eventually taught Giselle the value of discipline and hard work, despite her protests and pleadings to quit. She learned to master the piano by understanding theory, developing technique, and appreciating piano music and its foundations. Her confidence increased with her success and she began putting her heart and soul into playing piano. (Childhood)

Raylene was very excited to learn how to ride a bicycle like all the other children in the neighborhood. After she had gotten her father to take off her training wheels, she realized that she did not know what to do. At that point, she asked her sister for help. Her sister held the back of Raylene's seat and sent her off, once she felt balanced. She kept peddling until she was riding like everyone else. She learned to stop the hard way and suffered painful injuries from not knowing how to use the handbrakes. She was proud to have learned to ride her bicycle on her own, with only minimal instruction from her sister. (Childhood)

Once Irene had learned the alphabet at school from routine sing-a-longs in kindergarten class, she wanted her father to teach her how to write her name. She described learning one weekend by listening to her dad, watching what he did, and doing it herself over and over again until she got it. She realized that she learned in more than one way. She felt proud having accomplished something so important, which she considered instrumental to her independence and her future. She was thrilled to receive praise from her father and teachers. (Childhood)

Appendix L

Common Themes across Participants: Quotes from the Focus Group Discussion and the Written Narratives

Focus Group Discussion (and Final Comments)

Learning from mistakes.

My French teacher...did not allow us to make any mistakes. It was really intimidating for me. I was so afraid to make a mistake in French class. (Brenda, Discussion)

My grade four teacher was the same way. She made us stand in front of the class and recite the verbs and if you couldn't do it, she'd say, "No, no! Sit down!" (Raylene, Discussion)

It's degrading. It makes you feel stupid. (Giselle, Discussion).

It just discourages you and makes you not want to do school. (Brenda, Discussion)

It's not that I can't do it. It's just that I don't have the confidence. (Brenda, Discussion)

We all have the same complaints about the school system. (Raylene, Discussion)

Whatever it is, school should not make you feel stupid—Ever! Ya! Ya! Ya! Ya! (Brenda, Raylene, Giselle & Irene, Discussion)

Meaningful connections.

It is important to be interested, passionate and enthusiastic. (Brenda, Discussion)

Teachers should make connections to the real world. (Giselle, Discussion)

It's so important to learn in meaningful ways—what is meaningful to us and how that relates to the world, past and present. To learn is to connect by learning about what the world is about and who we are. (Brenda, Discussion)

If I talk about it and have a good conversation about it like we're doing right now, then that's the best thing for me to learn. (Raylene, Discussion)

Debating, discussing and even talking is important to find out what you think and feel and believe and why. (Brenda, Discussion)

I don't find teachers make good connections between subjects. It should all connect. There's so much and it's so interesting and I really find they don't focus enough on that kind of thing. (Brenda, Discussion)

Whatever history you're learning should relate to the literature you're reading and the music you're learning. (Brenda, Discussion).

That's why a lot of people don't like history. It's the same thing over and over again. (Raylene, Discussion)

It's like you can't do a puzzle without seeing what the picture looks like. We need to see the big picture with structure and meaning to consolidate ideas with direction and purpose. (Irene, Discussion)

They should explain the big picture and then go into detail. They don't do that. They don't break it down. (Brenda, Discussion)

Mr B. keeps you interested like he's just having a conversation. (Raylene, Discussion)

Ms. G. tries to make people interested in current events so we don't get bored. She brings in articles, movies...I haven't had many teachers like that. (Brenda, Discussion)

Responsibility for learning.

I think a lot of the learning has to do with the teacher. (Raylene, Discussion)

Often when we had a teacher we didn't like, we did not like the subject we were learning. Early experiences can determine whether we will enjoy a subject in the future or not. (Giselle, Discussion)

Teachers are a huge influence and play a huge role. (Giselle, Discussion)

A fun teacher equals a fun subject. (Giselle, Discussion)

When courses are boring, I can't learn. (Raylene, Discussion)

We all thought we learned better if we enjoyed the class and the teacher. (Irene, Discussion)

I'm able to learn better if it's explained to me all at once—if it's all laid out for me. They don't do that. I've asked so many teachers to do that. (Brenda, Discussion)

Confusion about learning.

I'm not the kind of person that can learn in class. There's too much distraction! Well, it's harder under pressure. I think in a different way and I don't think they get it, which is why I don't succeed as well as I should on exams and essays. (Brenda, Discussion)

We all learn visually or by actually participating in the task that is being taught. (Raylene, Discussion)

I did not really notice any differences. (Raylene, Discussion)

People learn things differently and similarly. (Irene, Discussion and Final Comments)

I truly realized that everyone learns differently. (Giselle, Final Comments)

I learned that everyone learns in a different way, which allowed me to appreciate why people have strengths in some areas and weaknesses in others. (Brenda, Final Comments)

I learned how my friends learned and that people learn things differently. (Raylene, Final Comments)

Discussing learning (with peers and teachers).

Discussing learning [allows] students to understand...themselves and others. (Brenda, Discussion)

I learned not to give up just because someone does not teach you a certain way that you learn. Try to make every learning experience a positive learning experience. (Raylene, Discussion)

If students tell teachers about how they learn, it would be easier for the teacher. (Irene, Discussion)

It was interesting to see the different experiences people went through during memorable learning experiences. Their points of view were interesting to hear about too. (Giselle, Final Comments)

It was fun and interesting to discuss how my friends learned. (Irene, Final Comments)

I found discussing learning with my peers to be fascinating. My overall participation in this study has been informative and has provided me with a greater understanding of other people. (Brenda, Final Comments)

I think professionals should ask students how they learn to help teachers expand their way of teaching. (Raylene, Final Comments)

It's just something they need to do more research on to really understand how people learn. I believe professionals in the field of education should ask students about their learning experiences. (Brenda, Final Comments)

Written Narratives (and Written Comments)

Meaningful connections.

Even though I was really young, I enjoyed sewing. (Margarita, Narrative)

Music is part of my everyday life. (Syd, Narrative)

I was so excited to ride my new bike. (Jane, Narrative)

I had a lot of motivation to learn how to speak English, so I could actually participate and make friends. (Andreas, Narrative)

I've always been interested in learning how to read a little bit of Japanese. (Vito, Narrative)

Snowboarding was fun and daring. (Cate, Narrative)

I actually wanted to wakeboard. (Simon, Narrative)

When I was young, football was my dream. (Pierre, Narrative)

[This] learning experience...will follow me for the rest of my music career and the rest of my life. (Giselle, Narrative)

I believe that developing my creativity as a child will be of benefit to me in many fields for my entire life. (Brenda, Written Comments)

I really wanted to play with the other kids riding their bikes. (Raylene, Narrative)

Responsibility for learning.

It took me a day to ride my bicycle, and I didn't give up. I learned the hard way, on the ground and in pain. (Jane, Narrative)

I got [my license] now, which I am proud of. (Daniel, Narrative)

ESL was probably the hardest thing I had to learn. I was pretty proud I learned to speak English. (Andreas, Written Comments)

After a bit of difficulty and struggling, piano was something I was able to learn. Playing the piano was one of my biggest accomplishments. (Flora, Narrative)

I tried as hard as I could to achieve my goal. I learned how to read a bit of Japanese and I was proud of myself. (Vito, Narrative)

I learned to be daring and to never give up. Finally, the goal I had for the day was accomplished. I went downhill without falling! I was very proud. (Cate, Narrative)

I felt fabulous that I had succeeded in my goal of learning how to write my name. (Irene, Narrative)

It was important to have discipline. If you do everything you can to learn something, the result will be better. (Irene, Narrative)

If you truly put your heart and soul into it, anything is possible. (Giselle, Written Comments)

Learning piano was a package deal, which included discipline and dedication. (Giselle, Narrative)

I was really proud that I managed to teach myself how to ride a two-wheeler. (Raylene, Narrative)

Learning as process.

I learned by watching my grandmother sew. I learned to take time and do it well and not to hurry, to have patience. (Margarita, Narrative)

I learned by practicing [violin] every day for long hours. (Syd, Narrative)

I observed the kids biking for about an hour. Then I realized that I was going to have to practice and learn the mechanics of riding a bicycle. (Jane, Narrative)

I think I learned most of my English through a mix of some of the knowledge I had already gained from ESL and applying it. (Andreas, Narrative)

I went down the hill still falling, but improving over time. (Cate, Narrative)

I was a very quick learner when I saw something done. (Jeremiah, Narrative)

Learning is about practicing often, taking the time, and watching others. (Carl, Narrative)

Learning piano [involved] concentration. (Giselle, Narrative)

I learned by paying attention, watching, and learning from my mistakes. (Khan, Narrative)

The process of learning something isn't always fun. Sometimes practice does make perfect. (Jasmine, Narrative)

I learned that in order to learn a lesson I have to live and go through it. (Catarina, Narrative)

I learned by watching and by actually doing things myself. (Raylene, Narrative)

I learned by listening, watching and doing. If I'm watching someone doing it, I can do it after. (Irene, Narrative)

I know that the best way for me to learn is through first hand experience, as opposed to just listening to the experience of another. (Brenda, Written Comments)

Support of significant others.

If it weren't for my grandmother, I wouldn't be making clothes and doing fashion shows. (Margarita, Narrative)

The ESL teacher was really nice, patient and worked a lot to help me learn the language. My father taught me words that I didn't know and would not have learned at that age. He has always been around to push my education. (Andreas, Narrative)

[My friends] all taught me so much that without even one of them I don't think I would be the same. (Mary, Narrative)

I learned that parents have a huge role in the learning of the child...I learned with discipline, fear and importantly love. Parents need to be involved and help their children develop a will to learn. (Syd, Written Comments)

I got some basic tips from a couple of friends. Later, they congratulated me with open arms. (Cate, Narrative)

All it took was my dad to push me a little bit. (Simon, Narrative)

Thanks to my dad I know how to drive both standard and automatic. (Daniel, Narrative)

My teacher greatly encouraged me to practice at home on my own free time. (Jasmine, Narrative)

I [got] some instruction from my sister. (Raylene, Written Comments)

I truly appreciate what my parents and Sister M. have done for me to succeed. (Giselle, Written Comments)

My dad was patient and kept showing me how to write the correct way. (Irene, Narrative)

My mother encouraged me to express myself artistically. (Brenda, Narrative)

Appendix M

Guidelines for Students to Construct and Reflect on Written Narratives of their Most Memorable Learning Experiences (Andrade, 2013)**Part A: Constructing Written Narratives about Memorable Learning Experiences**

- 1) Construct a personal story about a most memorable learning experience;
- 2) Begin close to the central moment of this experience;
- 3) Include important details about your learning experience;
- 4) Include few, if any, quotes or dialogue; and
- 5) Wrap up after the end of the incident with an effective or catchy last line about your learning experience.

This guideline may help students contextualize and structure their personal stories with a clear beginning, middle, and end.

--Adapted from van Manen (1999).

Part B: Reflecting on Written Narratives about Memorable Learning Experiences

- 1) Why did you want to learn?
- 2) How did you learn?
- 3) What influenced your learning?
- 4) What did you learn?
- 5) How did you know that you had learned?

Students' personal reflections about their most memorable learning experiences, guided by their answers to these questions, may ease them into subsequent discussion about their learning, whether in pairs, groups, or as a class.

Appendix N

**Supportive Framework for Discussing Students' Most Memorable
Learning Experiences (Andrade, 2013)**

Meaningful Connections Why did you want to learn? What made this learning experience meaningful to you? How did you connect personally to this experience?	Responsibility for Learning How did you take ownership of your learning? What goals did you set and accomplish? What challenges did you overcome?
Learning as Process How did you learn? What were you thinking, observing, and doing? How did you construct your knowledge of content and skills?	Support from Others How did others support and facilitate your learning? How did they provide instruction, guidance, modeling, and/or encouragement?
Other What other aspects of your learning experience would you like to highlight, not represented by the aforementioned four themes?	