

TEACHING WITHOUT A SCRIPT: EDUCATING A 'YOU'NIQUELY
DIVERSE GROUP OF CHILDREN IN A ONE-ROOM
SCHOOL HOUSE: WHY CAN'T ALL KIDS BE
TAUGHT AS IF THEY ARE GIFTED?

by

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ABSTRACT

ECHO School was created as a place where *Every Child Has Options*. Conceived by a group of parents and one teacher who wanted to continue a constructivist model they had previously valued in a public magnet school that was forced to discontinue its program, ECHO was designed to support a multi-age population of students (K-12). These children, who were diverse in academic abilities, interest, educational needs and socioeconomic backgrounds were taught in a modern day “one room schoolhouse” via a gifted model to encourage independent and critical thinking in students without dependence on textbooks or scripted lessons. The non-profit program, which lasted four years, built a curriculum of individual goals and objectives based on the Alabama Course of Study and incorporated a wide range of technology to differentiate instruction for the students. As a result of individualized planning, students were able to become autonomous learners and creative thinkers, while at the same time working collaboratively with the group to teach and learn from one another. There was no beginning or end to their scholarship; because there was no ceiling, they could reach for the stars. This study utilizes narrative inquiry to explain how the stakeholders of ECHO experienced teaching and learning in a context that met the needs of diverse learners.

DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Mike and my son, Matt. I have finished the degrees; it should be all “Easy Street” from here on out. Thank you for your love, encouragement, and unending support through this life-long process. I love and appreciate you both. Also, to my Mom, Clint and Denise, Nicole and Tommy, my three Grandgirls – Bella, Sydney and Abby, my brother, Mike and sisters, Kathy and Sean and my sweet Gracie; you all inspire me to teach. Thank you and I love you.

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CHAPTER I:
INTRODUCTION

You are about to embark on a story of learners. There are learners of many different ages, learning levels, interests, backgrounds, neighborhoods, and abilities. In our public school systems, however, the schools do not always recognize this diversity. This story is about a school that was different. Here the learners, some teachers, some students, some parents, sought a learning model that addressed the needs of everyone in the classroom because of their belief that everyone in the class is unique. Current educational models seek to standardize curriculum and force all learners into a one size fits all classroom (Kohn, 2001). In our system of schools, one group of students, however, is treated differently from everyone else in school. These learners are singled out, assessed, taught according to their needs and desires, given choices and they are taught through *authentic* experiences that represent real life learning situations, that make sense because the learner can make connections and that are part of a larger whole that is the learner's life. They are allowed to get out of their desks and move around; they are respected for their opinions, they are allowed to try new things and even allowed to make mistakes in the process of learning. These learners are not limited to textbooks and memorization, but use multiple resources that satisfy multiple needs, learning styles and interests. Through these *authentic* methods and models, they get to learn about fun and interesting concepts and skills. These special learners are the gifted children.

At ECHO (Every Child Has Options), we drew on this principle with a new twist. We asked a critical question: Why can't all learners be taught as if they are gifted? It was our belief that all children should be assessed and taught to their strengths, needs, and desires, no matter what their ability or disability. In the following pages, a story will unfold that engages this question. I will discuss a form of teaching called constructivism that pays close attention to individual needs of each diverse child, allowing them to take ownership in their learning and construct meaning from their authentic learning experiences. This story describes our successes and our failures and examines the possibilities for teaching all children as if they are gifted.

ECHO: A Student's Perspective

Maddy, a former ECHO student wrote *The Constructivist Way* for her college education class in 2004. A senior, who had completed three years of an International Baccalaureate program, she wanted something different in education. After graduating from ECHO the first year, she continued, as a volunteer teaching Spanish for three more years.

The Constructivist Way

Imagine walking into a classroom with students busily walking around as opposed to sitting at desks. As you observe the students, you realize they are not having free time, but are actively involved in learning. While some students are creating posters for book reports, others are demonstrating math skills by cooking in the kitchen. This type of schooling is an alternative approach called constructivism. This type of program focuses on kinesthetic, or hands-on learning. It provides a flexible, fun environment for students to learn. As a firm believer in a hands-on experience, I believe that the constructivist's program is a better way for students to learn than the traditional classroom setting.

Perhaps the most interesting characteristic of this type of program is its non-grading method. Most people have gone through school receiving a letter grade on a report card. While receiving an “A” may be satisfying, grades take the focus away from learning. To receive the best grade possible, a student focuses on information required to score well on a test as opposed to actually understanding the concept. Thus, the letter grade measures memorization and test taking ability. On the other hand, a student who receives a bad grade becomes discouraged. This discouragement can affect the student’s self-perception as a capable learner. Instead of letter grades, constructivist program instructors provide evaluations. Evaluations are written reports of a student’s weaknesses and strengths. Evaluations truly reflect how well a student is learning in school. This gives room for improvement without being discouraging. Once weaknesses are identified, a contract between teacher, student and parent can be created; new goals are set which provide encouragement for students. Successful application of these concepts allows the teacher to measure the student’s actual understanding of the concepts. Most importantly, the student naturally proceeds at the most rapid rate possible in as many areas as possible.

This leads us to another great aspect of a constructivist education program. Constructivist programs focus on individual learning plans (ILP). The teacher assesses the student’s capabilities when creating a contract. Unlike traditional schools, constructivist program children do not sit down and read about the same subject at the same time as their classmates. Does it make sense to force children to learn the same subjects when everyone is on a different level? Constructivist children do research projects, experiments and schoolwork according to their ILP. Then, they present the information to their classmates. Because of a

wide age range in a constructivist school, program students learn from classmates and individual learning plans with guidance from their teacher.

As a volunteer at a constructivist program based school, I see firsthand the benefits of the program. I watch as students master concepts, which amaze me. Then, I watch the students share these concepts with their classmates. As a result of the multiple age classroom, students have the same teacher and the same classmates for more than a year. This creates close relationship and a sense of belonging. Most importantly, as I walk into the classroom I see happy students who are eager to learn.

This dissertation contains several different genres of writing. Throughout this document, meet the former students and parents of ECHO Home School Cooperative; hear their voices through narratives like this one. There is some autobiographical narrative throughout; I was both a participant and I am the researcher. There are stories and letters that some students and parents have written, stories that I wrote about students and stories relating to the people in our school. There is a bit of technical, but not too technical, research writing – supporting literature with quotes and citations and perhaps some unusual vocabulary. In Appendices A-I, there are examples of school documents that illustrate the school setup student work and student progress: A) the school schedule for the first week’s lessons and B) field notes I wrote about the students during the first week of school at ECHO. There are C, D & E) three newsletters, one written by me, one of the first I turned over to the students and a later, more detailed student written newsletter. F) The Talents outline illustrates the ways in which the students practiced thinking skills and the G) letter to our City pictures shows how the ECHO children made authentic happenings into learning lessons with a purpose. In H) there is the complete transcript of a parent interview regarding their child with special needs and how schools have and have not served her

needs, and the final narrative report of a student who attended ECHO in the final year, another example of how children are sometimes served by the public school system. Finally, there are conclusions, suppositions and editorialized comments based on my research and on my experience in learning.

In technical terms, this could be called narrative inquiry that draws on certain ideas from a sociological perspective approach called phenomenology. Phenomenology is the exploration of how we perceive our world and the meanings we give to our experiences of this world. These meanings are based on all of our past knowledge, feelings, and experiences, throughout our lives. So, you and I can share the same experience and yet we can see it and feel it in different ways. From a phenomenological perspective, each of the different narratives of the participants is brought to bear on each other so that we can then understand the phenomenon of ECHO more deeply.

As you read, I hope it will become apparent to you, the reader, that these are not just stories of a small group of people who started their own school. Their stories may also reflect the experiences of students and teacher all over our state, or country, perhaps even our world. They are the stories of children who are successful in our school systems and they are stories of many who are not so lucky. These may be your stories.

The ECHO Story

The Pre-History of ECHO

ECHO was modeled after a public magnet school, which was one of three local, public schools that received grants to plan exemplary programs to draw children from predominantly white schools into neighborhood schools, which were predominantly African American. It was initiated in an attempt to help balance the racial numbers in schools that did not represent the

racial composition of the city because the city was under a federal mandate to integrate the schools.

I had been placed in a K/1 class at that magnet school during the second semester of my undergraduate program and as soon as I walked through the door, I knew that this place was where I was meant to teach. There were children walking down the halls with their noses buried in books. Classrooms were vibrant with interest centers, computers, books, and conversation. I learned that there were no grades; teachers wrote narratives for each child at report card time. There were no textbooks; teachers used multiple resources to go beyond the textbook, including trade books, hands on activities and computers. Here, was a full-time art teacher and a full-time music teacher, where other schools in the district only had one semester of each. A drama teacher included all children who tried out in the twice-yearly school play productions. The teachers worked together to plan and had an excellent program of staff development; they were committed to teach using best practices. There seemed to be a community of learners and they were proud of the learning going on at that school. I taught at the magnet school for five years, until the magnet program was discontinued.

During my tenure at the magnet school, many changes occurred. Our school was one of the first literacy schools in the state to go through the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI). A full third of the teachers, myself included, became trained as presenters for the ARI modules and we were some of the first to go through the certification program at the local university for reading specialists. We expanded our focus from literacy and technology to include the arts and changed the name of the school to Unfolding Potential to Arts in Education. Then, falling tax revenue, which in our state supports education, left the state schools in proration. Budgets were cut. Other schools complained that the magnet schools had privileges not shared by all. The principal

retired and was replaced. Another magnet school closed and the students and teachers were divided up between other schools, causing an influx of people who were unfamiliar with the non-traditional set-up of the school. Parents, too, were upset about the school because their students were failing the standardized tests and there were protests that divided the school into a traditional/non-traditional program. Because the numbers opting for the non-traditional program were small, the board decided to close down the program. With all of the transformation, it was decided that the magnet school would return to its original traditional program, complete with textbooks, programs, and grades. Some were happy; others were devastated. Magnet parents had already begun to worry about where their students would go. Some approached me and asked if I would teach their children. Flattered, I laughed it off.

In the midst of the upheaval, I was finishing my coursework for a master's degree in reading education. Taking a foundations class, our focus was socio-cultural learning theory of education. I was beginning to see the theory behind the way we were teaching at the magnet school. If this teaching model was advocated in graduate education courses, I wondered why all schools were not following the same path, but I knew that what we were doing in the non-traditional setting was time intensive, required special training, and a great deal of commitment. My professor asked what my plans were for after the magnet closing; I had not even considered anything else.

“Why don't you start a school?” “Sure,” I laughed it off again. But the more I thought about it, the better it sounded to me, so I asked if I could create a school for my class project, and that is exactly what I did. By the end of the summer, along with a group of interested parents, we had a core group who were committed to building a homeschool cooperative.

Theoretical Foundations of ECHO

The ECHO School plan was based on a foundation of these educational theorists: Piaget, Vygotsky, Dewey, and Gardner, combined with the educational psychologists who built and supported the concept of a solid, equitable and caring progressive education. Piaget and Vygotsky, similar in educational theory, proposed a constructivist model of learning where the students build their understanding through interplay with materials and social interaction. Our former magnet school had based its constructivist philosophy on the Piagetian theory of a developmentally appropriate education of learning through doing. It was through subsequent graduate course work that I was introduced to Vygotsky and his notions of social learning theory, scaffolding the learner, and learning through play. John Dewey, often recognized as the father of progressive education, set the tone for students learning and constructing their own knowledge through experience. Howard Gardner and his theory of multiple intelligences (MI) supported teaching to the individual learning styles of every student. With MI, it is possible to recognize that there is more than one way to be smart and allows for an environment conducive to teaching all children to the strengths of their intelligences.

The plan began, based on educational theory, the constructivist magnet school model and, our imagination, wishes and dreams for what we believed were best practices for a children's education. As a result, ECHO focused on *arts*, *diversity*, and *community* as key principles that were highlighted by these theorists and they were achieved through *technology*, which allowed the heterogeneous group to work according to their individual and unique needs.

The ECHO Plan

ECHO was planned as an eclectic learning environment featuring multi-age K-8 grouping, arts-based curriculum, inclusivity of diverse students, research based, focusing on

experiential based learning, with a school-wide enrichment model (*a gifted education for all*), using a literacy-centered environment and inquiry-based/student-initiated projects. Like Dewey's school, we would use authentic, real world activities and assessment.

Rather than standardized tests, the school would implement alternative forms of assessment such as electronic portfolio samples, student work samples showing progress, anecdotal records, student self assessments, parental assessments, daily reflections, weekly contract/journal of activities, teacher and student made assessments (rubrics/tests).

Progress reports would include Individualized Learning Plans (ILP - *similar to special education IEP's*) developed according to the student's strengths, weaknesses, and goals set by *teacher, student, and parents* and comprehensive narrative reports based on the individual learning plan. This narrative report relays student progress, including areas of study the student has completed during the semester, successes and recommendations for further investigation, enrichment and development.

The Arts would include opportunities for drama through local theater, reader's theater, music, artists in residence, drawing/painting/crafts, elements of design, artist studies, and creative projects. Through the arts, we would be able to learn through play, as advocated by Vygotsky.

Technology would be the tool utilized to support unique learning styles, abilities, interests and multiple intelligences. Using computer programs such as Microsoft Office (Word, PowerPoint, Publisher), digital camera work, video production, video display, web sites and keyboarding, would provide the resources to meet multiple needs through writing presentations, music, electronic portfolios and learning games.

In this study, I have used the narratives of the children and parents of ECHO School to tell the story of what happened at the non-traditional homeschool cooperative. As the author, my voice will be evident, loud and clear, but it is important to hear the perspectives of the other stakeholders. As researcher and participant, I will attempt to step back and see ECHO from another perspective. I present that opportunity to experience those voices through interview transcripts, letters, and daily reflective journals created when students attended the school. Specifically, I will focus the interviews on how ECHO was experienced through the following questions: 1) why did you come to ECHO; 2) what did you do while you were at ECHO; and 3) why did you leave ECHO and how did ECHO impact your life after you left the school?

In the coming chapters, I will present foundations of ECHO: how it was formed and on whose theories it was built. Read all about learning: the theorists whose ideas framed teaching and those concepts that framed the ECHO School, and the narrative inquiry methodology used to extrapolate the perceptions of the ECHO stakeholders, to ascertain the reasons they left the security of public school, for the unknown of a homeschool cooperative. Hear the narratives of former ECHO students and parents regarding why they came to ECHO, how they participated in the ECHO school and why they chose to leave the school. In the last two chapters, you may look at the data, conceptualized into meaningful explanations and implications and then pull it all together for the conclusion of this, the story of ECHO School.

CHAPTER II:

WHAT ABOUT LEARNING?

In large states public education will always be mediocre, for the same reason that in large kitchens the cooking is usually bad. –Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 - 1900)

One of the biggest problems we face in our world today is that every time we find something that works, we try to universalize it, trying to make it apply to everyone one and everything. But, there is no ‘one size fits all’ anything. There are far too many variables in learners, learning processes, teachers, and teaching styles for one cookie cutter style to fit the needs of everyone. There is a need to recognize that each person is unique and deserves an education that matters to them. In this way, there will be no winners and losers in education. As Freire stated in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), “there are neither ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only men who are attempting, together to learn more than they now know” (p. 63).

In this chapter, I will look at the evolution of learning theory, learning process, and learners. I will begin with an overview of the ever-evolving hypotheses of the learning theorists. First, I will investigate the three generations of learning theory (Iran-Nejad & Homaifar, 2006), from behavioral to information processing to biofunctional learning theory, a current constructivist learning theory, described in Iran-Nejad and Homaifar (2006) *Biofunctional Learning and Performance*). Iran-Nejad and Homaifar refer to the behavioral psychologists as “first generation” learning theorists and the cognitive psychologists [information processing theory] as “second generation” learning theorists, and the biofunctionalists as “third generation”

learning theorists (2006). Finally, I will discuss the work of learning theorists whose work has influenced the philosophy of ECHO school, the curriculum, and the educational pedagogy for a group diverse group of learners in an inclusive setting.

Defining Learning

From the Greek philosophers to Skinner to Gardner, over the centuries, educators, psychologists, scientists, and sages have attempted to develop a theory that explains learning. Upon the foundations of those theories, educators construct their school curriculum and pedagogy. However, if there were only one way to learn, then surely the experts would have no need to continue to define and refine the theories of learning. We know many of these theories do not work for some learners; certainly none of them work for all learners. *Different* people learn *differently* in *different* situations. And then, it all depends on how you define learning.

The Evolution of Learning Theory

Since the time that Socrates expected his students to seek knowledge through questioning, learning became individualized, contrary to a classic Greek education consisting of memorization and recitation. In *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (1999), Editors Bransford, Brown, and Cocking compiled theories of learning, old and new, for the Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. They noted, “the meaning of ‘knowing’ has shifted from being able to remember and repeat information to being able to find and use it” (Simon, 1996, p. 5).

If that is the case, then perhaps it is time to take a look at school curricula and teaching methodologies to be sure that it has kept up with the theory. I will address learning theories over the past century and how they relate to actual learning.

Behaviorism:

The First Generation of Learning Theory

The theory of behaviorism was popularized by Pavlov's experiment with his dog. Pavlov (1927) was a physiologist who, while studying digestion, noted that when it was time to feed his dogs, they would begin to salivate at the sight of their food. The food was the *stimulus* and the salivation was the *response*. He thought that if he paired two stimuli and trained the dogs to associate the two stimuli with the response, he would evoke a *conditioned response*; the dogs would respond (salivate) to both stimuli. Pavlov paired the food with a bell. As the food came, the bell sounded. Soon, the dogs would salivate to the sound of the bell because they knew food would be coming. As the dogs became sensitized to the bell, the food was removed and the dogs would salivate when they heard the bell, but no food would be delivered. Eventually, the dogs would no longer salivate to the bell. This was called classical conditioning and it is based on an innate response (salivating to food) coupled with a stimulus (bell), creating a conditioned response (salivating to the bell). These findings were instrumental to Watson's (1920) theory of behaviorism.

B. F. Skinner (1935) added a component to Pavlov's theory: reinforcement. He worked with rats in the "Skinner box," a changeable maze. He believed that positive reinforcement would promote a behavior. With operant conditioning, the reinforcement came after the response in the form of praise or a reward. This form of behaviorism is used widely in schools for teaching and classroom management. "Motivation to learn was assumed to be driven primarily by drives, such as hunger, and the availability of external forces, such as rewards and punishments (e.g., Thorndike, 1913; Skinner, 1950)" (Bransford, 1999, p.6). Rewards such as stickers and grades are used as reinforcement for behavior goals. These theories of behaviorism

manifest themselves in teacher-centered educational experiences. This generally plays out as teacher-regulated, explicit, direct–instruction in the classroom.

Information Processing Theory:

The Second Generation of Learning Theory

The information processing theory of cognitive learning generally attributed to Atkinson and Shiffrin (1968) is based on a computer model and accounts for information in and information out (Information in → Short term memory (attention span) → (elaboration and coding) long term memory → Retrieval → Information out→). Following this theory, learning can be improved with enhanced methods of input (teaching/learning methods) as in using better software in a computer to produce a better product. Although, a more elaborate theory than the behavioral learning theory of SR (stimulus – response), this cognitive learning theory still only represents the idea of receiving, storing, and retrieving information. However, just as a computer does not experience feelings or respond to what goes on around it, the learning theory does not allow for the interaction of the learning environment or dynamic modes of functioning.

Biofunctional Learning:

The Third Generation of Learning Theory

Although modern learning theory boasts a computer model of information processing, input, and rehearsal, which result in learning, that kind of learning does not often result in understanding. Understanding is felt individually inside the learner. It is achieved by making connections with prior lived experiences and a reorganization of meaning (Iran-Nejad, Gregg, & Cound, 1998). The notion of biofunctional learning -- learning with the whole body involves seeing, hearing, and feeling (sensing). It is understanding. It is knowing. It is intuitive. It is what is natural to the child (Iran-Nejad, 2009).

In *Biofunctional Learning and Performance*, Iran-Nejad and Homaifar (2006) discuss the notion of schema and information processing theory as a sequential or hierarchical system of organization of information in the brain. They suggest the analogy that the brain is the night sky and pieces of knowledge are the stars. There are two kinds of activity going on in the brain: 1) ongoing brain activity (OBA) is dynamic mode of functioning, always working in the background; and 2) momentary constellation firing (MCF) is the active mode of functioning, as you learning something new. The stars in the night sky (OBA) are the intuitive knowledge base – information you have already acquired and they stay lit (ongoing) in the background sky. When something new is learned, additional stars light up and combine with all of the background knowledge stars that have connections to what is being learned, momentarily lighting up to form a constellation (MCF) of what you have learned. As learning continues, new stars light up and combine with, again, all the related stars to form new reorganized constellations, or bodies of knowledge. Knowledge is continually shifting, making connections to previous knowledge and reorganizing to create new knowledge. Learning is a reorganization of prior knowledge.

When learning is piecemeal, knowledge is accumulated, but there is no accounting for understanding – making connections. Making the connections between the (momentary active and (ongoing) dynamic modes of functioning are what create understanding.

Constructivism

Constructivism is the learning process by which the learner makes the connections in learning. In *How People Learn*, Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (1999) refer to “a new theory of learning coming into focus that leads to very different approaches to the design of curriculum, teaching, and assessment than those often found in schools today” (p. 8). Further, they posited, “One of the hallmarks of the new science of learning is its emphasis on learning with

understanding.” (p. 8). Bransford’s new theory reference is to constructivism, which was greatly influenced by Piaget and Vygotsky and their successors.

Constructivism, as a process allows the learner to create (construct) their own meaning through active participation in the learning experience in addition to inner biofunctional influences (Iran-Nejad, 2005). What is learned from any given situation depends on what is already known, how, when, and why the learning situation is approached and the methodology by which the learning is delivered. Whereas the behaviorist theory of stimulus→ response and the information processing theory of input/output, are both piecemeal, teacher directed/student accepted forms of learning; constructivism is wholetheme, student-centered, multi-modal, discovery oriented, project-based, hands-on, social learning. It builds on prior knowledge; therefore, it is different for every learner.

Bransford (1999) uses the example of Lionni’s (1970) children’s picture book, *Fish is Fish*. In the story, the fish and tadpole are best friends, but the tadpole grows into a frog and goes onto the land, while the fish stays in the pond. The tadpole returns from land to the water to tell fish all about what he saw. The fish dreams of learning about being on land, but, hence, he cannot go because he would not survive. As the tadpole describes the sights, fish imagines the pictures in his head; his idea of a man is visualized as a fish (what he knows) walking on fins, birds are fish with wings and cows are fish with udders. Because he has no concept of man, the fish cannot think outside the realm of what he already knows. Neither can children think out of their realm. Even though it might seem like a teacher makes more headway when he or she “tells” the information to the class, if they do not have the prior knowledge and they do not make the experiential connections themselves, they are unlikely to learn, understand or remember the information.

Constructivism as a learning theory is much more complex than the information processing theory of input → output; it takes into account environmental and biological influences that affect the learner. Because of this complexity, there are multifarious variations of the constructivist theme because one size does NOT fit all.

Many psychologists and educators have contributed to the constructivist theory. Constructivism includes a large subset of learning theories, including Jean Piaget's developmental theory, Lev Vygotsky's social development theory, John Dewey's pragmatic learning theory, Bandura's social learning theory, Carl Rogers' experiential learning theory, Jerome Bruner's discovery learning, and, Iran-Nejad's authentic wholetheme learning theory. Here, I will give a brief overview of the nuances of each of these constructivist theories and provide intermittent explanations of how we implemented the theories at ECHO School.

Jean Piaget is closely associated with constructivism because of his developmental theory of childhood learning. Piaget (1983) explained that children go through different phases of learning and it is important for the educator to understand these phases in order to plan appropriate curriculum and make learning meaningful to the student. Young children in preoperational and early concrete stages will not understand abstract concepts. They cannot learn the concepts by being told; they must work through the developmental phases of understanding.

Most important to the foundation of constructivism is that learning takes place in authentic situations. Vygotsky's (1978) notions of tools and symbols are important to teaching and learning. The tool that we use for communication, language, is the most important one in our society. Play allows children to imagine themselves in different worlds, making real connections to learning. Whether learning through play by scribbling grocery lists or playing school, "a child is never so serious about learning as when he is playing" (Kamii, 1996, p. 262).

Social learning theory, too, greatly influences the constructivist classroom. Children learn through social interaction with others. They learn from and teach each other. They expand their knowledge through dialog, listening and responding, arguing dissonances and reorganizing their thoughts. Whether through the written word or verbal social exchange, the learner's knowledge is socially constructed. Vygotsky (1978) stated,

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological)... All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals. (p. 57)

John Dewey expands his constructivist theory from the immediate social surroundings of Vygotsky, with the notion of *pragmatics*, or learning from the world around you. This idea heavily influenced the ECHO School plan. In *My Pedagogic Creed*, Dewey (1897) admonishes,

The teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child, but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these influences. (p. 9)

Further, he believed that school should reflect the child's social life, focusing on learning things that are relevant to the child's current social life, not teaching something that will not benefit them until years later. In other words, the child should be involved in authentic learning activities, ones which have meaning for him or her at the moment, ones that child can draw on their prior knowledge to make connection and make sense of. Dewey (1897) stated in *My*

Pedagogic Creed:

I believe that education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living.

I believe that the school must represent present life - life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the playground. (p.78)

At ECHO, we embraced the constructivist philosophy of teaching. Learning was meant to be relevant to the child. Activities were designed to be authentic: real and meaningful. We

wanted to teach by doing, what was natural to the child (Iran-Nejad, 2009) In this sort of environment, a teacher should never hear, “But why do I have to learn this” from a student. A learner should recognize the relevance of a learning experience.

This type of curriculum, learning from the world around us, included many fieldtrips. Usually, we traveled somewhere at least once a week, sometimes more. The children included play in their daily learning, whether it was through drama, art, swimming, playing games, or creating their own games. They wrote daily for many purposes: keeping daily reflective journals and writing thank you letters every week. (We always had someone to thank for something!) They wrote letters to the city asking for a stop sign at our corner where many days we would hear a screech and crash and run outside to see yet another wreck (see Appendix G).

Until we had to prepare to re-enter the public school system, we did not use math books. Following the Alabama Course Of Study math objectives, we played math games, solved math stories, and made up our own math problems. We measured, weighed, and calculated calories of candy bars, then wrote poetry about how delicious they were. We had Math Wednesday with the grocery ads and planned a Thanksgiving dinner on a budget. We collected catalogs and “purchased” gifts for our relatives at Christmas (If I had a million dollars, this is what I would buy for you!) We conducted an annual White Elephant Sale for Charity. When my youngest son was nearly eighteen and threatening to move out, my older students researched apartment prices, utility costs, food, and gas and prepared a budget to see if he could do it. (They decided he could not afford a girlfriend.) These were all relevant, interesting activities that satisfied the same objectives required of children using textbooks. These were lessons that did not always fit in a lesson plan book, abandoning the plan, we went with the teachable moment and I just wrote a note on the topic and then “LEARN” beside it.

Other theorists developed further facets of the constructivist theory. Student interest is a foremost requirement. Relevance, significance, curiosity, and self-choice are significant components to the learning process in order to engage the student in learning. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory indicated the highest level of learning would be achieved by making learning relevant, functional, and appealing to the learner.

Carl Rogers, founder of client-centered therapy, takes his theology and psychology backgrounds and applies his experiential learning theories to form the student-centered humanist theory of learning. In *Freedom to Learn* (1969), Rogers believes that learning comes from experience, which is much more than memorizing, remembering, learning names, dates, and other information. He refers to rote memorization as meaningless, whereas he sees experiential learning as significant. Rogers sees the role of teacher as a facilitator who 1) sets a positive climate for learning; 2) clarifies the purposes of the learner(s); 3) organizes and makes available learning resources; 4) balances intellectual and emotional components of learning; and 5) shares feelings and thoughts with learners. Rogers (1969) cited experiential learning principles as

- 1) Significant learning takes place when the subject matter is relevant to the personal interests of the student
- 2) Learning which is threatening to the self (e.g., new attitudes or perspectives) is more easily assimilated when external threats are at a minimum
- 3) Learning proceeds faster when the threat to the self is low
- 4) Self-initiated learning is the most lasting and pervasive. (p. 23-31)

Rogers proposed that learning take place in a safe learning environment with a facilitator who provides all of the care, support and resources to create a meaningful learning experience.

Further, Jerome Bruner proposed that learning occurs in active, engaging activities as in his discovery learning. "The most personal of all that he knows is that which he has discovered

for himself.” (Bruner, 1979, p. 82) He cautions, however, that discovery learning does not happen spontaneously, it is “a matter of rearranging or transforming evidence in such a way that one is enabled to go beyond the evidence so reassembled to new insights” (p. 82). Regarding motivation, Bruner believes learning should not be associated with rewards and punishments, that the discovery itself is its own motivating factor (p. 88).

It is that discovery, that “aha” moment that makes learning worthwhile. Rewards fade, but knowledge lasts forever. At ECHO, every so often, usually when we would get a new student who was not used to our unusual ways, regarding a task or assignment they were asked to perform, they might ask, “What do we get for that?” The whole rest of the class would stop and in unison chant out, “Knowledge!” I would say, and what does knowledge get you? They would reply, “Power!” They liked that. They eventually would start to feel it, understand it, and know it.

Iran-Nejad (1994) advocates for authentic learning using wholetheme instruction. Authentic learning is real; it is meaningful to the child. It relates to everyday experiences and makes sense in the scheme of the world. Wholetheme learning is multi-source; it goes far beyond the teacher. It not only comes from the text, it comes from the environment, the senses. According to Iran-Nejad (2005), understanding is achieved through multiple sources: external sources such as the natural world and the cultural world, internal sources, such as the inherent biological self (attention, emotion, imagination, thematic and categorical knowledge) and is regulated by active (momentary) and dynamic (ongoing) functions. It is not “assumed that the sum of parts will some day equal the whole” (Chen, Rovegno, & Iran-Nejad, 2002, p. 402) as with piecemeal learning. In a class utilizing piecemeal instruction, students might have a number of hour-long periods for different subjects. Each subject usually follows a textbook that is not

related to other subject areas. The students are learning isolated pieces of information.

In a wholetheme classroom, all of the subjects are integrated and centered on one topic. For example, one year at ECHO, our class theme was exploration. We not only studied exploration in depth around the time of Columbus Day, we explored geography and maps and cultures and settlements all throughout the year. We approached exploration from multiple sources and multiple subject areas. We read, we wrote, and we figured our math on the explorer's routes in days, miles and seasons. We made connections to exploration in any way that we could. So when did all the parts add up to a whole? They never did. Knowledge is infinite.

With all of the constructivist educational theorists mentioned thus far at the foundation of the learning program, ECHO initiated an authentic wholetheme environment for learning, where children learned through experience, in a safe place where they could make mistakes and learn from them, making ECHO the program it was. ECHO students participated in hands-on activities and projects that required them to be think. But there was more. Current learning theory includes the notion of biofunctional learning -- learning with the whole body -- seeing, hearing and feeling (sensing). This theory, combined with that of one educational theorist, I have not yet mentioned, created a learning atmosphere ripe for motivated learning. He was a part of our daily routine. We had a line hanging across our classroom, with posters asking: *How SMART are you* and *How are you SMART?* In between those two signs were eight posters announcing different ways that one could be smart, expanding the definition of intelligence eight-fold beyond the academic intelligence. Gardner brought us different kinds of smart and made it possible for everyone in the class to find something at which they were "best." That was a very important accomplishment in a class full of diverse learners with diverse learning styles.

Multiple Intelligences:

The First 25 Years

When Howard Gardner took the stage in St. Louis at the 2009 NAGC (National Association for Gifted Children) Conference, he said that he would be talking about his theory of multiple intelligences. He quipped that although many people have used his theory and written about his theory, most of what he read did not resemble his idea of multiple intelligences. I laughed, thinking of all the multiple intelligence “programs” that seem to be popping up and the multiple intelligence assessments being used to categorize and label children. Then, Dr. Gardner proceeded to talk about that exact concept as he framed his presentation. In the notes I scribbled on my paper, I had written:

- Authentic learning: teaching to the needs of diverse students (multiple abilities/disabilities, ages, levels, interest)
- Ethics: Treating everyone the same is unfair; it assumes only ONE WAY of being smart.
- Use assessment to teach, not to judge (ILP, IEP) – assessing each student for individuality – no labels, there is diversity within labels EVEN GIFTED (Gardner)
- Curriculum: Teaching to the needs of the child (equity); Teaching to the interests of the child; Teaching the Whole Child
- Using the computer as enabler – allows ability to teach

I recognized the framework immediately as resembling the foundation with which we built and ran ECHO School. Gardner included all the tenets by which we built our school and curriculum.

Learning Styles and Multiple Intelligences

Howard Gardner’s name is synonymous with multiple intelligences; he wrote the book on learning styles. Gardner attended Harvard College as a pre-law student, but became influenced by Eric Erikson and Jerome Bruner, who sparked his interest in psychology and human intelligence.

Gardner's (1983) *Frames of Mind* introduced his theory of multiple intelligences. Gardner believed that people learn in different ways and he isolated seven (original) intelligences: "The first two, linguistic and logico-mathematical, are ones that have been typically valued in schools; the next three are usually associated with the arts; and the final two are what Howard Gardner called 'personal intelligences.'" (Gardner 1999, p. 41). They include

- 1) Logical-mathematical intelligence -- analytical, mathematical and scientific;
- 2) Linguistic intelligence – language;
- 3) Musical intelligence -- skill and appreciation of music;
- 4) Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence -- using the body solve problems;
- 5) Spatial intelligence -- recognize and use patterns of spaces;
- 6) Interpersonal intelligence -- understand other people;
- 7) Intrapersonal intelligence - understand self; and
- 8) *Naturalistic intelligence – attunement with nature – plants and animals.

In his book, *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* (2000), Gardner added an eighth intelligence: **Naturalistic* a person's ability to be attuned with nature (flora and fauna) in his or her surrounding environment. In his presentation at the National Association for Gifted Children in November 2009, Gardner stated he now considers eight and one half intelligences, as he continues to work on the existential intelligence, or learning by seeing the big picture (i.e., Why are we here? What is my role in the world? What is my place in my family, school and community?) This intelligence seeks connections to real world understandings and applications of new learning.

Along with the popularity among educators with the theory of multiple intelligences, there are critics. Gardner has been criticized for many different wrongs from naming his

categories as intelligences rather than abilities or talents to having no empirical evidence on which to base his theory (Brody, 1992; Sternberg 1983, 1991). Howard Gardner (1993) is self-critical of his own MI theories stating, "intelligences are fictions -- at most, useful fictions -- for identifying processes and abilities that (like all of life) are continuous with one another" (p. 70).

Multiple intelligences allow a wide range of smartness. I have found in my teaching that when children can find success, they are motivated to learn. Authentic learning that is real and meaningful to the learner helps them achieve success. We as teachers cannot contrive smartness. We have to know the child and know and recognize his or her strengths – and know that even though they are all different, all learners have strengths.

Learners

“Who is just like you?” I have uttered these very same words in elementary, middle, high school, undergraduate, and graduate classes as well in teacher training and professional development workshops. The results are always the same. Close your eyes (if you are in a group) and raise your hand if you are just like your sibling(s). None? Well, then, if you are not the same as someone who has basically the same nature and the same nurture, how can we expect to group children who are the same age – within a year or so – of each other and expect them to learn the same thing every day? How can we expect them to have the needs, the abilities, the interest and the motivation to learn just as their age mates all over the world?

My brother and two sisters used to meet at our Grandma’s house in the summer, we would reminisce about places we had gone and things we did when we were young. Strangely, sometimes I wondered if we lived those same stories the versions were so different. It was like we had experienced our memories in different places and times. It was somewhat eerie.

Three of us, three years apart in age, had lived in the same house, with the same parent and relatives, went to the same schools, even had some of the same teachers, ate the same foods, and so on, yet none of us had the same educational experiences and even our childhood family memories brought totally different experiences. The youngest sister was ten years younger; we allowed her to be different.

This example illustrates how three siblings, all within three years age of one another, with almost identical lived experiences, could be such altogether different people. Yet in our public school systems, we group children, many from completely different backgrounds, with diverse abilities, interests and lived experiences, together with 25 other children who were born within one year of each other. In many instances, this produces a wide range of children to teach.

Within a “regular” classroom, there is a diverse spectrum of students. With special education legislation requiring students to be taught in their least restrictive environments (LRE), mainstreaming children with special needs into the regular classroom is common. This practice of inclusion demands that teachers recognize the needs of students.

What is Inclusion?

The special needs of children with disabilities in the public domain were addressed by Public Law 94-142 with the *1975 Education for All Handicapped* (later re-established as IDEA in 1990). However, the landmark case that actually included the most students, guaranteeing access equal educational opportunities, was *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* in 1954. It overruled the earlier *Plessy vs. Ferguson* in 1896 that allowed for segregation of white and black students under what was termed “separate, but equal.”

Inclusion, as addressed by the American educational system usually refers to including children with disabilities in their own home schools and accommodating their needs. But,

inclusion in a more broad sense, is addressed everyday in schools with growing populations of children, not only with learning disabilities, but ESL (English as a second language) and children from different cultures and backgrounds. Every child has the right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE).

Inclusive education focuses on the individual strengths that children bring to school rather than their perceived deficits, looking at whether children have the opportunity to take part in the normal life of the community or school, or whether there are physical and social barriers in the environment. (Peters, 2003, worldbank.org)

Automatically, a class can experience a wide range of diversity, without ever adding or subtracting from the original class roll.

What does a class full of students look like? If you think about what some might be considered an evenly distributed, average, Bell curve classroom, the largest number of children would be right in the middle. They are considered “average.” They are expected to be capable of doing most of the work that is offered in a standard curriculum with a modicum of motivation and effort. To the right, on that Bell Curve, there will be another, smaller group of kids who are a bit brighter and to whom schooling comes rather easily. On the other hand, there will be a group, on the other side of the continuum, just to the left of the middle, who need to work somewhat harder to get good grades in class. To the left and right of these middle groups are the extremes: children who struggle academically and children who have already surpassed the grade level objectives of their class.

“Gifted” children, unless they are in a private or special school elsewhere, will generally be placed in the regular classroom. If there is a program to serve their needs, they will likely have a pullout gifted program for part of the day or week and perhaps the teacher will offer differentiated instruction to enhance their learning. Or, they might just become bored and unmotivated. At the other end of the spectrum are the children with special needs who struggle.

They usually are not successful in the classroom and need support from a special teacher or aide, or require work that is geared toward their individual needs in order to thrive. Both of these extremes, struggling and gifted, have difficulties associated with them; so do all of the categories across the middle.

How do we determine who are the children with special needs? Why, we test them, of course. Children are administered specialized assessments and their scores are used to determine their labels. The children are reduced to a number. So, how does one 85 (the number can be a test score, an IQ score, or any random number) compare to another 85, or 112 to another 112? They must be exactly alike.

Contrary to the beliefs of some people, educators and administrators included, a pair of 102's is not necessarily alike. More factors determine a child's characteristics than a test on one day in their life (Devlin, Daniel, & Roeder, 1997). Are they rich? Are they poor? What are their likes and dislikes? What about physical, mental or emotional issues? Where did they grow up? Do they have one or two parents? Are the parents active in their education? What kinds of learning experiences have they had? What are their lived experiences? In special education, one gifted child is not just like another. There is a range in gifted – from barely gifted to profoundly gifted – almost as wide as the range from barely gifted to struggling. (Then, again there are also children who are gifted in some areas and strugglers in others.)

These standardized tests that measure intelligence can create problems for children all across the academic spectrum (Kohn, 1993). Scot Danforth (2008), in his article *John Dewey's Contributions to an Educational Philosophy of Intellectual Disability*, writes of Dewey's "belief that the use of intelligence tests as both undemocratic and impractical in meeting the needs of teachers" (p. 45).

(Special) education is a manipulation in numbers and letters. According to Baum and Olenchak (2002), the numbers and letters create a system of *ABC Children*, identified by their labels rather than by themselves. (So called) "Normal" children are label free and each category of special needs is has its allocated label: ADD, ADHD, MR, ED, EC, LD, SLD, there are those who insist that all children be categorized and labeled by letters. Their labels define them. But the label does not make the child; several of the myriad characteristics of a child qualify him or her to earn the label.

In a standardized structure, rarely are teachers allowed to teach children with special needs the information they need to navigate their world. However, Julie Allan (1999) points out that “these pupils need to be equipped with the personal tools and strategies to challenge and transgress the daily disabilism that they face” (p. 21). In gifted education, children are rewarded for being already being afforded an enriched education. They are qualified based on IQ for gifted programs (GT – Gifted and Talented), then are given hands-on thinking activities that are highly motivational and personalized to their interests and needs. Learning goes from being teacher-centered in the general classroom to being learner-centered in the gifted classroom. Students no longer answer the teacher’s questions; they pose their own questions and seek their own answers. They have enjoyed enriching experiences and as a result, they are able to accelerate, compact or skip the tedious, dull and boring learning and learn what is interesting and engaging to them. While students who are average or struggle have their information broken down into meaningless pieces and are expected to memorize and repeat what they have “learned” (Kohn, 2004). They may never experience the joy of learning. “Worse: Happiness in schools is something for which educators may feel obliged to apologize when it does make an appearance” (<http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/edweek/feelbad.htm>).

Children are labeled by numbers and grouped by labels. The wheat is separated from the chaff (Kohn, 2002). The smartest kids are pulled out and taught together so they can go as far as they can, and so the slower children will not hold them back. The children who struggle are pulled out of classes to be remediated, while missing the social interaction, important content and big picture of the educational learning environment of the classroom. They also miss the role models of successful learning. They are sentenced to a “demoralizing program; a curriculum of compliance” (Pijl, Skaalvik, & Skaalvik, 2010).

Children with differences are often seen as “Others” (Levinas, 1971) *Otherness*, simply defined, is anyone different from the Self. Levinas adds that the *Other* is seen as inferior, less than equal to the Self. Diversity comes in many different flavors: ethnicity, mental, emotional, philosophical, cultural, educational, socioeconomic, religion, sexual, gender, racial, ability and disability; all marginalized by the Self. There is a fear of knowing what to do with someone who is different – the *Other*. But the fear comes from not knowing. According to Jerome Bruner (1996) in *The Culture of Education*:

Individuals ... seek out dialogue and discourse with other active minds... it is through this dialogic, discursive process that we come to know the Other and his points of view, his stories. We learn an enormous amount not only about the world but about ourselves by discourse with Others. (p. 93)

Mary Ruth Coleman (1998) begs the question: “*Are we serious about meeting student needs?*” She believes not and offers a laundry list of what should have been done to make inclusion a viable situation in the public school classroom. Still, she believes, the support to offer differentiated instruction is just not there. According to Coleman, classes are too large, there are no support personnel, teachers are untrained and there is not enough instructional time to teach to the needs of the student after teaching to the standards and the test.

Inclusion at ECHO

At ECHO, students and teachers were able to see the *Other* every day in many different ways. We intentionally sought diversity by inviting families and offering scholarships to students who could not afford tuition and embraced that diversity because of our belief that children learn and grow from seeing and knowing the face of the *Other*. According to Luluvein (2010) in *School Inclusion and the Community of Practice*,

Inclusion is not a mechanism for relocating educationally disadvantaged youngsters in mainstream rather than in special schools. Rather, inclusion implies a whole school approach to social relations and production of meaning reached through processes of negotiation between parents, teachers and children. (p. 35)

In a one-room schoolhouse setting, competition waned and students were encouraged to compete against themselves toward their personal best. Everyone was different and we used those differences to our advantages. We found that each child was a unique individual with strengths and weaknesses, multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1997), if you will. When it was a given that everyone was different there was no need to worry about someone being better or worse and many of the peer pressures found in age grouping were minimized or disappeared. Following Dewey's lead, we made the world our classroom. We practiced a Vygotskian social learning method of cooperative learning where we built on our strengths, supported one another's weaknesses, and children were able to make learning meaningful as they were taught as if they all were gifted, according to their needs and interests. In a widely diverse environment, children were able to use their strengths to experience success, some for the first time, ever. With choice and enhanced, enriching content, each student could expand his or her starlit night sky.

Teaching All Students as Gifted

In my educational experience, I have taught, in 13 years, every grade (except 11th) from pre-K through graduate. I have taught gifted classes; I have taught children with special needs and every level in between. I have seen different programs for all of these areas and the best model I have witnessed has been for gifted children. Although all children in special education have an individualized learning plan, children at the struggler end of the continuum, usually have work broken down into manageable, sometimes, non-related, chunks – piecemeal learning. The children at the gifted end are trusted to make decisions on what and how they want to learn. As long as my daughter and son were in gifted classes, I never saw them once do anything that my non-academically gifted son could not have done. Further, he probably would have done better in school if he had experienced the interesting and engaging activities my other children. As I went back to school to become a teacher, I kept all of my gifted children’s work, and I made regular kids in my classes do it too. When they were given choices and voices, they became better students and active learners. The more I gave them, the more they wanted. And the higher my expectations were, the more they tried to meet them.

At ECHO School, without the pressure of grades and everyone working at their own pace, there was no need to accelerate or disassemble anything. We integrated subjects and created wholetheme-learning experiences (Iran-Nejad, 1997) that allowed the students to use their whole being to construct their own knowledge that made sense to them. Instruction was differentiated to the needs of each individual student (Tomlinson, 2002). Following Renzulli’s *School Enrichment Model*, we approached project based learning units with 1) “Type I enrichment (general exploratory experiences); 2) Type II enrichment (group training activities); and 3) Type III enrichment (individual and small group investigations of real problems); and

sought to employ enrichment teaching and learning (enrichment clusters)” (Renzulli & Reis, 1997, p. 34). Our annual White Elephant Sale was a result of a Christmas Talents project. Merging the Talents Unlimited thinking skills into the schoolwide enrichment steps, we decided to have an in class yard-like sale. The students brought unused items that they inventoried, priced, and sold. Then, they decided on a charity to donate the proceeds each year. Benefactors were St. Jude’s Children’s Hospital, the American Cancer Association, our local dog shelter, and our local United Way.

We used *Talents Unlimited*, Calvin Taylor’s thinking talents model (Schlichter, 1996) with Productive Thinking, Communication, Planning, Decision Making, and Forecasting (see Appendix F). With procedural guides for each talent, children became accustomed to the procedures and attuned to the language of the talents. For example, during a Productive Thinking Talent lesson, they will 1) think of many, 2) varied and 3) unusual things and 2) add to their ideas to make them better. My favorite of the talents, it has always amazed me that when students generate a list of ideas, they begin quite generically (no matter what the topic) and when they finally run out of ideas, they have to think harder and add more, the ideas become profound. Beginning these lessons as whole groups and then smaller groups, the students begin to think through the steps whenever were encouraged toward "thinking about thinking" (Bruner, 1996, p. 19) [which] has to be a principal ingredient of any empowering practice of education.

Conclusion

At ECHO, we were able to put into practice the theories of learning that we believed represented “best practice” in education. With multiple teachers, teaching students of varied age, ability, levels, interest and intelligences we implemented a variety of teaching methods and activities to cover the wide range. By taking the gifted model of assessing each individual

student, addressing their interests and motivations and allowing them a voice, giving them responsibility in learning, it was possible for all students to experience a higher level of success in learning.

Throughout this dissertation, examples of students' experiences at ECHO will be presented. Through their narratives, learn why they came and why they left and most importantly, what they did while they were at the ECHO Homeschool Cooperative.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Inviting children and parents to tell the story of ECHO School seemed natural. We dreamed ECHO together. We planned it together. We implemented it together. I wanted to tell the story of how we all, for many different reasons, came to Echo, built the programs and why it had to come to an end.

I know what *I* think. I know what *I* wanted ECHO to be. What is important from a researcher's point of view is that the perspective of the group is identified. If we look at more than one perspective, we can build our own interpretation of what ECHO School was really like.

During our time at ECHO, whenever a person who was interested in knowing about our school would come to visit, I would have students conduct a tour and answer questions. In this way, the visitor would see, hopefully, a more real and honest point of view. I always tended to see the sunshine. I saw ECHO as a success. It is possible that others had views different than mine. We shall see.

Introduction to Phenomenology

The goal of phenomenology is to gain a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday experience. Therefore, it is the phenomenologist's task to study lived experience. –van Manen, 1990

Phenomenology deals with lived experiences (van Manen, 1990; Cresswell, 1998). It is the study of certain group behaviors from the point of view of the members of the group. How do you find the point of view of a group? You study them. You observe them. You analyze

their artifacts. You ask them. You allow them to express their lived experiences through their stories. Within those stories, the researcher will search for consistencies. As the commonalities are found, they are highlighted, and then categorized by theme. As those themes are identified, a common consensus is formed.

Researchers search for essentials, invariant structure (or essence) or the central underlying meaning of the experience and emphasize the intentionality of consciousness where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image and meaning. (Cresswell, 1998, p.52)

The common perceptions of the group are the phenomenology, the essence. This study investigates the common threads that wove a group of mismatched strangers together working toward a common goal.

What does narrative have to do with it? Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) refer to Dewey (1997) and his notion of *experience* as the basis for narrative research. The narrative is the experiential story. Narratives are found throughout this document. The narratives of this group of ECHO parents and students tell their individual lived experiences. From those individual stories, the researcher draws data, analyzes and reports. This document utilizes narrative stories to tell the group story of ECHO.

Introduction to Narrative Inquiry

This is *Narrative Research* or a *Narrative Inquiry*, as the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably (Coulter, 2009, Clandinin, 2007). Because I elected to use narrative inquiry for my study, I needed to define it. Riesman (1993) said, “The study of narrative does not fit neatly within the boundaries of any single scholarly field” (p. 1). So, I set out to research the researchers by reading Riessman, Clandinin, Connelly, Barone, Coulter, Smith, Polkinghorne, Kouritzin, Piquemal, Norman, Hatch, Wisniewski, Van Maanen, Pinnegar, Daynes, Hurren, Clough, Nutbrown, and other narrative researchers within these books and articles. What I found

was that narrative is very different from other research methodologies. It is messy; it does not fit the traditional research mold. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) refer to the fact that “narrative hovers in the borderlands of qualitative research,” neither part of, nor separate from. “Generalist researchers seemed to think we were too literary; literary theorists thought we were too bound by research conventions.” (Coulter, 2009, p. 608) As for the definition, there are as many varying points of view as there are narrative researchers. There is no one, well-defined conception of narrative.

In contrast to narrative, traditional educational research follows a format. As I flipped through hundreds of awe inspiring doctoral theses, I found that they have an order common to all. There is a sequence, a style, an algorithm to writing a traditional dissertation. Certainly, in quantitative research, there is a prescribed order, a systemization. Traditional quantitative research is organized, categorized and analyzed. In qualitative research, there are certain protocols, whether based in grounded theory, case study, phenomenological study, ethnography or biographical life history (Cresswell, 2006), each has its own, if not similar, set of rules.

Defining Narrative

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) define narrative research as:

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories . . . Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first, and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study. (p. 375)

Cresswell refers to narrative research as interpretive qualitative research, a self-reflective and inclusive study of the researcher *and* the researched. Further, he discusses the trend to questioning “disciplinary power, theoretical future of the field, alternative theoretical approaches, discontinuance of conceptual traditions, new methods of training and preparation

and alternative writing and publishing possibilities” (p. 3).

Clandinin and Connelly argue narrative inquirers “must “*fall in love*” (2000, p.81) with their participants.” “Narrative research is relational research” (Clandinin & Murphy, 2010, p. 599). The researcher becomes immersed in the research. He or she has dual roles as researcher and participant and must have this relationship in order to understand the inner workings of the group. “Narrative inquiries are always strongly autobiographical” (Clandinin, 2000, p. 121). Because we are participant and observer, our own experiences shape our interest in our chosen study. Clandinin refers to her early efforts at narrative inquiry, that because they were not “governed by theory, methodological tactics and strategies,” they were labeled “fluid inquiry” (Schwab, 1960) and not recognized or respected. With files full of rejections, her work was seen as “too personal, idiosyncratic and narcissistic” (p. 121).

Towards a Methodology

There are three sets of considerations when determining method in narrative inquiry: theoretical, practical or field work, and interpretive or analytic considerations (Clandinin, 2000). Theoretically, the role of the inquirer is to sort the data into a view of the experience being studied. Clandinin discusses that it is easy to try to squeeze a narrative into one of the *sorting and qualifying* qualitative (ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory) approaches, but these more formal approaches of inquiry begin in theory, whereas narrative begins in experience. Narrative inquiry may have aspects of all or none of the qualitative approaches. However, Clandinin believes it is closely related to phenomenology referring to this as phenomenological narrative inquiry or narrative inquiry of a phenomenon (Clandinin, 2009). Phenomenology, the view of a phenomenon through several different perspectives elicits different perspectives of an experience because of many factors, including different understandings or interpretations due to

a variety of lived experiences of the observers. Semantics are very important in the describing narrative; a misplaced article can mean the difference between concurring and contesting the views of the narrativists. Again, Clandinin and Murphy (2009) refer to narrative inquiry as *hovering over the borderlands* of qualitative research. It has common characteristics, but is not quite the same. It is different and unique, just like the characters it portrays in our story.

The Process

Fieldwork encompasses far more than conversations and interviews. A myriad of sources relay significant data as to the lived experience being explored. Letters, journals, stories, photographs, schedules, and other artifacts are just a few of the data filled resources that are used. Once all of the data sources are collected, it is time for the researcher to remove themselves from the group to pore over the data and begin analysis.

Before interpretation can begin, the data must be archived and sorted. Next narrative coding begins with naming the characters, settings, actions and events. Once gathered and placed the researcher begins the process of writing a variety of “interim texts,” or interpretive accounts (Clandinin, 2000, p. 133).

According to Riessman (2008), “Analyzing cannot be easily distinguished from transcription” (p. 60). We go through the process of arranging and rearranging our data to tell a story. In my study, analysis began at the first interview and continued through the interview transcription process and scouring years of files, choosing artifacts such as student reflections, stories, narrative reports, and school documents to help tell the ECHO story.

Clandinin and Murphy (2009) oppose the notion that a researcher will “impose some moral on the story from outside the context of the teller” (p. 585). This is an important point to narrative inquiry. Supporting the position that there is truth in narrative and truth even in fiction,

that rather than interpretation, there is a wealth of evidence for allowing the storied data to speak for itself. “Paradigmatic analysis of the narrative seems to locate common themes or conceptual manifestations among the stories collected as data. The researcher inspects the stories to discover which notions appear across them” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 13). In *Narrative Configuration*, Polkinghorne (in Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995) argues, “little need was felt to do much more than gather and arrange the materials, for they would . . . speak for themselves (p. 7). Barone’s (in Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995) concurs in *Persuasive Writings, Vigilant Readings and Reconstructed Characters* that some educational stories should be sufficiently trusted to be left unaccompanied by critique or theory. Barone (2000) discusses the qualitative problem-solving process in which a theme, metaphor, or “pervasive quality” (Barone, 2000, p. 195) emerges from the research process. Polkinghorne (1995) discusses this in terms of building a story plot. He argues that themes are not imposed; they *emerge from the data* in the authentic practice of narrative research (p. 5). Coulter (2009) cites Eisner who believes “narrative researchers allow multiple interpretations to emerge, yet hope to persuade readers by their artistic visions” (Eisner, 1998, p. 610). Summing up, Geertz (1973) adds,

Anthropological writings are themselves interpretations, and . . . they are, thus, fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are ‘something made,’ ‘something fashioned’ . . . not that they are false, unfactual, or merely ‘as if’ thought experiments. (p. 15)

With this narrative framework in mind, I will explain the process of my methodology.

Purpose of the Study

All reflective inquiry starts from a problematic situation, and no such situation can be settled in its own terms. (Dewey, 1929, p.189)

The purpose of this study was to describe the learning experiences of a *diverse* group of multi-age, multi-level, and multiple ability students in a homeschool cooperative which used differentiated instruction and authentic learning principles in order to meet individual learning

needs of these diverse students. ECHO School (2003-2007), a private replacement for a popular public magnet school program, employed a curriculum of differentiated instruction based on objectives found in the Alabama Course of Study. Modeled after the constructivist notions of Piaget, Dewey and Vygotsky, children were able to build their own knowledge through experience according to their developmental learning needs. Because the group of 12-17 students ranged in age from 4 to 17, instruction was delivered via a school-wide gifted model of teaching to encourage independent and critical thinking in students without dependence on textbooks or scripted lessons.

Setting and Participants

I interviewed students who attended the ECHO school and their parents, who were also teachers, without whom the school could not have functioned. The parents functioned as teachers; as parents changed, course offerings changed. As a certified K-12 teacher with experience in a wide range of grades, I filled in the blanks. Using the narratives, student work and other documents such as daily class reflections and student presentations, this study explores how the participants of ECHO built a curriculum based on the Alabama Course of Study to meet the needs of children with diverse abilities, interests and learning styles. Narrative stands “outside the framework of traditional Q and A approaches, [rather] in which the researchers responsibility is to be a good listener and the interviewee is a storyteller rather than a respondent” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2009, p. 31). Hence, simple, open-ended questions and use of stories from schoolwork, letters, newsletters, reflections and the group format were used to invoke rich responses and storytelling.

The interviews were simple, consisting of only three questions including 1) why did you come to ECHO; 2) describe your experience at ECHO School; and 3) why did you leave ECHO

School? These questions, along with prompts of pictures of school events, student portfolios and more specific questions (see appendix L) sought to define how the different stakeholders experienced this nontraditional education model and define the benefits and implications of this form of teaching for future students.

Setting

We met at my house. It was one of our learning locations, where we still gather periodically. We call it the farm, because it sits on six acres with pear and peach trees and a barn. But the only livestock we raise are ants; we raised mice at one time when we first moved in, but – thankfully, we do not raise them anymore. One neighbor, however, has a horse, and goats and chickens live on the other neighbor’s side.

All of the ECHO families who began in the first year spent a great deal of time at my old house in town; we had started in my living room, cooked in my kitchen, and learned to swim in the pool. We bought the farm the last year of ECHO, so all of those children spent time there. They had hunted Easter Eggs, collected leaves and acorns for fall projects, and observed the country wildlife not normally found in the city where the school was located. There was also a group of children who had moved on to other schools, but still participated in some activities with ECHO kids and most of those children and their families returned two or three times a year for reunions. For most, it was a comfortable and familiar place to be.

As everyone was notified of the project, we plotted possible dates that we could meet for our interviews. The participants chose the dates that were most convenient to their schedules, creating two large (multi-family) groups and four small (single-family) groups who met at the farm. The members who wanted to participate sat on the sofa and in chairs; some children sat on the floor while others siblings and the younger children went and played outside.

At the beginning of each of the six meetings, I reread the entire IRB to the group to be sure that they remembered why they had come. Then we proceeded with the interviews.

Participants

For this study, I interviewed former ECHO students and their parents who were involved in the school during the four years of its implementation and who experienced the inner workings of the school. The students and their families were contacted via electronic mail. The complete IRB was included in the mailing, including the three main questions and a list of prompts, the consent/assent forms, and all related materials.

Demographics

Of the 35 children, in 26 families, who attended ECHO over the four year implementation, 18 families responded and 33 people were interviewed (including children and parents) in eight separate interviews. There were also three families responding who were out of town, and wished to participate, but were unable to attend the interviews. They sent their stories via electronic mail.

The age range of the former ECHO students, when they attended ECHO, was 4 – 18 years old; their age range at the time of this study was 10 – 25 years old. The demographics of the group were diverse. In the four-year operation of ECHO, 35 different students attended ECHO School. Of those 35, over time (with overlap), there was one pre-K student, five kindergarteners, one first grader, five second graders, seven third graders, six fourth graders, ten fifth graders, eight sixth graders, two eighth graders, one ninth grader and one twelfth grader. There were seven African American children, two Hispanic, and the remainders were of white European descent. Although ECHO School did not categorize children by labels, for the purpose of describing diversity and using labels assigned before and after ECHO, there were two children

with dyslexia, 17-20 with ADHD, 13 gifted, four with Asperger's/Autism spectrum disorder, 6-8 with specific learning disabilities (SLD) and one with what was classified as mental retardation (MR). At ECHO, we left our labels at the door.

Research Procedures

IRB Requirements

Educational research must follow the strict guidelines Institutional Review Board of the University from which it stems. According to the University website for the IRB,

the purpose of the University of Alabama's Institutional Review Board (IRB) is to ensure the safe and ethical treatment of humans as subjects in research, public service, and training programs. In accordance with federal and university regulations, it is required that the IRB review all research involving human subjects.

<http://osp.ua.edu/site/irb.html>

Following IRB approval, the researcher interviewed the former ECHO parents and children. I sent via electronic mail a) the formal consent of parent interviewees and b) the assent from the (minor) student participants and consent from their parents using the attached informed consent and assent forms (see Appendix L).

Confidentiality was assured through various mechanisms. Pseudonyms were given to all participants, names of towns, schools, and/or other geographical references, and any other personally identifying information. Once, I explained the procedures, and the participants decided to participate, we mutually decided the dates to conduct the interviews with the participants in my home. As each group met, the participants signed their consent/assent forms and the interviews began. I was not only the researcher, but a participant as well. I knew the group of children and parents very well and they knew me, however, I tried not to interject myself too much into the discussions, leaving space for them to tell their stories.

Table 1.

Pseudonyms of Participants

Group	One	Two	Three	Four	# /Grade
Grade					
Pre K	(Bethany) Miranda Baker	(Bethany) (Fiona)	(Bethany)	(Bethany)	1/PreK (2/PreK siblings)
K	Ben C	Miranda Baker Petey D	Callie G (Nicholas G)		5/K
1			Nathan I		1/1
2	Sophie R Drew B	Kristy B (Kayla) Layla Fox			5/2
3	Kylie Hunter	Sophie R Drew B Ian	Layla Fox (Reese)		6/3
4	Max P Maddox	Kylie Petra	Sophie R Drew B	Layla Fox	6/4
5	Lola C Conner S Chad C Scooter S	Max P Mark Fox	Kylie D Deanna M	Sophie R Kyle C (Kylie D)	10/5
6		Lola C Conner S Scooter S Mac B Kacie G	Mark Fox	Cassie B Deanna M	8/6
7	Meghan S Tiffany L	Xander C	Lola C Scooter S (Conner S)	Eve P	6/7
8		Meghan S	(Xander C)	Lola C	2/8
9			(Meghan S) Tom S		1/9
12	Maddy R				1/12
	15	18	12	7	52

Focus Groups

Focus groups are group interviews that prompt participants through discussion of certain topics to generate data. According to Kitzinger (1995), interaction is part off the methodology.

Instead of asking each individual each question, the interviewer asks the question and the group responds, interacting with each other. Kitzinger notes the advantages to focus groups are that they allow participants to express themselves, encourages other participant to “generate and explore” (p. 302) their own questions about the topic and it allows those who do not generally speak up, to comfortably participate in the group. In our focus groups, participants who would normally answer with a one-word or short answer were able to feed off other participant replies, thereby expanding the discussion of each topic. One student’s memory of an incident might spark a parent’s different version of the same occurrence. Finally, the discussions were rich and enjoyable. The groups were fully immersed in the discussions and seemed to propagate their own discussions and those of others.

On the other hand, there were also negative results of the group interview in that in some groups, one or two participants took the lead in the discussion and were hesitant to give it up. Some participants did not feel comfortable breaking in or talking over participants who are more aggressive. Also, there may have been families who chose not to attend a group meeting depending on who else was in the group. However, all participants were offered individual or other group options, if needed.

The former ECHO students and parents were in a unique situation, in that they were used to interacting as a group. Many of the parents had been friends and acquaintances before building the program together and while some children knew each other before ECHO, many became and remained friends during and after the closing of the school. When they were asked if they preferred individual or group interviews, the overwhelming choice was to meet in groups.

In each of the meetings, I conducted group interviews using the interview protocol with the students and parents. The three questions of the interview protocol served as a guide for the

informal, conversational interviews. No follow-up interviews were conducted. The interviews were audiotape recorded and the tapes safely stored in a locked drawer in the office of the dissertation chair until they were transcribed. Then they were erased. Three typists assisted in transcribing the tapes, each of who had been part of the interview they transcribed to avoid loss of confidentiality. As each transcript was completed, I listened to the tapes and compared them to the transcripts to check for accuracy. I also listened to the tapes as I went through the interviews and ascertained themes.

Data Collection Methods

Multiple methods of data collection were used during this study. Informal interviews were conducted in order to understand the participants' experiences with the ECHO School. In each of the six group interviews, three to ten interviewees, after being read the interview protocol, easily fell into discussions of remembrances and perceptions of the school. The interviews were utilized as the primary method of data collection. The research also included supportive data which included letters received from out of town stakeholders who could not be available for an interview, artifacts such as ECHO school documents, newsletters, schedules, field notes, and student work from portfolios to compensate for the fallibility of any single method (Erickson, 1986). Using a variety of data collection methods and data sources, and making sure that repetitive patterns and categories were alternately supportive (Patton, 2002), credibility was brought to the findings. Evidence of what eventually became the final themes: diversity of learners and differentiation of teaching methods to meet those diverse needs, authentic learning (authentic wholetheme instruction) and caring for students, was revealed in all forms of data, interviews, reflections, and student work.

Data Analysis

For my own research, I collected and read articles, highlighting and taking notes and storing information for later to synthesize with other data for analysis. I began writing stories that related to my students, experiences we encountered at ECHO and my personal stories that brought me to view teaching as I do today. Clandinin (1996) refers to this as writing “autobiographical research texts out of memory” as “memory tends to take on a factual, un-nuanced quality” (p.141). Taking interview transcripts, student work, reflective journals, and stories, I began to organize, first in my mind, and then on paper, coding the data and pulling out how these fit together to tell the ECHO story. This was the most intensive part of the whole process and took many weeks of arranging and rearranging, checking with participants to be sure I remembered things correctly and then reorganizing once again.

At the first read, I deleted anything that seemed extraneous or off point, and after several reads and listening thorough of the audio, I began to cut and paste the interviews into common topics that became the themes, thus creating the story. Through these approaches, I was able to identify and develop themes and categories. Concurrently, data were examined to support or dismiss the formulated themes. Efforts were made to minimize intrusion of researcher bias during the analysis process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and to understand the intended conveyance of the data. In addition, multiple forms of triangulation were used during this study to improve the validity of the findings (Denzin, 1978; Marshall & Rossman, 2009).

It is completely understandable that my former students and their parents would not want to criticize the program to the teacher. It is for this reason that I attempted to include multiple sources of data. Beyond the interviews, letters from former participants and school documents have been analyzed in the analysis. One final area that I have tried to remain unbiased was in

editing the data. It was a challenge to choose examples of interviews, letters and documents to represent the ECHO experience because there were so much data. I was especially careful in the editing process because I believe that the reader should hear the whole story to draw a conclusion, not just my version of the edit.

Why Narratives?

Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories... Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is primarily a way of thinking about experience.
(Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477)

Dissertations traditionally are not commonly read by the masses. Narratives, or stories, are much more compelling. This narrative dissertation will paint a picture of how one teacher and a group of parents and their children created a homeschool cooperative utilizing an authentic, wholetheme curriculum based on a school-wide enrichment model, implemented on a foundation of literacy and technology, to meet the needs of a diverse group of students from pre-K to 12th grade. It will be conveyed through several different formats and from the multiple perspectives in an attempt to explain the phenomenology of the four-year experience.

But, Why in the Form of a Story?

Why narrative? That is easy; a narrative is a story. We grow up with stories. Mamas tell stories to their children; children tell stories in their play; teachers tell stories to their students. *History* is a story. Telling stories is a part of life. We learn many lessons from stories. Connelly and Clandinin (1988b) define narrative as "the making of meaning from personal experience via a process of reflection in which storytelling is the key element and in which metaphors and folk knowledge take their place" (p. 16). Barone (in Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995) argues for the trust of educational stories to tell of the author's intent "without critique or theory" (p. 2).

Fiction as Truth?

The following narrative example will provide an explanation of how fiction holds truth. I asked a student to write a reflection. When I taught at the magnet school, students wrote "reflections" when they misbehaved. They would write what they had done wrong, why it was wrong and what they would do better next time. The purpose was two-fold: one, to have them reflect on the action and two, to give them time to cool off and settle down. One day, I had a new student who had transferred in from a tough (inner city) school and he was unused to our procedures, and defiant. He had no previous knowledge of, nor did he intend to write a reflection, when he was reported "cagging" students going down the hall. I asked him to instead write a story about someone *else* that had the same problem or had done the same unacceptable thing that he did. As I read, I found that it was *all about him!* He did not leave out one single detail. He had written *his story*, only he had changed his name to protect the guilty, I presume. I have recycled this strategy very often with my students, offering an alternative to those who defiantly refuse the status quo. They not only got the idea as they became settled, but some also enjoyed the writing and the thinking/writing process helped solve the problem in their mind through their characters.

Narrative vs. The Facts

In the following illustrative example that I wrote about one of my students, I offer support for writing in narrative as opposed to writing in brief, an academic description. Two examples show a contrast between one with detail and feeling, contrasting just the plain facts. Example one contains only the facts; example two is written as a narrative. The story is the same, yet one tells so much more. What do you think?

My Sweet Willie: A Love Story

Example 1: Student Record Notes

Charles William Brown (pseudonym) is a 3rd-grade student. He has attended two previous schools where his behavior problems led to 6 suspensions. Small in stature, with large reactions – he responds to teasing with explosive anger. With a label of ADHD, he is prescribed medication but his dosage is erratic. Willie receives Special Education services for SLD (Specific Learning Disabilities) with a Reading Level of 1.8 and a Math Level of 2.0. His grades are C's and D's and he is barely passing. Willie's parents are uninvolved in his school matters and he lives with aged Grandmother in low-income neighborhood in another school district of town.

Example 2: My Sweet Willie

“Quick! Mari! *Please* get my purse.” Hands unsteady, I rummaged through months of debris, then finally found the familiar curved bottle. I poured out two blue caplets into the palm of my hand; Willie was at my shoulder breathing into my hair.

It was the last week of school. The moon was full. The werewolves were out in full force. They came to school disguised as children, and I wondered where my sweet students had gone.

“Let me touch it. Let me taste it—feel it.”

I looked at Willie dismayed.

“I'll throw it away after,” he said.

“You will not throw my Aleve away. I need it!” I countered.

“Why are you taking two? My mama only lets me take one. You don't need to take two.” His words were coming as quickly as a boxer's combination punch.

“Willie, you are a little kid. I am a grown adult. I need to take *two* Aleves.”

“Well, why do you have to take 'em anyway?”

Sternly, precisely pronouncing each syllable, I replied, “Because I have 18 kids who are giving me a headache.”

A silent second lapsed. His eyebrows raised, his chin lowered. “You need to get your “toos” [tubes] tied.”

What could I say? Willie is one of the reasons I keep going back day after day, subjecting myself to the trials and tribulations of teaching school.

He came to me, an early Christmas present, in mid-December. My class seemed to have had a revolving door this year. Like Dorothy said in the *Wizard of Oz*, “People come and go so quickly around here.”

His diminutive stature never gave away the giant inside this young boy. As a third grader, Willie had been in and out of six schools already. He had acquired thick, protective layers with each experience to cushion his inner child, a little boy who wanted to learn.

In his previous school, Willie had been in a self-contained resource class for children with special needs. Now, he burst onto the scene—wary—in a class of children who were becoming independent, autonomous learners—a work in progress—during their tenure at our school. Undeniably, Willie suffered some culture shock.

“Do you have Special Ed here at this school?” he asked me the first day, as we conferenced together amidst a battery of assessments.

“Well,” I began, “I teach third and fourth graders and Special Ed, too.”

“Good,” he replied matter-of-factly. “That way, no one will know.”

Teaching in a multi-level class, in an “inclusion” Title school, children rarely made distinctions between which teachers taught what subject or to whom. It was just as likely for a gifted child to beg to read with the Title teacher or ask when they might get to go to Mrs. So-and-So, the Special Ed teacher’s class as might the child who regularly made the trek to the resource teachers’ rooms.

Willie respected his Grandmother most, of all the people in his small world. His mother, in and out of jail for drugs, his auntie in jail, his uncle dealing “bud” from the kitchen, and his older brother was much worse off academically and socially than Willie would ever be. Yet, he survived.

“I would never steal anything from you. Do you think I would?” he asked with conviction, as my animal cracker crumbs fell out of his pocket. I assured him that I trusted him. I knew he felt my faith, but doubted he was in control of those long-ingrained habits.

Willie’s outward appearance in no way hinted at the spice inside. His wide-open eyes and his ear-to-ear smile that framed perfect teeth were bright against the background of his unlined face, the color of fine walnut furniture. Smooth.

Smooth, too, was his freshly laundered clothing—four sizes too large, but chosen for the style rather than the roominess. Or, were they the only size that had been available as

hand-me-downs or handouts? Nevertheless, he came groomed and spit-shined at the beginning of each day.

I imagine he ate Mexican jumping beans for breakfast, cheetah's milk for lunch and a lion's share for dinner—if you believe the axiom that “you are what you eat.” But, he was often hungry, eating peanuts and apples I kept in the classroom and taking home remnants of class celebrations and food experiences.

He came to me ... to our class ... to our school an angry child, ready to pounce on the first innocent victim to cross him. He was full of fight, struggling to escape. It did not take much to set off his temper. Willie had a short finger, cut off at the knuckle, with an intriguing story attached in its place; he nearly lost all composure at the slightest mention, or even prolonged stare.

I greeted his anger with calm. We established rituals for peacefulness and tranquility—or at least as close as Willie had probably ever come. I gave him space to cool off and encouraged him to talk about his anger. Soon, he became able to maintain self-control around me, still, out of a teacher's sight was a different matter altogether. In the world lacking adult supervision, where he frequently sought solace, he continued his fight and street behavior.

Willie never stopped. He never stopped fighting. He never stopped tapping. He never stopped moving, unless he fell asleep, a common occurrence. We let him sleep. He never stopped talking, unless he slept. We let him sleep. He never stopped asking questions, inquiring, seeking. It is for this reason, I am sure, that despite multiple learning disabilities, Willie was wise beyond his years.

After a semester that lasted five long years, I came to miss Willie when he was out of my presence just as much as I needed a break when he was around. His smile, his sweetness, was there to coax my forgiveness for each transgression. As we survived many peaks and valleys, Willie never failed to surprise me, to impress me, to make me laugh, to keep me on my toes, to inspire me.

So it was, that at the end of the year, when we were all ready to be let out of the gate for summer, when the children could no longer control their enthusiasm for the impending break, when the moon was full and emotions were high, when all good children were double charged, Willie was triple charged. At the end of the day, at the end of the week, at the end of the year, as I barked out orders, thinking I could stand it no longer, Willie supplied me with yet one more reason to keep coming back and doing it all over again. This one sweet child, hovering over me, asking questions, telling stories, tattling on classmates, in general, rattling my nerves, inspired me to smile, to laugh aloud, to write his story, to tell it over and over.

I wonder where he will be next year. I wish the best for Willie and I pray that his teacher will see all of the wonders of Willie that I had the pleasure to experience.

These two examples, using different perspectives, paint different pictures of the same child. The first is indicative of what a teacher might find in a note or in summary in a student records file. It tells the facts, but it does not tell the story. In contrast, the second example frames the child, painting a vivid picture of the background meanings for his story.

The Findings

Persons choose to do research because they have a dream that somehow they will make a difference in the world through insights and understanding they arrive at.
(Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p. 15)

As a researcher, I felt as though I had an important story to share. After teaching for years in the public schools and seeing children who were being devoured by the system, I allied with the parent of those children and sought a better learning environment. It is important that educators know that even with federal and state testing and mandates, that it is still possible to encourage and inspire to become engaged learners.

The final dissertation document includes multi-modal, narrative support for the main themes that were revealed in the interviews and related data: diversity, differentiation, authentic learning, caring, and supporting the process using technology – in all, teaching all students as if they were gifted. I have attempted to include rich, thick descriptive evidence and examples for each theme. You are invited to know ECHO through its stories.

CHAPTER IV:
THE ECHO STORY:
VOICES OF PARENTS AND STUDENTS

Don't be the best at what you do; be the only one who does what you do.
--Jerry Garcia

In this chapter, I will introduce the ECHO students and parents and share their stories of ECHO School from their perspectives. As you meet these characters of the ECHO Story, through their voices, common themes of diversity and differentiation, authentic learning, caring and using technology to meet the diverse needs, emerge from the narratives.

As an investigator of the interactions and perceptions among the ECHO School family, I present these narratives that illustrate the ECHO Story. Pseudonyms are used throughout. The stories are presented using multiple data including interview transcriptions, letters, homework items, and daily class reflections.

First, I will introduce you to four of the ECHO School students: Nathan, Miranda, Tom and Xander. They have very distinct narratives; their stories are alike in some ways, but very different in others. Then you may listen to the voices of multiple students and family members as they paint, for you, through interviews, reflections and student work, a picture of ECHO Homeschool Cooperative.

The Themes Emerge:

Diversity & Differentiation, Authentic Learning, Caring and Technology

You are invited to share in the ECHO Experience. As you read, you may recognize

common concepts, or themes, that will intertwine throughout. Notice the *inclusivity* of a *diverse group of learners* at ECHO, how they were not only different ages, but differed in grades, ability levels, and interests. See how they experienced *authentic teaching* methods to provide real and meaningful learning experiences that enabled *differentiation* to the unique group of children in a constructivist setting, where children build knowledge through engaging and experiential learning; the learn by doing. Experience how they used *technology* to build and support the curricular needs of each individual student's unique and special needs. Finally, feel a sense of family, community and caring that existed in the group and how that caring was built into the everyday experiences. Above, beyond and through all of these themes, see how when expectations were high, the students were able to achieve at their highest potential; when they were all taught in the same model as if they were gifted, they responded in ways they might not have experienced in previous learning environments.

Then, in the final chapter, I will analyze these common themes, combining them with the supportive literature, and offer implications and conclusions, insights, and hope for practicing a philosophy of teaching that enables all children to be motivated to do their best to become active, life long learners.

Nathan's Story

While the first grader sat in my lap as we worked on a PowerPoint on my computer, he looked into my eyes and said, "Ms. Minear, you have cracks in your face."

Meet Nathan. Nathan was indeed a character. Nathan was a six-year-old first grader who came to ECHO School at the beginning of the third year. His mother was an engineer and single parent of this only child. Nathan was her world and she would do anything to find an acceptable and accepting learning environment in which he could grow.

I am sure that Nathan, (like Willie) ate Mexican jumping beans for breakfast every morning and his mind ran at one speed only: fast forward. Living a nightmare in a traditional kindergarten class, he sat in the corner for most of the year because he already knew what was being taught and he had to be “controlled.” There were not enough corners in ECHO school to accommodate all of the children who in traditional classes needed to be controlled; we had to find other options.

So, this is what we did for Nathan. We kept him busy.

In the first grade, Nathan was interested in learning how to do PowerPoint because he wanted to do research like the big kids were doing. Once he learned how to make a presentation, he came in and wanted to read books every day so he could do a research project. I have many of those PowerPoint’s saved. As a six-year-old, he could copy and paste pictures, change fonts, write text, create graphics and make words fly on and off the page!

We used lots of technologies at ECHO. I love using the computer. It can help in lots of ways. The only teacher I remember at ECHO is Mrs. Minear. Parents got to go on field trips with us at ECHO.

I think I'm a distinguished scholar who has an aptitude for learning. I think I'm a quality student. I discern, executed, and perform. I wish to be considered an impeccable student. If I was a teacher, first of all, I wouldn't be called a teacher. I'd be called a coach. I would force all my students to be over illustrious, sagacious, astute, clever, and dexterous. If I were a principal, I would only accept top-notch students and teachers.

I have always loved school. I am now in the fifth grade. My view of school never has ever changed. When I was at ECHO, I grew my intellect and prowess. I'm now in 5th grade. I love school. School is a good fun way to learn. My view on school is fun and cool.the end....

Nathan's Mom: Her Story

We came to ECHO because I needed an alternative method in educating my son. I worked in the public school system as substitute teacher for 2 years and witnessed firsthand the deterioration of our educational methods. I held long term assignments in reading and mathematics for high school students, and also substituted for elementary and middle school. I witnessed ninth graders unable to read simple words, such as 'hat' and 'cat'. I learned about emotional disorders and learning disabilities. I was horrified and concerned for my son. I decided at that point to assume full responsibility for my son's education.

From those experiences, I decided to teach my 4-year-old son to read. When he began kindergarten, he was reading on 2nd grade level. Academically, my son did very well. However, his behavior was a major impediment to his "traditional" education. I knew I had to find an alternative environment that was receptive in educating my son. I was given information about Each Child Has Options (ECHO) and knew right away that this environment was best for my son.

Nathan started ECHO as a first grader.

As a kindergartener, Nathan was diagnosed with ADHD. I was not comfortable in medicating him and wanted to attack this condition in a holistic way. I signed him up for Martial Arts, began Neurology Counseling, and enrolled him in ECHO.

I was attracted to ECHO because the teacher, Mrs. Andrea Minear, was an experienced mother and teacher who understood everything I was going through and was committed to helping me educate my son, despite his challenges. She understood the need to teach students differently based on their own individual style of learning. She probed into Nathan's interests and created assignments to suit him. Those assignments allowed him to go as far as he was able to go in learning. For example, he was asked to work on a science project that was centered on something he likes. He chose rockets. He learned to

make a rocket fly using a balloon, using an idea he gotten from a field trip to the Children's Museum.

I enjoyed how historical field trips were also instrumental in his learning. I also recall using PowerPoint to present the various research projects that he had done. There were many opportunities for science projects, Power Point presentations, field trips, social gatherings, fundraisers, parent interactions/involvement, etc. We were a complete family with support and an innovative approach in educating our children.

Nathan was quite involved and interactive within the ECHO family. He challenged everyone to be on their toes. I was a working single mom and was not able to present my full attention to all of his activities. Yet again, Mrs. Minear stepped in. At Mrs. Minear's suggestion, Nathan was assigned a teacher's aide to make sure he completed his assignments/projects.

He has left ECHO with treasures he still has, even today. He learned to sew, knit (he is still knitting the scarf), and use PowerPoint to make presentations. Because Nathan was reading on an advanced level, Nathan was eager to work with the older kids and enjoyed learning from them as well. He remembers the kindness that the older boys showed and how they spent time with him, teaching him.

We left ECHO because of employment relocation. However, I still keep in touch with Mrs. Minear because she was so instrumental in my son's education. I continued homeschooling my son and have been to other co-op home school groups, but the environments were not as diverse and receptive as I would have liked. I had even put Nathan back in the public schools, but the results were the same. Nathan has always had a good work ethic. He would complete the assignments given to him, but the assignments were not challenging enough to keep him engaged, giving his mind time to wander. Nathan is an interactive learner. He is a hands-on learner. He learns by researching and presenting his findings. I believe ECHO was very instrumental in nurturing the curious nature my son possesses and encouraging it to grow.

Since our days at ECHO, I have gotten married and have had another son, presenting certain challenges for continuing Nathan's homeschooling. Last year, for Nathan's fourth grade year, we used the K-12 curriculum with intention of eventually placing him in a structured environment. This year, my husband and I have enrolled Nathan in a home school co-op for boys. Our decision to do so was because of Nathan's expressed interest in 'being around other kids'. While the K12 environment availed many social opportunities, we felt Nathan really wanted to actively participate with other learners, not just socialize with them. We chose the single gender, because my experience has taught me that boys learn differently than girls. Additionally, we want to fully establish Nathan's learning ethic in the classroom environment before the distraction of girls becomes overwhelming.

Nathan is eleven years old right now and is doing quite well in the all boys home school co-op. His current teacher states the following:

“Lastly, Nathan is the only student to ever arrive at a “Winners” program with an analytical approach that is indicative of a desire to excel and learn at the highest level. Although Nathan can’t yet navigate the “Winners” standards or execute the “Winners” requirements flawlessly, he has shown the energy, desire, educational awareness, and ability to move forward quicker than any boy that I have ever seen, and I have coached several boys with intelligence.”

Nathan continues to be an active kid. He continues as a martial arts student, and has a newfound love of swimming. He exceeded the State’s standardized testing again last year. He loves playing with the kids in the neighborhood, skating, magic tricks, and word games. He is still searching for what he wants to do when he grows up. He has his eyes on anything military, airplanes, and guns (I have concerns for this one).

We believe that Nathan’s educational progress began with his tenure with ECHO and Mrs. Minear. We truly miss Mrs. Minear and ECHO!

Nathan attends an alternative to public school in a large metropolitan city in the southeast United States. The goal of the program, “Winners,” (a pseudonym) is “Creating excellence in African-American boys through Character development, Discipline training, and Intellectual challenge.”

Nathan’s current teacher/coach writes of his school philosophy (used with permission):

Arguably, the greatest impediment to high-level achievement for Black boys is their unwillingness to analyze, interpret, and compute. Time and again, one who is initiated will observe a typical boy from this demographic [avoiding] processing and interpretation like it is the plague... As unsettling as this may be, it is crucial that this reality be understood. This point is of immense import because it should be obvious to anyone that if one does not approach learning analytically, he is not going to learn, and certainly, he is not going to excel. This fact bears itself out when one considers the abysmal results that Black boys (and Black girls...just not as bad as the boys) are collectively producing in their educational pursuits. Even to those who are exceedingly optimistic in their assessments, they should still be able to glean that something is greatly amiss. It is actually simple. An unwillingness to approach learning and development analytically leads to mediocrity.

The good news is analytical processing can be coached. Although it can, it is not easy to ingrain. There is a clear and obvious reason why so many eschew this vital attribute. IT TAKES HARD WORK. Accordingly, few Black boys possess this skill. Analytical processing has to, therefore, be continuously reinforced and stimulated, and in environments where it is not repetitiously percolated, you are not going to have high-level learning or development.

In the history of “Winners” and during my tenure as an educator/coach, I have had only ONE boy show up with the type of analytical approach that is emblematic of a top performer... The point is if we, the Black culture, are serious about producing boys who are to truly become scholars and leaders, it will have to begin with the infusion of analytical and processing skills. ... The bottom line is a boy who can’t analyze and compute is a boy who will not become his best. When you consider the resistance that is usually encountered from this type of student when they are faced with learning how to interpret data, text, and other work requirements, it is clearly not a favorable situation. Fortunately, we have proven processes and mechanisms in place at “[Winners]” that will right this unfortunate situation. I must say, however, that the work is arduous and grinding, but if it is not done, there will be no TRUE education.

Of Nathan, he writes:

...The good news is students such as Nathan consistently push the standard forward and upward, and this level of student makes everyone around them better. The goal is to move all of the boys here to a leadership position. At that point, they are guaranteed to perform phenomenally at “Winners”. We can predict great academic performance in any given student, because we know exactly how our processes work. Although Nathan pretty much just walked through the door, we can already predict that he will perform incredibly on the upcoming ITBS Standardized testing. Although he has performed fine on testing before, there is no doubt that this year’s performance will far exceed anything that he has previously achieved. He has shown us his ability, and we know exactly what to do with it. One last point...we have not had to excessively coach him one time. As a matter of fact, having him around here has been nothing but fun. With intelligent boys such as this, you just let the process run its course. They innately understand the simple and basic concepts of contribution and development. So in essence, they upgrade themselves to meet the standard as set. That is how this program is designed to work.

Miranda Baker’s Story

Miranda Baker chose this name for herself. It is a good name for a sweet girl. Miranda was our little four-year-old the year we started ECHO School. We had not planned to include pre-school aged children in the school, but Miranda was very special. She was extremely bright and loved learning. All of the other children at ECHO adored Miranda and looked after her as if she were their baby sister.

Because Miranda was only four, she does not have many memories of ECHO School. Of course, she remembers being there and being happy, but her classmates and teachers hold the

fond memories of Miranda close to their heart. Miranda does not really know why she came or why she left ECHO school, so for this interview, she stayed outside and played with my little grand girls and her parents spoke for her.

Miranda Baker's Parents: Their Story

Why did you choose for Miranda to attend ECHO School?

Mrs. Baker: Well, we both knew that Miranda was too smart to keep on in her preschool because she knew all that stuff. [One of the ECHO moms] would tell me about this plan and thought it might be a really good opportunity for Miranda and thought she would blend in. So, we talked about it and got her over there and Miranda loved it and learned a lot. I was more freaked out because of P.E. and the field trips and the little safety issue [because she was so young].

What did Miranda do at ECHO?

Mrs. Baker: At Echo she could sound out words. I wanted reading to be big for her because she would get so frustrated. She wanted to read faster you know? And she eventually did at ECHO. And I remember her just sitting in groups with the kids and she'd tell us that she remembers being read to and watching videos on Spanish and learning Spanish words and fieldtrips and P.E.

Mr. Baker: ...and all of the kids because I came up there and watched some and I was really amazed, there were some kids who would not make it in a regular classroom and did not. They all did little projects and presentations. I was really impressed by that. And Miranda four-years-old doing her little projects.

Miranda just loved learning and I think the older kids played a big factor in that.

Miranda wanted to be just like the older children and it beckoned her to participate in learning activities well beyond the expectations for her age or grade. I was looking at some of Miranda's reflections and I remember she would dictate and someone would type for her, because she would have pages full of reflections. I had a picture book called Up and Up, a wordless book, by Shirley Hughes. I scanned the pages and made it into a book and I had them write the words to the story based on the illustrations. And I have the one that she wrote; it was amazing.

It was not just that she benefitted learning from the older kids, but they benefitted from her, as well. It freed them to enjoy the things that peer groups don't normally allow; they would've been teased. You know some of the kids would dress up in dresses till the 6th grade, even the boys, and love it. Because they didn't have to compete with their age group, they got to be interested in what they really wanted to do. And everybody in there had something that they could teach everyone else.

Why did you decide to leave ECHO?

Mrs. Baker: Well, that was us. We were in a financial tight and economic stress. I think Mr. Baker fell and hurt his shoulder and couldn't work for awhile. We just couldn't afford it, and I know you offered, but that just did not feel right to us.

Mr. Baker: well right now, even in 5th grade she's light years ahead of the other kids, even the one's who are smart. They're not pushed. They just make A's and it's easy. Miranda is so detailed and she wants things to be perfect. I mean she loves learning.

I remember when Miranda went to public school; her teacher thought she had a learning disability. Did they have a problem with Miranda when she first went back to public school?

Mrs. Baker: Well, we got sent every year for the ADD thing. I think we stopped after second grade because it was just the same thing. She was so smart and already knew the stuff so she would get bored and un-focused. That's when they found out why we were always checking her out. She was just not interested in doing things she already knew how to do. She missed only 2 questions on the standardized test in third grade. Her teacher then found how Miranda worked. So, her teacher just let her go around and teach the other kids. She's now doing some peer tutoring with this little boy in her class.

Mr. Baker: that's what they should be doing. They're not using all they're resources.

Mrs. Baker: And now with Miranda's little sister's second grade teacher, she wants everyone on the same page on the same day. And it's like you must do it, it's about structure and obedience.

Tom's Story of ECHO

Tom and I have known each other for five years, having been teacher and student and have remained friends (as with many of the ECHO School group "family") since his attendance at the school.

I told Tom about the research that I was planning and how he would be involved and what was expected of him. He was immediately and enthusiastically willing to participate. Tom was fully aware of what he wanted to say and answered each question completely and clearly. This narrative story telling, or "stories of experience" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) sparked pleasant memories, thinking back to the activities and relationships of the school. We proceeded through the interview process in a casual, unstructured style of narrative inquiry (Klein & Myers, 1999; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I explained that I wanted to know simply 1) why he came to ECHO; 2) what he did at ECHO; and 3) why he left ECHO. I was armed with plenty of backup prompting questions, but I find that, as children lead me in different directions in a lesson, so interviewees lead to "rabbit trails" with the answers that they offer. Still the protocol gave me a script to use as a guide. I was confident that I could obtain the information I sought by following the lead of the interviewee.

Why did you come to ECHO?

Tom explains: My parents actually found an article about ECHO in the paper. I was about to start high school and really wasn't working out in homeschool, no real structure to it, couldn't stay focused. So, we were looking for something that was sort of middle ground between jumping back into public school and staying at home.

ECHO seemed really interesting, it seemed like something you go to, get acclimated to being back in classes but not have to you know jump through the hoops every day. You could actually sit down and start learning again.

Tom came to ECHO School as a 9th grader. Originally, the ECHO plan had been to take students from elementary school K-6 through, and then as the elementary school children

progressed into middle school, they would be accommodated. As it happens, every child has a story and Tom was no exception. Finding out about ECHO School in a newspaper article, his mother explained that he had experienced good and bad years in public elementary school, but had been mercilessly taunted in school for being different. She relayed that he was on medication for ADD and that he had autism or Asperger's Syndrome, a milder form of autism. He was shy and quiet and had some difficulty recognizing and responding to social cues from others, however he was very bright and willing to learn. He had been "homeschooled" (or self-schooled, going through textbooks, chapter by chapter, on his own) since the sixth grade. He left the public school system when after he began middle school he had been picked on and severely teased. Of this experience, he stated that he was, "bullied constantly, and really wasn't being treated like a human being by one of my teachers. It felt like the world was against me." He could not tolerate attending the school any longer, so he withdrew.

After two years of homeschool, Tom's family wanted him in a more "social situation" with other students rather than alone at home. It was agreed to let him have a go of it. After he was enrolled, his mother did not take part in his ECHO schooling; his grandmother and grandfather were his guardians and participated in the parent *role*.

What did you do at ECHO?

It was not at all what I expected. It was somewhere between where I was at and where I was going. After about a half a semester everyone there felt like family. I mean it was really relaxed: really, not what I was expecting. You had some time when you could actually sit down and get into what you were doing, without feeling like somebody was about to throw a whip at you if you didn't you know write such and such.

Tom recalled that he liked "to write, especially poetry, short mockeries of official documents, and computer programming." He participated in a Creative Writing class at the local University. He has never cared for "busy work." Tom remembered that he looked forward, as a young child, to starting school. He was excited about learning and to "just enjoy being there to find out something new. There were teachers who thought I was just a little heathen. It really depended on weather I really clicked with the teacher.

Like 2nd grade teacher was a saint, and she thought I was the most brilliant child in the world, and I loved her to death and I learned a lot in her class. Then I get to 3rd and 4th grade and my teachers like I when I didn't have my assignments in on time or at the moment. Then like I was kind of distracted so I didn't do especially well in their classes."

In enrichment for gifted and talented students, he "always looked forward to class, because we didn't have that many assignments. "We spent the whole class just sitting there doing different activities doing different projects. Actual hands on doing stuff. I remember I always got good grades in things I was actually interested in. I was one of the children that actually was ADD, I really couldn't focus on things and I didn't see the point in it. "I'm one of those people who learn osmosis, I'll find something to get myself interested about a subject, and then just try to absorb whatever information I can. I'm one of those people who learns best from lectures, but when I'm remembering things more long term I work hands on."

Of the teachers and parent participation at ECHO School, Tom remarked, "I remember you there overall. Um Kylie's mom, her husband is a mathematician. She actually gave me a lot of personal help. I ended up working with a lot of elementary kids on like long division and arithmetic so added I a little there. We had Maddy, Sophie's older sister was teaching us Spanish. We had Callie and Gabriel there and their mother is a native Spanish speaker, so we got to actually practice a little of that. We had someone to come and teach us art year round. DeAnna's mom came in, and she was the one that actually taught us sewing. She also did a lot of art stuff, but she did it within science" and "Oh! Mrs. Pappas, how did I forget her?! Yeah we had creative writing class and that was so much fun. She's the one that drug me to that creative writing club in the first place. And I've done that like every semester since 9th grade. That was really memorable to me."

"A lot of people that we had come in to teach were actually parents. We had the parents get involved with their child's projects. Parents would come in a lot and help with kids at the end of the day. One of the big things I remembered at ECHO was that parents had to take a lot of interest in what their child was doing. But if you see how that works, you know in the grand scheme of things parent involvement is one of the greatest things you could have in education. I mean, the difference between an average student and a brilliant one can just be if mom and dad ask them what they did that day. Parents were asked to be very involved at ECHO."

Tom described the process of learning at ECHO. "You find a topic, develop and interest in it. A student is given a topic, they're presented with information. You're given some environment in which to digest that information. In like public school you're given lectures and assignments. In a school like ECHO you were given a project for you to work on, but you were given no specific guidelines. You're just asked to go and find some information about this topic. But it's all about how you end up digesting the information is what you remember. A lot of what you see in public school is rote memorization, and test answers. Students remember some factoids, but don't really comprehend the subjects. And then you see things like study projects and research groups where you actually get in and you're supposed to learn abstract concept before you learn

factoids. And if you can do that then you fill the foundation for some bit of knowledge that actually sticks with you. I mean I can tell you anything about the science projects I did in the 5th grade. But I could tell you about Mount Fuji or something else because I actually worked on those projects and learned stuff by myself.”

“What really sticks with you I found really depends on the person. Some people can learn things by lectures. Some people need to see illustrations to build memory. Some people are best doing things with their hands, hands on. Some people learn things when it comes in different forms. I’ve seen some people in some schools who would make a song out of a study sheet and try to remember things that way. I mean if you look at different people you see a lot of people just have different ways to learn things easiest.”

“I learned a good bit about chemistry and biology. I kind of gained an interest there, and that’s when we were doing our research projects. We just went out and found something, looked all over the internet and library about that subject and wrote a short paper or presentation about it. [It was] a really simple concept, just a few little requirements. We were given the Alabama course of study but also the freedom to learn other things about the subject. And I enjoyed reading the sections on biology and biochemistry and that kind of got me off onto physical science.”

Tom explained how students could go beyond their course objectives. “You and the other teachers would go out of your way sometimes and let somebody deal with a certain kind of project and look into a subject that wasn’t necessarily on the curriculum. We had opportunities you wouldn’t find in public school. Something I’ve also seen done really well though, is letting students who are given subjects in the same general spectrum, work on projects with real presentations, and let those students work in small groups together, work on their level with somebody who is on a slightly higher level. Let them both, you know learn what they can and then present it to the class to try and share some of that information with them. You end up having a lot of students on different levels working together. It gives those who are ahead a chance to explore ahead on what they want to, while leaving the others with a solid foundation to cover all the basic stuff on that subject. I mean it can be a challenge to cover the same core material for students from middle average to super genius in one room at the same time. I liked that we use a lot of methods at ECHO -- trying to approach a subject from different directions. You know give something to different students who like to learn with different methods. Get them involved in different ways, and then actually have students go and explore things on their own terms in whatever way they want to, you know just lay a foundation and let them grow out of that as they’re able to. But, it really ends up not working so well in public systems, plus most of the teachers aren’t trained in the method to do it. So, it’s very rarely done spontaneously.

Tom recalled that he “really expected it [ECHO] at first to be a very small version of a public school. You know, to be given a couple books and be told this and that. By the end, I really started catching on to what it was about. It was that you received a little interest in some topic and you were free to explore it, and you were encouraged to do that. That’s what I really perceived of it and I thought that was just ingenious, because if

you can get someone's interest in something they're going to take off on that. I mean you can't force someone into it. There's an art to getting people to want to learn something. I think I really kind of have that figured out." Of school he says, "I love it now, for the first time in my life. I've been around seeing a million different methods of teaching. I think school is brilliant if it's done right. I think public schools are kind of necessary but really kind of off point."

Why Did You Leave ECHO?

Tom thought, "ECHO as a school was kind of geared more to elementary and middle school level students. It was really hard to learn high school level material, mathematics and science in that environment. I wouldn't say there are limits on it, but you know differential teaching you kind of have to work within a spectrum. And you know it's kind of hard to teach a high school kid and a kindergartener the same thing. So I ended up going off to study specifically high school material."

After ECHO, Tom attended a private Christian high school in town. It was very traditional in curriculum and teaching methods. Although he did well, Tom sought other options. He moved to another, smaller private school, one that was similar in philosophy to ECHO School. The director of that school was formerly a mentor professor in my undergraduate teacher-training program, and instrumental in gathering the research based foundations undergirding the former public magnet school program where I taught, as well as the ECHO school.

Tom attended dual enrollment college classes at the local community college in his senior year of high school and began an honors program at a large state university in his hometown in the southeast United States. He wants to become a civil engineer, and then wants to continue his education and attend law school. He is a highly motivated student who loves to write; he has taken on a political blog for the local newspaper. He excels in math and states that he finds history and science fascinating. He is a well-rounded young man with a wide range of interests.

As we were finishing our interview, I asked Tom what he would do if he were a principal or superintendent and he could make decisions about how to run schools. He graciously obliged:

I would re-do disciplinarianism to actually give students a fair say in what happened when they get sent to the office, because that's one of the biggest problems. I would try and loosen up as much as I can, you know the whole do the curriculum; pass the test or else of idea. You know give good teachers freedom to actually work with their students. Even teachers who really want to teach their students in different ways end up not being able to because they just have to cover such and such material that has been micromanaged by the school system. I think a lot of this money is going completely towards athletics; they need to make sure the basics of academics are covered. You know new books, nice desks. I'm not saying they should cut out athletics, it seems like a lot of schools are more focused on their athletes. Like the [first high] school I was at, the student could fail academically, as long as they were an athlete they could get through to the next grade level. I mean if the teacher knows that they have kids in the class that need to pass, they'll just give them the answers at the end of the tests and tell them to study that. That's completely defeating the purpose, that's something that's kind of come from no child left behind is that you have to make sure that everyone knows exactly this. The teachers will teach exactly that and nothing else. I mean I'd just make sure that things would loosen up a little bit."

I'd really like to see the differentiated teaching employed at ECHO in other schools. I mean it's used pretty heavily at the [second high] school I'm at right now to great effects among middle and high school kids. I liked to see a format, like what was used at ECHO, taught to elementary students in addition to the basics. I think you're really on to something with this, I mean I'd really like to see this employed on a bigger scale, or at least consider this in education."

The Story of Xander

The following story is about Xander (pseudonym), a young girl who attended ECHO School in the second and part of the third years, as told by her mother and stepfather, who are both mental health professionals. Xander was the first ECHO student who looked at the school specifically because of her special needs. The family had attended meetings in the summer of the first year, but decided to continue in the public schools because of the girl's special needs. They came to ECHO the following year.

Xander's mother (XM) discusses in depth, the problems of the inclusion of her child with special needs in the public and private school systems. Xander came to ECHO and found that some of her needs were satisfied, but after trying several private schools, Xander found a comfortable fit in a private boarding school for children with needs similar to her own.

The entire transcript is found in the Appendix H. Here, I will highlight the story told by XM and Xander's stepfather (XD).

When asked why they came to ECHO School, Xander's mom began: "I was unsure [about coming to ECHO the first year] because I felt it was not a real organized as a school system -- that it was so disorganized..." XM described that Xander had "social problems or difficulties; she does have Asperger's and social problems." She went on to explain how Xander had a "very good teacher" at her previous middle school, one who took a special interest in Xander and involved her in the band, an activity that was highly motivating and enjoyable to Xander, even though her mother describe her as "tone deaf." XM provided private music lessons to supplement Xander's school class. That year she was in a class with other students like herself (with Asperger's), but the following year, because of Federal NCLB guidelines and requirements for highly qualified teachers, the school "forced Xander to mainstream -- and my sense -- is in regular school." Xander no longer had her teacher who had given her the opportunity to experience success and joy in school. XM explained:

I don't believe in mainstreaming -- not in that way -- unless you have a very small school, and the kids work together and everybody knows everybody and they are very helpful. So, when kids with learning problems, they take on that wonderful community, you take care of everybody in the community whether they have a mental illness or they can't read or write and they take care of them.

The second year of middle school, Xander was mainstreamed into the regular class. According to XM,

Mainstreamed for her meant to be with conduct disordered kids or the retarded kids, that's what it meant to her and so, she was in the lowest track and she was one of the few girls in that low track because you know girls don't usually have such bad conduct problems.

Before she was mainstreamed, Xander never had any behavioral problems, but she began to experience self-doubt, calling herself a "dope," "Dopey," and one of the "stupid kids." She told

her mom about fights that were happening in class and how the police had to be called in over the disruptions.

XM complained that Xander, a child with learning disabilities, was put in the “retarded” classroom and made to memorize and not learn.

They were kind of different kids, kids with learning disabilities and they want to put them in the retarded classroom, because then they don’t teach them ways to learn around their disability. And so what they did all they did in the class was they went over the test and they highlighted, memorize this, memorize this, this will be on the test. I was so resentful and angry.

Xander’s stepdad described an incident when he was helping Xander with her homework, she was being taught the answers rather than the concepts in math class.

... I did was trying to help Xander with her homework one night and she was studying her math, and she had a question for me, “What is the next prime number past eleven?” “And she said it’s “C”. And I said what do you mean it’s a “C”, then she said it’s C on the pink sheet. I said what do you mean and she showed me this pink sheet that had 1 A, 2 D, 3 C, you know and I said what is this and she finally said here’s the answers and C is the answer. And I said, “Xander what is a prime number?” and she didn’t have a clue, but she knew C was the answer she was supposed to put down. I said, “What kind of use is it to Xander, who at that point couldn’t make change, to teach her prime numbers and just teach her what the answer is?”

Frustrated with five hours of homework, XM and XD would work to try to teach the meaning behind the answer “C,” making tests for her child and “mixing them all up.” but

“we’re not teachers for God’s sake, we’ve got full-time jobs. I mean [we were] ready to jump off the roof. I was exhausted. It was just hell.” She stated,

I’m trying to help with math homework and the subject is prime numbers, which I’m not strong on anyway. Yet, she knows that the answer is “C”. And it’s like, you know, I am not spending my time to teach her to answer “C”, to take the pink sheet and get the answers. It was terrible.

Disheartened and discouraged, XM was concerned that Xander could not make change correctly and she was being taught meaningless math that had no chance of transferring to real life. “We really, literally had a beef. Xander would not make change correctly and that was what

she needed, not prime numbers. It was the same in most of her classes -- that was the one that was worst -- just glaringly wrong to me.” XM “just wanted her to learn the basics, so she can take care of herself.”

XM had been highly supportive of her child’s education as she made her way through school. In elementary school, she had made costumes and helped Xander with her Amelia Earhart presentation, breaking the material down into organized parts that Xander could process. Following Xander’s presentation, she remarked, “I really should have learned how to use that radio. If I used that radio, I wouldn’t have crashed in the ocean.” XM realized that she had understood. She could learn. All along, she begged that Xander not be put in the “retarded class; she’s not retarded. That kid is not retarded.”

XM: So, why did we bring her? I was desperate to tell you the truth. ...Xander came home and she said, “Mom, I am so stupid... The other kids, they get this stuff all the time and all they are doing is fighting in the room, they get this stuff in minutes, it takes me forever to get it. I’m really stupid.”

So they came to ECHO at the end of her seventh grade year.

“I really, I really did love ECHO. The kids could teacher her stuff, I mean she would just pick it up, it was a small classroom, she would just pick up stuff. When she came home knowing that power point it really put me to shame.

It really was impressive and it was a group; they took care of each other. They had really tolerated the differences in each other. It was more like family; a little community and I really, really liked ECHO for those reasons.

Why did you leave ECHO? Xander’s mother describes the reasons ECHO school was unable to accommodate Xander’s multiple needs. There were several reasons why they left. First, the time they had to commit was overwhelming for two professional parents. ECHO required five hours of parent volunteerism per week. That, along with rides to and from school, sitter/tutors in the afternoons and coordinating extra-curricular lessons and activities (dance, cheerleading, music), the parents were overwhelmed. They hired a tutor to fulfill their volunteer hours, but because Xander had so many needs, it was not enough.

The second reason was, there was a conflict of special needs:

I think it was Todd was so disruptive; I was extremely angry, because I think to stay in there I think mother should have been told -- she had to have him to a child psychiatrist and to be on medicine. I am a child psychiatrist, I didn't see him gaining a lot; you can't because you had to be on medicine. I know she didn't want him on medicine, but when I did come in I saw him disrupting everything. And it took one parent, it was always one parent was full time with Todd, keeping him off the other children ... I am a child psychiatrist; I took care of little kids like that. It was like a miracle, you get a good doctor, you get then on the right medicine and they can learn and they start feeling good about themselves. But, running around and being ADD and knocking books off and constantly have people chase him was not...He couldn't access it, couldn't access it even if he was with one to one."

XM described her experience as a single mother with a child who was suspended from school at a young age because the teachers could not handle her. "As a child psychiatrist, and I have had Xander on medicine since she was suspended in kindergarten." XM put her child on medication at that time and Xander was able to maintain control in the class.

Todd's mother did not want him on medication. I interjected, "I respect the right of parents to say, "I want to find something else [besides medicine for my child]." And all of all the things that [Xander's mom] said are all the things that have happened in every school. There's not a place for [children who are different]. There are not enough teachers; the classes are too big. Schools don't have a community. They try to make everybody do the same thing and everybody doesn't get it the same."

XM and Todd's mother were on separate sides of the proverbial fence whether or not to medicate children because of attention and hyperactivity problems.

Xander's mom: "I've told parents, I was very, very strong and opinionated about this because I was in practice eighteen years, and then I went and had a kid who did have horrendous problems. And she was impossible to work with, I always had tutors and things for her and they saw one day I forgot to give her medicine and they came and said, "What happened? You know it was just awful she was just crawling up the wall."

Because of time commitment and scheduling problems, exacerbated by a child that she felt was disruptive to her daughter's education, XM took her daughter out of ECHO and tried

another private school, similar to ECHO, that was right down the street. Filled with hopefulness, there were problems at that school as well. XM did not feel that Xander's special needs were being met.

Xander's parents discuss the struggles and frustrations of trying another well-regarded private school, one with good intentions, but that did not follow through on the family's expectations.

Oh yeah, we went to Talbot School, because when we interviewed there, they said "Oh yes, you can drop them off first thing in the morning, you know, early and we'll work with them and you pay a little extra" and "what happens is that we work with them after school and keep them until six". So, I thought, "Thank God" and I said now I had always heard it was for gifted children. I said Xander's just a normal kid, but she has horrible learning. "Oh we can fix it" and they promised all these things and I thought well thank heavens they understand. I told them everything and they said, "Oh we can handle it and it was like a little beautiful school house.

And I thought here is the community and they'll work with her after school. Well, what was happening was that in class she was doing absolutely nothing all day. They didn't do any tutoring, as we had paid for and as they had promised, and she was coming home with four and five hours of homework. And it was like, they said, "Oh no she'll do it at home. I was furious. We had to pay for the whole year. We had her with you for the last semester of seventh grade and starting eighth grade we had her in there for the first half of the year. She was learning nothing, it was real clear she was learning nothing. It was a nightmare.

Xander's stepdad talked about how she found the program where she is enrolled today. Before she had started at Talbot School, they had taken her to a summer program for this camp for Asperger's kids. They were "dubious because they are out in the middle of nowhere, but they were very attuned to Xander and they understood Xander very well." They assured her that, "She's exactly the kind of kid we work with and she fits in fine." The summer program in North Carolina evolved into a boarding school program that year and Xander's parents enrolled her there.

XM said it was quite rough the first year, with Xander homesick to return home, but they feel like they have finally found a place that Xander is learning useable skills.

XD described how she came home and ordered pizza.

Ok, she called Domino's, she ordered the pizza, she got the kind of pizza we liked, and paid for it. But, you know, she did that it without bothering to check with any of us as to whether we wanted pizza. But you know, compared to a few years ago, where if I just said, "OK Xander, how much does a pizza cost, here's my wallet".

XD explained that "she understands those things now. And you know, she has her driver's license now. She's driving a car." She goes to the grocery store with her money, drive down to the grocery store, go pick up stuff, bring it back. XM is thrilled with the progress.

Both Xander's mother and stepfather are psychiatrists. In Xander's story, they speak from the dual roles of parent and professional. Sometime the views overlap and sometimes there is tension between the two. Xander has tried most of the options. She was very lucky to have parents who understood her needs and sought out the best that they could afford her. Xander found a place to have the amount of support that it takes to teach a girl with her special needs. She is lucky to have found a private school that her parents could send her to.

Other children are not quite so lucky. If you are a child born into a family of less fortunate circumstances, the options are not so broad. It cost an incredible bit of money to be supportive of Xander's needs.

Summing Up:

Diversity & Differentiation, Authentic Learning, Caring, and Technology

You have met some of the students of ECHO whose experiences are representative of the *diversity* at our school. Each child is unique, with different strengths and struggles. Their stories are also representative of the diversity that exists in many public school classrooms. In deciding which students to highlight for this chapter, I wanted to show young and old, academic achievers

and struggling students, children who were popular and those who encountered social difficulties. Nathan, Miranda, Tom and Xander have lived experiences that have shaped their paths through our educational systems.

Nathan and Miranda, the youngest of our group, are both extremely inquisitive and motivated to learn. Nathan, who was like a video game ball ping-pong from one wall on to the other, wanted to know everything that he could learn. His questions never ceased, he wanted answers NOW! Miranda, quiet and sweet, a perfect little angel, was so smart that her public school teacher thought she was behind. They were as different as night and day. But in many ways, they were so much alike. Because she did not want to sit in a chair and sound out words; she was suspected of having ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) every year, when her only problem was that she was already reading chapter books. The class work was boring. She wanted more. Nathan carried his label with him like a ball and chain. There was no mistaking that Nathan was burdened with the ADHD label of an excessively active child. Did he suffer the label because he was curious and active? Or was he overly curious and active because we could not keep up with him?

Tom and Xander were older students who had already experienced public school. Tom loved school, loved learning, and was very motivated to learn, but dealing with the social issues of bullying caused him to leave the public schools for homeschool. He sought a safe, caring environment where he could learn without limits. Xander, too, lived the harsh peer pressure of school, struggling to learn and in turn being called names and taunted for being *different*. Both Tom and Xander were quiet and shy, and had been socially outcast, but Xander struggled daily with her academics, while Tom forged a path ahead.

You have met some of the oldest and youngest students of ECHO; now, I will introduce to you the experiences of the children in the middle. Excerpts taken from interview transcripts, reflections, schoolwork and other school related resources, will chronicle day-to-day examples of living and learning at ECHO. As I gathered, sorted and organized the data, I began to recognize that there were recurring themes throughout the conversations and narratives. Here, I have organized the data as evidence of the recurring these themes: Diversity and Differentiation, Authentic Learning, Caring, and supporting learning through Technology and framing all these, treating and teaching all children according to a gifted model of teaching.

The Themes Through Multiple Voices

As you read, recognize *inclusivity* of a *diverse* group throughout all the narratives. Listen for how the children negotiated *authentic learning experiences*, how they implemented *technology* to support the curriculum and how they experienced a sense of family, community and *caring*. There is no elegant way to categorize the themes. Authentic learning does not settle into nice neat columns and rows. As you may notice, the themes are overlapped and tangled. You may recognize some of these stories as similar to people you know. The stories belong to real children, but they represent a cast of characters found in many classrooms in many schools. There are no two students alike in the group. Some have likenesses; all have differences. Because of the differences, each child was treated differently, according to their individual wants and needs, but all were, to the best of our abilities, equitably included and accepted for their multiple abilities and talents in the family group. Finally, there are abundant examples of children and their uses of technology to overcome struggles and to enhance their learning experiences. I will return to this discussion in the final, Chapter V.

Meet the diverse students and parents of ECHO. Hear their voices. As you meet the group, hear in their narratives, what special circumstances brought them to ECHO, experiences that they enjoyed (or hated) at ECHO and what compelled them to leave the school to return to public school or begin another new adventure. I hope you will enjoy their stories.

Year 1 -- a letter of introduction to ECHO written by one of our parents as an advertisement for the school:

Dear Reader:

Walk through the door of ECHO Learning Center, and you will find yourself in the midst of a hum of activity. Do not expect rows of desks or silent children filling out worksheets. Our classroom is a lively place. The families involved in this cooperative homeschool program believe that the best learning is an active, engaging process. We work with our lead teacher to provide an environment where children thrive, academically and socially. My son, age 10, can't wait to get to school each morning. He knows there will be good friends, of all ages, and familiar routines—like lunch and recess at nearby [downtown] Park. There will also be surprises and challenges—perhaps a visiting scientist or poet, a museum field trip or a really hard math problem. Alice (Max's mom)

This was the view that we had for the school during the first year at ECHO. This was our goal. The interviews and narratives will tell the story of how the people who were part of ECHO perceived what they had created. Max's mom had a strong presence in the school. She was one of the original magnet school's founding members of ECHO and she was active for the entire four year run. She was a well respected and a well-loved member of the group. At ECHO, Max's mom had a voice that was strong.

Another strong family role was seen in Sophie, Maddy, and their family. A former magnet school family and founding family, they helped build and helped close the ECHO School at the end. Their interview took place in my living room on a Sunday afternoon. Sophie is now 14, Maddy is 25 and married, and their mom is seven years older. Lola, who also participated in the interview, is now a 17-year-old high school senior and is still very close friends with Sophie and her family.

Maddy was our 12th grader who accompanied her 2nd grade sister, Sophie. (Sophie stayed all four years and after Maddy graduated the first year; she continued to teach Spanish the entire four years of ECHO.) Both were very shy, but together they created a great team personality. Maddy had participated in the IB (International Baccalaureate) program for three years in our local high school. An excellent student, she was stressed to her limit in a highly competitive academic program coming into her senior year. ECHO afforded her the opportunity to mentor her youngest sister, as well as grow in many ways, herself, as she began teaching Spanish to the rest of the students and when she went on to college and began taking nursing classes, she would teach health and other interesting topics she was learning. Maddy, who was uncomfortable with the social interaction at first, became one of the favorite teachers of all the ECHO children. A nurse now, she is considering continuing her education to become a nurse educator.

Maddy: I went to ECHO, because it was a smaller group. Big groups make me nervous. I hated school.

Maddy and Sophie's mom: I think you were going to ECHO or not going back to school which is a crime with a bright, bright kid that was so miserable.

Maddy: Then, you can't go back [to the regular high school program] once you started [IB]. I was having trouble with Algebra 3 and trig.

Maddy and Sophie's mom: [At your previous school,] in Algebra 3 and Trig, they didn't have a teacher, remember? ... They had a teacher that had two classrooms at the same time-she'd run back and forth. Well In public school, there is a lot they don't tell you. You know and the kids don't know you can't do that kind of thing. When we started getting notes about the class I knew something was seriously wrong or I thought it was a joke, but she really wrote that poorly. All the kids could write better than the teacher and she graded them.

Lola: I just remember research. I liked doing research.

[To Maddy] When you started classes at [college] a lot of times you did things with us at ECHO, Like health and speech. Remember that paper you had us write? I think I wrote about organ donors.

Maddy: Oh, yeah I did.

Lola: That's neat. See we got a lot out of that.

Maddy and Sophie's mom: I don't think they [ECHO students] recognized they were doing work most of the time.

It was true; often, the students did not know that they were learning. So many times, I have heard students say that ECHO was so easy and that they got to do whatever they wanted to and they never did any work. But, they did learn. As a teacher having taught in city, county, and private schools, all elementary grades plus 8th and 10th, I knew the amount of material that gets covered in a classroom after all the disruptions and disconnected piecemeal instruction. Learning comes from experience and the students of ECHO were immersed in experience. They learned. These ECHO children still talk about things they did in school five to seven years ago. Of the little girls who always used to study animals, Sophie, now 14, tells this story:

Sophie: Um, yesterday I went to buy another pet because my Guppy had just died after four days of having her and it wasn't my fault. I was going to buy a snail because my fish tank was getting dirty and it needed something to eat the algae. So, I was looking at all the pets and my mother made a list of what I can't get; including gold fish, angelfish, reptiles, and other stuff. So, I saw this cute little newt, in a cage all by himself and the tank was dirty -- just thought I'd tell you -- so, I got him and I told my mom I got a newt and she thought it was a frog, but it wasn't. It was a salamander type thing and I showed it to her and she said "I thought we said no reptiles?" and I said "oh, we did, he's an amphibian."

Diversity and Differentiation

The following section consists of excerpts from several interviews that have been woven together to present a picture of the diverse group of students and their needs that drew them to a non-traditional school. Drew, Lola, DeAnna, Layla, Max, and some of their parents speak next.

Drew, like Sophie, was also a second grader with who came to ECHO the first year. His mom and dad, like Sophie's, were instrumental in building the school and recruiting students.

Drew, oldest sister, Margie, had been my student for two years (4th and 5th grade) at the public magnet school. She was going into the 7th grade and planned to attend ECHO, however, her friends backed out and returned to public school, so Drew was substituted at the last minute.

Lola came from the magnet school as well. I had been her teacher for 4th grade. Lola stayed the entire four years, having me as her teacher for five years.

DeAnna had been a student at the Montessori Magnet School in our town before its program was discontinued. Her parents had moved her on to a traditional elementary school and disliked the structure, especially hours of what they considered unnecessary homework each night.

Max, another magnet student, and his mom were an integral part of the school. Even though Max moved on to public middle school after the second year, his mom stayed the full four years teaching creative writing.

Mark and Layla C. Fox were brother and sister who came at the beginning of the second year. Their mom participated heavily in the program, as one of the PE parents. She trained the group for a kid's marathon for the three years they were part of the school.

Drew's sister: I think I wanted to come but most of my friends were going to [Happy Valley School] so I chose that.

DeAnna: I came because I didn't really I didn't really pay attention to my work [where I was attending] and I didn't know anyone, so it was a little bit strange, but it was good. I just decided to stay. I came in October [of my] 5th grade.

Lola: I came to ECHO in 5th grade and I don't know why really, I guess because you [the teacher] were leaving and I just wanted to follow you. I just wanted to try something new I guess and I didn't like textbooks and they only had all traditional classes at central.

Drew's dad: Originally, Margie [a former student of the teacher] was going to go [to ECHO] and we switched Drew [the little brother] out at the last minute, right?

Drew's dad: and Margie didn't go because there wouldn't be any friends her age and she wanted to be with her friends.

Layla C Fox: So, who wants to hear why I came to ECHO? Okay. Well, I was only six years old when I first went to ECHO, so it wasn't really my choice where I got to go to school, but, well, one thing I liked when I got there was that the people there were smarter. Because I was in kindergarten at public school, and I felt like I was being held back because the other kindergarten children were...kind of stupid. I could write and read better than they could.

Max's mom: There are lots of kindergarteners who can't write and read.

Layla C Fox: We were still learning to do it, but I was really good. I liked writing a lot more than I did reading, and my teacher would make me read a book before I could write, and I had already read all the books like fifty times and kind of knew them by heart but I still had to read them and that just sucked.

Mark Fox: Um, let's see...in the third grade when I was eight years old, we spent a year in the Czech Republic and I went to three different schools there actually, two private, one public, mostly the public one. But I got a taste of all the different things, extremely different, just education wise, so when we came back when I was nine, my fourth grade year, we'd been gone for a year so both my parents, they were getting houses, still getting set up and everything. So I had to go to public school and I absolutely hated it, like, *hated* it.... Anyway, so I pretty much came to ECHO just to escape the horrors of public school.

Max: I remember being excited that Mark was coming because the first year I didn't have anyone in the same grade as me.

Mark Fox: And I also remember the tour when you like showed us that skeleton, and you were like, "this is one of my former students who misbehaved and didn't do his work." I'm like, yeah, I'm going to come to this school.

Kylie: That was a cool skeleton.

Emma: I knew Mark would like you when we first met you because of your sense of humor.

Differentiation and Inclusion (Equity and Social Justice)

DeAnna's family, Drew's family, and Tom discuss the advantages to being in a multi-age setting and how it lends itself well to meeting the needs of the student.

DeAnna's mother: ... I think one of the reasons why we felt comfortable putting DeAnna in a multi age classroom is she had spent years in a multiage classroom at [an earlier Montessori school] so whether there was anybody exactly her age or not wasn't important to us.

Tom S: Uh, just the social environment in public school didn't work out for me. Bullied constantly, really wasn't being treated like a human being by one of my teachers. It felt like the world was against me. I don't mean to make that sound over dramatic, but it was to a point where I really couldn't focus on any of my classes. So, I kind of fell out and went into homeschool after that. I got through two grades, kind of got jumbled up in the eighth grade, so I ended up coming to ECHO after that.

Drew's mom: well I think the multiage could be good, because everyone was different because you wouldn't be compared to someone that was your age that might be better than you at something.

Teaching in spite of labels, including age/grades, we fell into the habit of teaching the student rather than teaching the label, abandoning the expectations that generally accompany a label. This was differentiation at its highest level. Peer pressure was less of an issue because children were competitive against themselves and not each other. Although there were conflicts, we sought for the children to be able to cooperate and use their strengths while getting support for their weaknesses. Several children in our group had suffered devastating experiences in public schools. One boy, whose mother had always volunteered to be the "room mother," was tired of putting on awesome parties for his classes while her son sat in the principal's office, unable to attend the parties. When that boy came to ECHO as a fifth grader, he had been in and out of five schools in the city and the county.

A similar, but, again, very different story, is that of a little girl, Cassie, who came to ECHO our last year as a sixth grader. She had been in eight different schools. I wonder what her first years were like.

According to her accounts and those of her mother, she had difficulties since pre-school, being told as early as four years old that she was not "up to par" with the other children. As far

as I can ascertain, she was one of two (poor) African American children in a private religious kindergarten consisting of mostly middle class white children.

By the time she attended public kindergarten, she was “bad.” In kindergarten, she already had a label! She stomped and threw a temper tantrums and was put in “time out” in the hall for the day. Or she was left in the bathroom and forgotten.

By first grade, she was sent to a school for children with behavioral problems, frequently restrained and placed in confinement. (“Restrained” is a word that she uses, understands and knows well, but is uncommon for her range of vocabulary.)

One day, angry with her captors, she spit on the wall. When her grandmother came to pick her up, the child was told to clean the whole room. Her grandmother, incensed, had her clean the spot where she spit and whisked her away.

From that point on she was exiled to one new school after another, each time to solve an unsolvable problem. Each time, she made no progress, behaved badly and was sent on to the next school—until by the eighth grade, after ECHO, she had been in attendance at ten different schools. In the eighth grade, she was threatened quarterly with being sent to another school.

I have followed Cassie for the three years since she left ECHO as a mentor and advocate. I attended her Special Education IEP meetings and her suspension reviews. I wrote letters on her behalf; I begged the school (Middle School, High School, Alternative School, City Board and Special Education Department) to put her in a school where she could learn, but the pleas go ignored.

No one knew. No one knew; not even her friends and their families knew that when Cassie came to ECHO as a sixth grader she could not read, write, or compute simple math problems beyond a kindergarten or first grade level. She was always clean and nicely dressed,

but she was tattered from falling deep into the cracks and no matter what we did, we could barely budge her.

She sat by me and she worked on activities and projects that she could finally find success in. A special student mentored her and a special mom who took time to help her with her projects. It was the first year in Cassie's school life that she did not suffer the degradation of suspension. ECHO was an alternative school, but it was a positive alternative and she was probably the happiest there that she had ever been in school. She felt success; she was proud of what she was learning and she finally made friends.

At the end of the year she moved on to middle school, armed with her narrative report card (see Appendix I), along with instructions for care. The instructions were filed, ignored; the public school system had rigid, inflexible guidelines; and now at nearly fifteen years old, she cannot read or perform simple math functions, much less keep up in a history, science or pre-algebra class. So she talks and plays and is beginning to like boys and still she is pushed onward to nowhere. She has no power, nor does her mother. They have very little money, and certainly, no status, no social capital (Bourdieu, 1997). She has no power over anyone or anything. The identity she clings to is that of "stupid" and "retard" and "ugly" names she has been called by peers and unknowing family members (even her mother). She has no live-in father or father figure. Gender, to her, is nothing. Poor, black women have little. Somehow, her cycle needed be changed.

These stories could be considered very much the same, however, every person is unique and every situation is not only different for different people, but the interpretation is different from various points of view. Unless we are attempting to create compliant citizens who know

the same information, we must consider the individual and teach him or her to think for themselves.

Contrasting Cassie's story, DeAnna, who was Cassie's mentor and friend, left public school for similar, but very different reasons. Still, it was a system that failed her because it did not meet her individualized needs. DeAnna left a Montessori program and returned to public school in the fourth grade where the emphasis had switched from learning process to memorizing facts. Her parents needed a place for a smoother transition, a place where DeAnna's learning needs were accommodated.

DeAnna's dad: In [public] 4th grade, DeAnna spent the whole year catching up. There was a lot of reading and extra to catch up to what those kids were doing over there. And then in 5th grade the expectations were over and above what we wanted our child to be able to do – something besides homework. And after about a month, we talked to the teachers first, they ...weren't going to change to accommodate DeAnna.

Then we happened to find ECHO. I was thinking DeAnna was just going to have to suck it up and do it. Other kids had survived and she'll just have to get through it. But we just kind of took a leap of faith.

DeAnna's mom: We were terrified mostly because we were leaving everything we knew about education. Even though it wasn't working and even though I'd had years of education and still the thought of leaving public school make me sick at my stomach. And I remember feeling terrified for a good 3 months. I guess now, and I tell people this everywhere I go, DeAnna is so much better off for having been at ECHO.

At ECHO, Deanna and her parents were able to make her curriculum meet her needs.

There, she did not have to struggle for hours doing work that was not only tedious, but also meaningless.

The children at ECHO had individualized learning plans (ILP) that were created as a team effort between the teacher, parent and student. Each student worked on the objectives for their age grade through research and projects. They had choices if they wanted to work alone, in

pairs or in groups and those combinations were flexible depending on the project and subject area. They were given agency and they learned to make decisions about their learning.

Authentic Learning Experiences

The curriculum at ECHO was also supplemented by group lessons, visiting teachers and many, varied and unusual field trips. Field trips were a great way to make many lessons truly authentic, by making the learning real for the students. Rather than only read a textbook, we were free to go where we wanted. With a few moms and some vans, we travelled the state – and farther. “*Here we go again!*” was our motto. We generally averaged one to two fieldtrips each week (See Appendix J). With literacy at the center of the ECHO curriculum: from that point all other subjects emanated; field trips were the spokes of the wheel that took us places we could learn. Below, read about authentic learning experiences that made ECHO special for these children.

Lola: I loved the field trips the best!

DeAnna: we went on field trips every day and at the end of the year we were like wait have we actually done any work?

MM: the question is not “Have you done any work?” The question is “Have you learned anything?”

DeAnna: We had to have our course of study and there wasn’t time to do it because of the field trips but at the end of the year you were like you remember this field trip, what did you learn?

DeAnna’s dad: I remember sitting w/ them at the end of the year saying now go back, remember this field trip, what did you learn?

Drew’s mom: I loved the field trips because they’re great and they break up the monotony, the monotony of public school. And the field trips are nothing like the field trips at ECHO; they have to be considered very educational. I appreciated the field trips too. I went on the Montevallo one, to American Village. Now I see, especially now that we don’t have that anymore, you know [Drew’s younger brother in public first grade] isn’t having all that.

Drew's dad: not to mention neighborhood 'walk arounds.'

Drew's mom: we didn't get to do the walk across the bridge. We were gone.

DeAnna's mom: one of the best field trips was one we didn't plan. For some reason y'all talked me into going on morning walk and we went down to the cemetery and the guy was there from the Talbot School and he'd done all the research and gave us a tour and I didn't know there were Confederate soldiers there. There was just a lot of history, so I was just in heaven.

MM: we were down there to do drawings, rubbings.

DeAnna: we were supposed to get rubbings of historic markers, and we have a picture of us rubbing them with our hands. (ha ha)

DeAnna's mom: but that man was the history teacher at Talbot School and he let us listen to the lesson, too. We would learn from anybody. Were you there when we learned from the man in Birmingham. He was a homeless person and he took us through the park across from the civil rights museum and told us stories and about the statues. Because those were impromptu – he gave us the best tour we ever had and he was there because he had been there and he said if you participated in the civil rights movement that you could live in that hotel across the street free. But he had been a professor.

Mark Fox: The field trips and the projects were probably the best thing about ECHO, and Fridays at Ms. Minear's, I really liked those, too.

Mark Fox: So Fridays, projects, and field trips, those were really fun. I remember a lot of the field trips. What was my favorite one? I don't know, there were just so many. We went on field trips a lot.

Lola: Like every day.

DeAnna dad: I think the kids learned to veer off course and say this isn't in our plan, not in our book...

Technology Makes It All Possible

In the world of technology, Richard Clark and Robert Kozma have had an ongoing battle regarding whether or not media influences learning. In his 1983 article, *Reconsidering Research on Learning from Media*, Clarke stirred the educational fire by looking at research which he states shows that media has statistically insignificant influence over learning. In the 1987 rebuttal article, *The Implications of Cognitive Psychology for Computer-Based Learning Tools*,

Robert B. Kozma asserts that certain software programs are designed to enhance learning with the aid of a computer. Both had convincing arguments, and the dispute continued well into the 21st century. But at ECHO, we did not care whether it was the technology doing the teaching or the teaching coming from the lessons and the teacher, we used a variety of technology to enable us to serve a wide range of needs. Because we covered such a scope of ages, grades and interests, and we had a serious lack of capital; we were limited in our use of schoolbooks. We were fortunate to have an extensive library of storybooks, trade books, and reference books from my grown children, donations, yard sales, and my love of books, but we needed more. We also used the public library on a regular basis, but the single most important tool we had that allowed us to differentiate instruction was the computer. Earlier in this chapter, you met Tom. Tom was our high school student and he came to ECHO using a laptop to help organize his work. But we had been using technology from the beginning of ECHO.

The Internet provided a resource for up-to-date information and allowed us to learn, create and present without moving from one seat. (Not that we ever stayed in one seat; but we could!) Informing the students on credibility issues, they quickly learned to recognize websites that contained quality information and those that were just thrown up by questionable sources. Because we had such a range of ages, interests and abilities, the Internet provided us individualized – differentiated – resources.

We must have been good at begging, or appeared to be pitiful, because our friends and their friends responded to our technological needs. When we moved into our ECHO building, we started to build our technology empire. Beginning with the few computers I already owned and had passed down as I had upgraded, we added the gifts of others' nearly discarded or sadly unused pieces of equipment. From a great grand ancestor, the original Mac to the Gateway

Pentium 3, we switched parts and patched pieces, added Internet cards and ran cords all over the room; we created our network. During our four years at ECHO School, at the least, we had a computer for every two students, and at the best, every child could work individually, but simultaneously on some form of computer technology.

“Watch out for the cords! Don’t trip!” We all knew the drill. “Who needs internet and who wants to write?” Or, “here, you may work on this typing game.” “Don’t look at the keys!”

We used my digital cameras; we went through several. We documented our ECHO lives. The students would be responsible for pictures of all of our field trips. Two or three children would each be in charge of a camera, and between them, we would gather enough evidence to create a PowerPoint fieldtrip or a Photo Story. This involved many levels of expertise, from captioning the pictures, to developing the timing and adding audio to the presentation. It involved many members of our village.

I bought a projector for presentations and we borrowed an old tattered video screen and hung it upside down from the ceiling so we could raise and lower it like a shade – as needed. We used, with frequency, the 15-year-old Panasonic DVD recorder that had recorded the baby videos of my son trying to roll over for hours and hours. The plug connection had been loosened by one of my former student teachers and we had to jiggle it to keep it working as we balanced it on our shoulders. From that, we upgraded to a Sony handheld which used the small cassettes instead of full size DVD’s like the older camera. We found that we had some very promising videographers in our clan. It was quite entertaining (and educational) to enjoy their masterpieces.

Mark and Layla's mom: Didn't a bull chase you while you were making a movie?

Mark Fox: Yes, I think it was the first year that - actually it was just a cow - that holds the most memories, because the time me and Nick spent at Conner's house making those movies...

Yeah the biggest thing about ECHO was probably the power points and the projects, learning how to do a research project and make power points. But just that World War II project we did, I think that's probably the greatest memory I have of my childhood because all the stupid stuff we did... Yeah we made so many different movies. I remember how we set up all the toy soldiers and sprinkled flower on them, because it was supposed to be the Battle of the Bulge and it was snowing.

We utilized everything we could get our hands on and actively sought to solve our learning problems by using supportive technology. With my Grandpa's old cassette tape player and my youngest son's Teddy Ruxpin tape recorder, we listened to background music while we worked, followed along with books-on-tape, interviewed each other for projects and recorded ourselves reading books to make Reading Rainbow type selections for the younger students or siblings at home. The lessons learned through technology have carried over into subsequent schooling experiences.

Mark Fox: Well, I think the best thing about ECHO that paid off was probably the computer stuff we learned. This semester I've got a class, business tech, that's required and I am bored out of a mind. And there everything I learned to do at ECHO in the fifth grade has paid off, because I can already do everything in that class, because we are learning to use power point, access and all that stuff.

I'm pretty much helping out my entire row, because they're like, "how do you make a new folder?" And I'm like, well... let me just... Ms. Minear taught me... Actually, the computer stuff that I learned at ECHO, that's probably the most I learned, because [at my current school] we're on a block schedule, and the classes are long, and that class is completely wasted for me. I'm always the first one done with the work, and I just kind of sit there, stare at the ceiling, and wish YouTube was accessible.

Technology at ECHO was not only a fun and a useful life skill; we used technology to support learning disabilities. Fortunately, we were able to discover ways to move children ahead,

navigating around their special needs and weaknesses so that they could shine using their strengths, as the following story depicts.

A (distressing) success story

Writing. Simple. We do it for many reasons and purposes. Toddlers curl their chubby hands around crayons and create masterpieces on walls. Moms make grocery lists. Grandmas write letters. Children come to school ready to learn their letters and write their names. They practice; they become skilled. They write a word, a sentence, and eventually, a story.

We started our year with a room full of excited smiling faces of children who were ready to learn. From our 4-year-old prodigy to our 12th grade senior, we had a diverse crew of abilities. At that point in time, I had taught every one of the elementary grades, K-6, except second grade, and lo and behold, two of my seventeen students were second graders. Both the boy and the girl had come from the magnet school from which we had emigrated.

Both had a great deal of difficulty writing and spelling. It did not matter how much they studied, spelling was a problem and worse, (hand) writing was such a tedious task, it was difficult to get either child to write. Amazingly, though, when those two children used a laptop, they were able to soar! They learned the meaning of red and green lines and used them to help with their grammar and spelling. Further, when they typed, they were able to write epochs.

So, when it was time to move on to middle school, Mom visited the school counselor to pave the way for her child's success. Having spent the past four years in a school dedicated to learning without labels, it was important to ensure continued achievement.

“We do not have an IEP or 504 Plan (no plans of accommodation for special needs), but my child has used a computer to facilitate writing since second grade. I want to be sure that she can continue using her laptop as she re-enters public school.”

“Oh, no. I'm sorry. If she has a laptop in class, everyone will want one,” was the response of the public school representative.

She was not allowed a laptop in her public school classroom. She had to find other ways to accommodate her special needs. It was frustrating for her mother that she could not continue what we found would work for her. She had to follow the rules. Her laptop had gotten her successfully through four years of school; she would find a way to make it.

Besides record keeping, projects, and creative play, we used computers every day to write. As the students wrote poetry, stories, letters and such, they kept those keyboard keys tapping. A daily assignment that everyone of the students were responsible for was the daily reflection. Learning the importance of teacher reflection in my undergraduate programs, I extended to my students the ability to think about what they had achieved each day. They would not only report a list of activities, but they would evaluate and weigh what they had done.

Asking themselves questions such as:

Think about what you have done today (or recently). How does this affect your being? You may wish to write about something you have LEARNED, how you FEEL, what you THINK, or of something you might be PROUD. Perhaps you HELPED someone or WONDER, WORRY or have QUESTIONS about something. Maybe you are THINKING of something you'd like to LEARN MORE about. You may also choose to write about a DREAM, an IDEA or FEELINGS that are on your mind. How will these things affect WHAT YOU WILL DO TOMORROW?

This careful thought and reflection did not happen over night. The students eventually learned the process over time, and as with any activity that is practiced and repeated, it became second hand to them. They were able to sit down at the end of each day and reconnect with their learning experiences. It was good. And it was all supported by technology. The students not only benefitted using technology, at ECHO, they created lasting memories of their days at ECHO School.

Reflections of the way life used to be...

Nathan, first grade (4-19-06)

I had a good day and I did go to the morning walk. And we had to be quiet when we walked. And I think it was fun and I had snack and I was glad I did lunch. And I had lunch and it was super fun and I played keep away. The end

Dear M.M.,

Today was a good day. I am really sleepy. I think this is a really old computer, I am not sure why but I think so. I went to bed at seven thirty. I was watching the crocodile hunter last night when I fell asleep. I cleaned my binder/ bag/ desk today and last Friday. When I get home I am going to take a nap. I hate feeling sleepy. I can't wait to go to ballet tonight! Today was really fun! First we read two articles. I read a silent article about a husband and a wife committed a murder together in two thousand three. I felt sorry for that woman. The guy also killed his dad. The couple also killed Heather D. They found the dead body of an other Heather stabbed to death in a well near the couples house. The class read a news article about some people might put a bypass in Hurricane creek. I hope they don't. I am going to write a letter To Bob Riley and ask the Henderson [?] to do something about it as well. I bet that they would say if there is a bypass in Hurricane creek then the people who put it there is no longer welcomed in smoothie king. I bet they have already done that though because they are smart. I got to study a fish heart. There was dried up blood connected to the heart, that fish had a lot of fat around its heart. We also dissected shrimp. I saw its brain! We dissected a fish named Eddie. He pooped when we were cutting him open. DeAnna's mom got fish poop all over her hand! Eddie had GIGANTIC teeth. He was a panorama [piranha] . We saw his bladder and his intestines, and all sorts of stuff! It was so cool! DeAnna pooped the eyes out of her shrimp! the eyes popped. Well I got to go and do mavis beachon teaches typing. Bye! Have a nice life!

Love,

Sophie (5th grade)

1-22-07

Nice reflection Sophie. Be sure to check your spelling. You might want to have someone proofread because the spell check doesn't always catch everything -- like when you wrote pooped instead of popped. Those are different words!

Love

:-) mm

DeAnna reflection

March 28, 2007

Today is really the 29th of March. This would be because I didn't do my reflection yesterday. Yesterday we had science and in science we ate gummy worms that represented chromosomes because we were talking about cell reproduction which has stages known as meiosis and mitosis. Cell reproduction is when the cell and every thing in the cell splits to make a whole new cell. The gummy worms were basically DNA. they look the most like DNA because they had two colors on them .(THEY WERE VERY GOOD)well you know what DNA looks like; it will break in half and move to the outer edge of the cell. Then the cell will just break and make two cells.

We also did a fun craft and for the fun craft we made bunnies. The test bunny that we made the other night name was grace and then yesterday / today I made a bunny whose name was James JR.

Tomorrow we are going to star softball and that will be buckets of fun since I am the pitcher.

DeAnna – 5th grade

Three versions of the wreck on the bridge; the students were being reporters.

SERIOUS WRECK ON BRIDGE

Layla C Fox

Today there was a car wreck on the Our Town Bridge. The wreck was serious and about five or six cars were involved.

A lady was hurt and surely she was knocked unconscious. She was a blond with a blue shirt and I never had seen her before.

Two ambulances and a fire truck were on the bridge. One car had run into the concrete on the side of the road that separates

The road and the side walk. At least one car had been hit so that it turned around. One or two of the cars hit the concrete on

The other side with their backs. I think there were more cars but I can't list them all. A little boy had been in the wreck and was crying very hard.

He was brought to a family care building quite near by.

The wreck happened close to the Tuscaloosa News building. Ambulances and Fire trucks didn't stay long and we left when they did.

Unknown Author

As you look at my map thier are lots of possible ways that this could have happened. The Voltswagon could have started it because it was the car that is in the front close to the middle. It could have been like a chain reaction. Let's say that the V W Bug hit the Hydaui and made it spin around in sudden shock. Then the V W Bug stops and there is something like a Camero that is driving along and hits it and it may have tryed to swerve over to the side and didn't realize that it was going so fast and it smashed itself. Then the college girl in the Toyota got scared maybe because she had only been driving for a maximum of 5 years and she might have gone crazy. That is my theory.

April 19, 2007

I saw a wreck .a
little boy was erylng and
shakng. he was ryally scat

there were toiw wak;
and ahote white car and blu
car.

A birthday treat: walking across the bridge for Layla C Fox's birthday during P.E.

Monday, September 18, 2006

The flamingo room

By Layla C. Fox (3rd grade)

On Tuesday, September 12th, E.C.H.O. [kids] walked across the bridge in the rain. Some of the kids had ponchos and others had umbrellas. We stopped before the end of the bridge and turned around. Most of us took of our ponchos and walked in the rain.

On September 14th we went over the whole bridge and went over to the flamingo room. Everyone had one cup of lemonade. As everyone drank their lemonade, we went over to the art museum and looked the things there. There was a man made out of cinder blocks, bowling balls in trees, and many other interesting things like that.

After everyone was finished with their drinks we walked back across the bridge and stayed at school

Not all the memories of ECHO School were good one. On this fact, most agree, P.E. was the most memorable awful time to most kids at least one time or another. Or, maybe it was not so bad after all.

Dissonance at the ECHO Corral: A Quite Different Picture

Regarding Getting Along, Not Getting Along and PE

The hardest subject for us to manage was physical education. Everyone agreed. But after the whole PE discussion, I do not think everyone hated it that much. There were lots of fun days. We had some good talks about being kind to others and everyone always promised that tomorrow would be better.

Max: I don't remember much about my time at ECHO, but I remember always enjoying it. Except for P.E.

Max: Well we liked it while we were doing it but looking back I was like, how was I ever like that? I don't know. Everybody was yelling or crying or fighting. That was the extent of our P.E. class.

MM: And the poor moms and dads were asking, "Do I *have* to do this?!"

Max's mom: There were some intense personalities among those children, and I think a lot of that was really unleashed during P.E.

Max:

And dodge ball of course. I remember our annual banning of dodge ball. Fourth grade we had it for a while, and you were like, "No. No more dodge ball." Fifth grade we had it for a while.

Max: If I were my age looking at these fourth graders I'd be like, why are they playing dodge ball? And I remember Scooter telling me, because he stayed around another year after me, and I remember him being like, "yeah, she's banned dodge ball permanently", and he was certainly upset by that.

ECHO children experienced variety at P.E. They had the variety of choice play and they had the variety of different parents with different ideas as to how P.E. would be conducted.

Remembered as one of the most popular P.E. parents, Mark and Layla's mom trained the children to run a marathon. She carried this task through her three-year tenure. An athlete herself, she led the children to run the perimeter of the park several times a week, keeping a log of how far they had run, leading to the Mercedes Kid's Marathon in the spring. The Kid's Marathon was designed so that children (K-5) would run a full 26.2-mile marathon over five months (September through January) and run the last mile on the day of the marathon in February. Many of the kids participated in the training and the marathon each year. Some walked, while others ran; either was perfectly acceptable. The object of the task was to enjoy the run.

That same mom would lead outings around the downtown area of the city, which was a block away from the school. A favorite trip was walking over the bridge from Tuscaloosa to Northport (less than a mile) in the rain wearing ponchos and to celebrate Layla C Fox's birthday

with pink lemonade at the Flamingo room on the other side of the bridge.

“Oh, I missed that!” one student remarked as the interview group reminisced.

Different parents brought different specialty activities to the group. One mama led the school on an excursion, which took them into the woods, and out to the railroad tracks, where there were told by an official looking gentleman to go back where they came from! We were in a perfect location, just adjacent to downtown with all the advantages of the park, the theater, restaurants, easily navigated sidewalk streets and the farmer’s market, just to name a few.

Best laid plans?

Consider that in the first year there were a group of 15 children ranging from 4 to 17. Let us look at the group: one Pre-K girl, one K boy, a girl and a boy in second grade, a girl and a boy in third grade, two fourth grade boys, three fifth grade boys and a fifth grade girl, two seventh grade girls and a 12th grade girl. The 17-year-old senior functioned as a teaching assistant, narrowing the range to 4 – 12. Better.

The problems began to arise with the group game. The big boys and the little boys generally did not have a problem. Differences in ages were not always as expected. There were times when rambunctious young ones plowed over the more considerate older children. Contact sports were discouraged. We had to ban Dodge ball early in the year and each time through the years when it was begged to reinstatement, it was quickly banned again.

The little girls preferred to walk on the rocks – the ruins of the old capitol, climb trees, or go for a walk. They were uninterested in the group game and when one little girl decided not to play, the others would likely follow suit, sometimes leaving poorly balanced and short-handed teams. It was for these reasons that we established the “you choose the game rule” to encourage

group participation; however, some of the stronger-willed girls held steadfast to their desires and strongly rebuffed group involvement.

Parent participation and attention, as with the children, varied tremendously. In a best-case scenario, two parents split responsibilities over the group game and “other” endeavors. Some parents joined in the games, enthusiastically supervising activities. There were parents who did not take their eyes off the children, concentrating especially on the youngest of our brood. Some mamas and daddies minded every p and q (as in mind your p’s and q’s) and some sat on the park bench totally oblivious to the goings on around them.

It was not unusual for arguments to come back to the classroom with the over-tired and agitated, red-faced, aromatic children. “He did this!” “She did that!” “They were doing whatever!”

It was difficult for some parents to maintain any semblance of order and propriety with the class because they were not used to interacting with the group on a regular basis. Just as classes taunt substitute teachers, some parents were easier to hoodwink than others. Parents had different tolerance levels and having only an hour each week to share with these jewels left them coveting decorum. Bright, as these children were, they knew exactly with whom they could get away with what.

The dissonance of P.E. fell on my shoulders: to decipher each dispute and bring justice to the participants of each altercation. There were accidents that needed to be explained away. There was teasing between many different students who struggled to understand each others’ needs and worst of all, there was a tinge of plain old bullying between kids who just did not get along.

Overall, PE is remembered as the least favorite part of the school day, which, ironically, is many times the favorite of students in public schools. However, as we shared remembrances, it was not that bad.

Mark Fox: I remember P.E., I think it didn't work because it was the one thing Ms. Minear wasn't there for. I think me and Ms. Minear had this kind of rivalry and friendship going on, or I thought we had. I respected you a lot. I look at every adult as someone who thinks they have power, but really, I'm stronger than them. I'm not kidding, that's seriously how I thought. I thought of Ms. Minear as the one person who could see into my mind and see what I'm doing. So when Ms. Minear was around, things were different.

The girls sometimes escaped to The Monkey Tree.

Kylie: And like Nick said P.E. was the not the funnest part, but I usually escaped it by, to many people's disappointment, I usually would go off and climb a tree, until the Talbot School people cut off all the branches, because they didn't want us climbing their tree. So we were too short to reach the branches. They just cut off the bottom branches.

Emma: I believe it was just the city that did it.

Kylie: Those Talbot School kids were after us! I was very angry about that, though. Because it was just sad. It was a really cool tree. I mean, there were a lot of trees but there was one we especially loved, a big magnolia that was really tall.

Layla C Fox: The monkey tree.

Kylie: I never even got to the top until a few months ago[seven years later, they still climb that tree], I think. I went to the park for some reason and I climbed all the way to the top, because I'm tall enough now to reach the branches. I used to climb that tree every P.E. until the limbs got chopped off.

Just recently, as I accessed my Facebook account to peek in on the daily news, I saw a conversation between several of the former ECHO children who have remained friends over the years.

Kylie had posted a picture of herself, 14 years old, high up in the monkey tree. It was the very same monkey tree of her childhood. The kids were talking about a book that they were reading and how it reminded them of this and that and the crazy dreams it made them dream.

I felt happy inside that they still loved to do, seven years later, the things they began at ECHO School.

Caring

Caring is very important in schooling. When I have asked students of all ages to describe the best teacher they ever had, it is unanimous that the teacher was someone who cared for them. Nel Noddings advocates caring as this ability see the face of the Other (Levinas) and take action, to be socially just. To be recognized as a caring relationship, the carer must not only express a caring act, but the cared for must acknowledge the care. I believe that one of the most important parts of the ECHO School was the caring nature of the teachers and families and children. We were a family.

Family Time. Sharing and Caring.

Mark Fox: I don't remember which one it was, but on the way back I had a long conversation with Ms. Minear about why children don't follow directions, and it was actually like a really in depth, psychological conversation. No, we were not laughing, because I was seriously being serious, and Ms. Minear was actually listening. It was really interesting, but I don't remember what was said.

MM: What did we decide?

Mark Fox: We decided that children were good hearted, but just due to all the factors in their lives they had to misbehave. It was pretty much me saying, Ms. Minear, there's a good reason why I don't want to listen to you.

MM: Looking back on it, do you think it was as bad of a thing?

Mark Fox: Back then I was really closed-minded.

MM: I know you hated it. And I was so torn between making you stay home and making you go.

Mark Fox: That was really me in my bad years, I think. That's when I was really not a very considerate person and I gave my mom a lot of trouble, I gave my dad a little bit of trouble.

So, I think ECHO kind of helped shape me a lot, and I really liked how we all knew each other, like we all actually knew each other. In public school you know about five people in each class and you may say hi to other people, but the whole class doesn't really know each other and there's really no way to, the classes are just too big, but in ECHO, there weren't too little people, but there wasn't too much, and we'd divide into general age groups. Pretty much me, Conner, Max, Lola, and Scooter had to become friends or perish. We had to unite and take down whatever assignments you gave us. And we became friends, so it worked out, and all the little girls, they became friends, and Drew.

Layla C Fox: No. I wanted to point out something that I really loved, like during tornado things, you know? Instead of just sitting there in the hall with your hands over your head and people smacking you if you aren't in the right position, you got to tell ghost stories.

Emma: A tornado's already scary enough.

Mark Fox: That was fun.

MM: And we'd fix hot chocolate.

Mark Fox: ... Ms. Minear gave us willpower.

MM: You learned that everybody doesn't have the same needs and the same wants.

Mark Fox: It was as simple as Petey was luckier than us. Life's tough.

Max's mom: Life isn't fair.

Tom: If I could take over that. That was something I didn't notice while I was there, but it seemed true. ECHO really promoted personal maturity. You had to be able to get along with people, Ms. Minear made sure of that. If you picked a fight with somebody or were being grumpy, that got on to. That was the end of it. And you just didn't do that again. That just didn't work right and you had to go on. And I never realized how valuable that was until you get into an environment where people are just held together by the semblance of a system.

And then as soon as they are put in this great, free world and expected to get along they don't. When you get to public school if you don't pick a fight with anybody it's because they get in trouble for it. But they don't tell you what the alternative is they just give you detention. It makes a difference when people actually tell you what you are doing wrong.

I remember my few records in public school, if you were to go by my detention record; I was one of the worst students in all E Middle School. And if you want my opinion, I never really understood why I was in trouble. Ever. Well, maybe a couple times. Between a combination of teachers not really caring and looking for somebody to blame and other students exploiting that, discipline was completely useless. People would go out of their way to mess with you just to get you in trouble. And that was the one thing above any

other that drove me out of public school. Teachers did not, downright did not care at times. I completely got off topic with that.

Max: Being in ECHO has helped me socially better than a public school setting. I'm friends with everybody in my grade, who are completely different and not just one person who's never even heard of this other person who I'm friends with. I can have a conversation with anybody. But I guess that helps, because I'm on the newspaper and I use that. But I just think it helped me getting to know people.

I was this new kid who was kind of alienated, because these kids had grown up together and didn't really want to get to know me, but around half way through seventh grade people were more open to it.

MM: They found out you were cool.

Lola: Yeah, I was going to go back to what Tom was talking about, I was one of the "troublemakers." Let's just say I always got in trouble.

Max's mom: When was this? I don't remember Lola as a troublemaker.

Lola: I remember it. I used to hate having to sit there and write this stuff down about what I did and how I did it and why I should do it differently. I'd just rather be suspended. But maybe she [the teacher] was right on this subject. She would talk to the person [about what they did].

MM: And now Lola's a mediator at her high school.

Max's mom: I think that ECHO was kind of intense There were different personalities and also very strong personalities, and there were undercurrents that I didn't know about, the conflicts, or what people were screaming about. But since there were so few people, it seemed like whatever the positive emanated it could be very extreme. ... It maybe led to some of the comings and goings of people at ECHO.

At ECHO, there were people who could not get along with other people, just as in everyday life. There were not only differences, but strong personalities, and there were very strong ideas about how things should be and how children should be raised, different ideas about everything. There were people who left because of other people. As much as I hated that and...actually I found out one the other day that I did not even know. And I tried to do everything that I could to get everybody to get along with each other, but as I have written, some people were just more cooperative than others.

Our school was a co-op, but sometimes it is difficult to be cooperative. That made it hard, because, like Tom said, there were reasons that people acted the way that they did. And it wasn't always because a person was good or bad or right or wrong, that there are circumstances that cause people to behave the way they do. When you take the time to know the Other, you worry not just about what their grades are or how many words they can spell, but how well they can get along with others, because that matters more than numbers and facts.

We tried to incorporate caring into the curriculum through character education, our annual White Elephant Sale for charity, and looking to catch people doing nice things. We even made a category for helping others in our daily reflections. We adopted a retirement home and went twice a month to do activities with them. I witnessed some children doing great things with the elderly there.

MM: We did so many things. And we did so many things from nothing. Remember when we went to Birmingham and stopped and picked up stuff off the side of the road? We made a school out of nothing. And I'm just proud of that. Every one that was there did it. We had kids in our school, ya'll, who...if you think about it, every kid who was there was there because public school did not work for them in one way or another. And some of those kids were there because they had behavior problems and it was so bad in those schools that they couldn't function behaviorally. And that's one of the parts of being in school. And those of you who have been back to school, you know they're there, and they're there in way bigger numbers than we had at ECHO. We may have only had one or two but they really stood out in a group of five or ten. But we still did great things.

Max: And then the ones who stood out eventually got along.

MM: Exactly. Some people who I never thought would never be different from the way they came changed in so many ways that it just...and I'm not the only one. I know that other people mention it and talk about it and say, "that person." And even though that person's not or those people aren't, it's not one person. It's several people. It's all of us. There were times when I got aggravated and didn't want to see anybody else, and I made people who couldn't get along go in the kitchen together.

Lola: When Ms. Minear ain't happy, ain't nobody happy.

Why People Left ECHO

Even though we worked hard to meet the needs of all students, to care about each other, still people came and went. There were as many different reasons that students left ECHO as there were students who attended. Probably the two most prevalent reasons to leave were social and financial. Socially, ECHO was good for some children because there was a low student to teacher ratio. However, having a small school meant there were limited choice in making friends with lots of other kids. Most of the ECHO students were involved in out of school activities such as dancing, swimming, drama, Girl Scouts, soccer and other sports. Most of these settings offered opportunities for social contact with age group peers. Many times, though, there was only one child in a grade level or only one boy and the rest girls. (Poor Drew!) Even though they got along well as a class, it still left a void after school.

Money was always an issue. The families who chose ECHO were not what might be considered “private school families.”

It had not been in their financial plans to pay tuition for private school. They were average working families to which tuition posed a burden. Some could not maintain that commitment.

People moved away and people moved up to the next level (middle or high school) and re-entered the public schools. Some children did not get along well with other children. I was always sad to see this as a reason for people to go, but as hard as we tried to recognize and accept differences in children, some children and parents could not accept the differences in others. We were a work in progress.

The largest group to leave was the last year when we closed. We did not have a big enough tuition base to support the minimal needs of the school (i.e., rent, phone, internet, etc.) I

had agreed to work for whatever was left over at the end of each year and it was never very much left, a fourth of what I earned as a public school teacher with no benefits. So, at the end of the last year, everybody left.

Sophie: What if we didn't leave?

MM: Well, you did leave. Are you going to say like I left you?

Sophie's mom: Therapy time.

Sophie: We went over this before Ms. Minear. The school closed and I couldn't drop out of school. I was going into sixth grade, so I went to E Middle School.

Drew's mom: This is kind of making me really sad.

Mark Fox: Well, I'm an extremely lazy person when it comes to stuff I don't just love, and I honestly liked ECHO, but I just focused on the stuff I hated about it and I didn't stop to think that, yes there's no perfect education system and there was a lot of stuff I hated about ECHO, but I didn't stop to think about all the stuff I loved about it, as opposed to public school, which I hated everything about. I really didn't like the Weekly Work, and other small things that really didn't matter. So I convinced my dad to homeschool me and within a few months regretted it. I guess I didn't really learn to appreciate it until it was gone, that type of thing, so I wanted it back, but then the school stopped and everything, so yeah. That's probably one of the biggest regrets of my life is not going there the fourth year and I really should have.

Layla C Fox: I was loyal to it; I stayed there the whole time.

Max: Good job, Layla C Fox.

Mark Fox: It would have been a lot more fun. I pretty much sat in my dad's office all day and read, and at ECHO, there was some stuff we had to read, but over all we had freedom of choice as to what we read.

Now and Then...Life after ECHO

Parents and students recall what ECHO was like compared to their new schools.

DeAnna's mom: I remember feeling scared when we left ECHO School when it ended; just terrified because we didn't know how we were going to adapt and how we would do on our exit exams.

Drew's mom: and we were terrified.

DeAnna: I wasn't really scared to go back to public school, I just didn't really remember what I was supposed to do in public school. But at [the private school I went to,] elementary ends at 6th grade and we were starting 7th grade and nobody else knew what to do either so I did just fine.

Drew's mom: I knew Drew would sail through and he did. They were amazed. But you know it was social. I was a little worried about social.

DeAnna mom: here's something that's good. DeAnna not very long ago started learning about cell structure. She said we learned this at ECHO school and it was more fun because we used candy.

DeAnna: I mean I like the school and the environment [of the new school] and everything, but they don't really understand that someone else might know something else. Like a teacher doesn't want you to ask a question that they don't know the answer to because they won't say let's go look it up like they should, they just kind of blow over it.

So then the rest of the class will ask me later about it and I'm like this is what happened and this is why it happened. It's just sort of amazing for the teacher to not teach the full story of something and to just teach you what they are required to teach you.

I like ECHO School over everything else because it seemed like at ECHO it was competitive learning for the good reasons of competitive learning. It was like; she's learning this so I have to come up with something better to teach everybody. At school, it's more like you don't want to do any of that because it's just wrong and learning is bad. And at ECHO School it was like you wanted to learn as much as you can about everything you possibly can.

Drew's mom: At public school you occasionally get a teacher that's really good. It really hurts their interest. And even then it wasn't like the ECHO School was. It makes it bearable but that's terrible to just be bearable.

In this chapter, I have added additional voices to this story to paint details into the picture of the ECHO School. These are the voices and perceptions, of the students and parents who *were* the school. They tell the story because they wrote the story. Each individual, diverse in his or her own ways, was an integral chapter to the story of ECHO.

Most obvious was the diversity of the group. I have reiterated this theme throughout and I want to expound on the fact that diversity in a classroom is not isolated to ECHO School. Each child is unique in any group, no matter how homogeneous the intentions. Because of this

diversity, it is imperative that for students to experience success, they must have a curriculum tailored to their needs. This is not possible using one textbook or even a singular program.

Because of the diverse nature of multi-age and multiple abilities, it was essential to differentiate instruction. We took the requirements, the Alabama Course of Study, and with the students' ILP's as a guide to differentiated instruction, offered a plethora of learning opportunities to satisfy those objectives, with student choices about how they chose to learn. With literacy at the center of the program, reading and writing could be easily matched to the needs of each student no matter what the topic. In the interviews, it was apparent that field trips were a favorite activity of many students, regardless of age or grade. The entire group went on the same fieldtrip, but each individual was able to pull from it different objectives. An example of a field trip that served many needs was the annual trip to our local Native American festival. A large event, even though we went every year, there was something new to be discovered, something that hadn't been noticed the year before, or some that was noticed that required more depth of study. The same phenomena occurred with our Museum of Natural History and Children's Hands on Museum visits. They were never boring.

Undergirding all of this learning, all of the diversity and all of the differentiation was the technology, which allowed us to research, confirm, document and present our learning. Finally, every one of those students became researchers; researchers became learners and learners became teachers, as they shared what each child shared what he or she had learned with the rest of the class. Technology was the tool through which we were able to truly meet the individual needs of each learner. Whether using a computer for a research project all the way through to the presentation or using a laptop to facilitate writing for a student who struggled with motor skills or spelling and grammar, many needs were met. Digital cameras for virtual field trips, video

cameras making movies, using the technology of the blind to get a taste of what it might be like to be disabled, the ECHO kids had access to many different kinds of technology to enhance their learning.

Essential, too was creating an environment of safety and caring. Not only did teachers and parents care for their own children, but also they learned the stories of other ECHO children and encouraged them to see each other's faces and listen to their stories, seeing the needs of the other children in the group. Noddings reminds us of the importance of an ethic of care in *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, (1992). Caring for others is most evident when talking to a class of children about caring. Noddings expands the notion to include different kinds of caring, many of which we practice in our day-to-day activities. We found it relatively easy to care for ourselves, taking care of our bodies, making ourselves aware of what we eat and maintaining activity through our morning walks, games at the park at noon and after school sports and leisure activities. Caring for the inner circle required the students to stretch beyond themselves and put their care into our close-knit group. In order to make them cognizant of the notion, for a while, they would tell "who they helped today" on their daily reflections. They could not merely say they had done something nice, because according to Noddings the one cared for must recognize the care of the caregiver. As a group, we cared for animals, taking trips to the humane society shelter with supplies and donations from one of our annual White Elephant sales. We elected to care outside of our group by adopting the residents of a retirement home, visiting the bi-monthly with activities and presentations. Both the caregivers and the cared for benefitted from this task, enjoying the new relationships that were built.

With all of the choices and opportunities, the students at ECHO were being taught as if they were gifted. Following the same type of model used in gifted and talented programs, they

were assessed to identify needs and talents, then a program was build according to their abilities and interests. They were not graded, but were required to meet certain objectives before they could go on to other units of study. Without the pressure of grades or time restraints, learners could pursue what interested them. We found that when they followed their interests, they became and stayed engaged in learning, going well beyond what is offered in a typical textbook. Judging from interviews 7 years later, these children are well on the way to being life-long learners.

So, do you think this all sounds like a fairy tale? In the next chapter, I will discuss some of the trials and tribulations of teaching such a unique group of characters. You already know the end of the story. ECHO closed three years ago. What happened? Could it have survived, and if so, how? What are the implications for future studies of this nature, or how can this relate to a public school classroom?

CHAPTER V:
IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The Themes Emerged:

Diversity & Differentiation, Authentic Learning, Caring and Technology

And So What?

Diversity

As you made your way through the narratives, you met a diverse group of characters. Many have formed lifelong friendships. Some did not. Although ECHO was not a school for children with special needs, it was certainly a school full of special children. Everyone at ECHO had the opportunity to attend a public school and for one reason or another chose not to do so. In the group of ECHO children who attended over the four years, there was quite a range of diversity. There were, of course, as stated earlier, the ABC children (Baum & Olenchak, 2002), with a plethora of labels attached to their permanent records. There were four-year-olds, 18-year-olds, and every number in between. There were nice kids and mean kids. (Sometimes there were even mean teachers, at times. That is why they call me Ms. Meaner.) There were tall kids, short kids, thin kids and curvy kids. There were gifted kids and strugglers; there were gifted kids who struggled in some areas and there were strugglers who were quite gifted in other areas. There were children with attention problems, mood disorders, autoimmune malfunctions, social butterflies, and kids with social cluelessness. There were kids with physical problems such as seizure disorders, a broken foot, peanut allergies, and vegetarians. There were those whose

parents chose to found and build the school group because they believed in a better way for their children to learn. There were kids who came along because their best friend came. There were children whose parents were against standardized testing. There were kids who came because they had been bullied in public schools. There were kids who had been released from public schools because they were the bully. There were rich kids and poor kids, happy kids, and sad kids. And then there were normal kids (sarcasm).

Imagine having to find a way to teach all those different kids that spans all of their needs. Imagine being a teacher in any classroom where you find every child is unique. The big question here was, “How do you teach a group of children who have different needs?” Is it fair to teach the same thing to the whole group when only part of the group will get it? Others will struggle or never understand, while some will be so far ahead they will become bored, or worse, become behavior problems in the class.

In the literature, there are theories that explain the functional process of learning. The behavioral learning theory, as with Pavlov’s dogs and Skinner’s cats, accounts for extrinsically motivated learning. The information processing theory demonstrates cognitive ability likened to a computer, taking in, storing and retrieving information. Neither of those two theories account for understanding. However, according to the third generation of biofunctional multisource learning theories, learning is not a storehouse of piecemeal units that enter into the brain, to be retrieved at a later point. Learning involves the entire mind, body, and environmental sources acting on it. In this paper, Howard Gardner’s (1987) *Multiple Intelligences*, Calvin Taylor’s (1992) *Thinking Talents* are two theories that address personality as part of intelligence. Both theories recognize intelligences and talents beyond what is generally measured in schools: academics.

Gardner notes eight intelligences at this time. The Linguistic intelligence – language and Logical-mathematical intelligence -- analytical, mathematical and scientific are considered the academic talents. Musical intelligence -- skill and appreciation of music; Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence -- using the body solve problems; Spatial intelligence -- recognize and use patterns of spaces; Interpersonal intelligence -- understand other people; Intrapersonal intelligence - understand self and Naturalistic – learning from nature. Gardner is currently studying the Existential intelligence - learning by seeing one's part in the "big picture." He refers to this intelligence 8 ½. Of all these multiple intelligences, the children at ECHO covered the range. Even though all of the ECHO students were smart, they tended to excel in a variety of ways. Drew was a true naturalist with his outdoorsy nature. The son of a biologist, he was drawn to the flora and fauna of nature. All of the students had certain levels of all the intelligences, as Gardner confirms, but their strongest intelligences tend to define their personalities. Working within a framework of accepting that there is more than one way to be smart was especially rewarding to this group who had already found that they wanted to learn beyond academics, beyond the textbook. Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences allowed the expansion of the realm of intelligence. Taylor Talents allowed some children to be better at some kinds of thinking, while other children excelled in other areas. Everyone had a chance at being a winner.

In the traditional school system, personality is not addressed by the curriculum. Some programs address visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners, but by and far, the teacher is responsible for recognizing and meeting the needs of his or her class. Imagine being in a classroom when it was time to go out to PE and the teacher said, "Alright, all the kinesthetic learners line up for basketball; you visual learners will be reading up on the rules of the game. Auditory learners, you will listen for the scorekeeper because the board is broken and it is hard to

keep up.” (Of course, I just made that up, because it does not happen, but it could.) In order to satisfy the academic as well as the affective needs of a diverse group, it would be necessary to address all the students’ individual needs. First, a teacher must recognize that there are different needs, and then he or she must address them. With mandated curricula and the stress of making the grade, how can a teacher ever get to know the students?

A year is never long enough to teach a child. In my experience teaching, nearly a full year is required to truly appraise a student. It takes six weeks to assess a new student’s academic background, six weeks to really figure out why they are the way they are, then another six weeks to realize that children’s personalities and character affect, not only the ways they interact with one another, but how that is related to their ability and motivation to learn. This is an abundance of information to process while following the specified (NCLB) mandates along the way in a traditional classroom. By the time a teacher has figured it all out, Spring Fever sets in changes everything, and then the school year is over. Everyone moves on: the students to a new teacher and the teacher to a new batch of apprentice learners.

I was afforded the luxury to teach many of my students for more than one year. With multiage in the lower grades and looping a class for two years in the upper grades, then having some children for two or three or four years in the homeschool, I was able to learn the needs of my students inside and out. Every person is unique and every situation is not only different for different people, but the interpretations are different from various points of view. Students at ECHO took on the roles of *student in charge* of whatever their strengths might be, as with Mark making movies. He took control of the video equipment, but shared his knowledge and skill with the other children. Teachers must consider the individual and make every attempt to meet

their individual needs. The way to address those needs would be accomplished through differentiated instruction.

Differentiation

There was no other choice at ECHO but to differentiate learning. Imagine a lesson that covered all the needs of all those diverse children who were just mentioned in the section above. They were all on different levels, in different grades, with different interests. I tried putting them under Harry Potter's sorting hat, but all it did was wrinkle up it's nose and say, "Yeah, right!" I assessed students the best I could, but what really worked was asking the children.

Tomlinson (2000) defined differentiation as specifically meeting the needs of a child or a group of children as opposed to teaching a whole class as if all the children are the same. She notes three ways to differentiate instruction through content, process, and product. Giving students their Alabama Course of Study (content) in a notebook, they were tasked with completing those objectives for the year. They could go as fast or as slowly as they chose, but they would not move on to the next grade set of objectives until they had completed what they had. They could work individually, in pairs or in groups (process). Finally, they would decide how they wanted to learn (process) and what they would do for their evidence of learning (product). Of course, the students did not just walk into ECHO knowing how to choose their own materials and resources, do the research and then come teach it to the rest of the class. This took lots of practice and modeling and the students who came from the magnet school already had a head start. They began learning how to think in kindergarten. As 5 year olds, they did research: How many legs do different kinds of animals stand on? What do they eat? All of this information could be found in the library.

An example of differentiating instruction at ECHO is when, in the first year, as we chose a science theme of animals, the little girls, who nearly always made animals fit their curriculum, chose to study kittens, while a fourth grader, who was not allowed pets because of his father's allergies, studied Corgi's and pet care. His friend, a fifth grader researched potbelly pigs, a pet that had just joined their family and habitats of animals. Their presentations consisted of stories, posters and a trip to see the pig at the farm. I think I learned that the Queen of England keeps Corgi's – I had never heard of them, before that; that even miniature pot belly pigs outgrow their welcome inside the house and it was the first time I ever saw one of those bald cats.

As the teacher, I had to decide how I would assign and assess each student. Assigning learning tasks was easy. Within the outline of their course of study, the students had choice. It was the child's decision how to approach the objective and certainly when they needed suggestions, I was there as their guide. However, there were times when we studied the same topics. It wasn't all student choice. When my 4-year-old granddaughter began to think that she could decide everything that she wanted to do, I asked my daughter what was going on. She said, "Well, you always give everyone choices." I responded, "I let them choose between two of my choices."

Contrary to what some of the students and parents might like to think, life was not a free for all at ECHO. Our little school might have stayed untidy, but it was because we were always busy and we needed enough different "stuff" to appease everyone's needs. In actuality, it took a great deal of organization to be able to serve all of the different needs.

As for assessment, students had to prove to me that they met the objective with some type of evidence of learning. That might have happened through a research study, a field trip, a science experiment, a story or essay; the choices were endless. They did not have tests.

According to research, Kohn (1993) states in *Punished by Rewards*, that not only do rewards *not* increase student learning, it *decreases* the amount of work a child is willing to do. If there is a goal, whether an A, a dollar, or a star, when that goal is reached, there is no reason to go on. When children learn for learning's sake, there is no end to learning. I have found this in my own action research my classes (Minear and Wilson, 2003)

Pass It On

We sought the highest level of engagement for each student; they would learn their topics well enough to teach it to others. Every student was not only a learner, but also a teacher. Children were learning what was in their course of study and they were presenting to the rest of the class, who, in return, were exposed to the subject matter. Some students might go on to pursue a new topic and they were encouraged to do that. (The courses of study objectives were only a minimum requirement.) Some students would encounter those same objectives the next year only to delve deeper into the subject! At ECHO, knowledge was not viewed as something you get and store away. Knowledge was something that you looked forward to, enjoyed and then passed it on, sharing it with others. All the time students were building their own knowledge, they were taking in the new and reorganizing it with the old, to create new shiny constellations for others to share.

As the children learned to go through their objectives, I modeled different ways to teach, present, and learn, careful to include multiple formats that touch on the multiple intelligences of the group. They would also add those tools to their arsenal and obtained different ways that they could meet their objective in a relevant and meaningful way. Their choices in learning allowed them control over the authenticity of their learning.

Evidence of learning projects that were discussed in the last chapter included Mark Fox's Battle of the Bulge video. He and another student were very interested in wars and battle. They actually made a movie with narration describing the battle, using strategically placed plastic army soldiers to illustrate the action.

Although there were many successes as we sought real and meaningful learning lessons, there were some drawbacks. Primarily, authentic (real) learning takes time. It cannot be wrapped up in a 50-minute lesson. Piecemeal lessons happen in a series of chunks. Wholetheme authentic learning is ongoing, always making connections to what has been learned in the past and seeking a personalized fit to the learner (Iran-Nejad, 1997).

We were fortunate to begin with a strong core of students who were familiar with learning in a constructivist environment. When new children came in from traditional schools, often the choices of what and when and how to learn were overwhelming. To exacerbate this problem, some of the experienced students did indeed look like they were just having fun and not "learning." Children had to learn how to take their learning responsibly. They had to learn how to organize themselves and we spent a great deal of time modeling these behaviors to the new constructivists. Finally, there were some students who were already ingrained into the traditional "read the chapter; take the test" model, and that was fine for them. Tom came from that tradition, especially as he had homeschooled himself for two years in middle school. Unsure of how to go about research, they might claim they would rather just take the test, but after a while, when they began to experience the inner satisfaction of learning in their areas of interest, they would begin to appreciate the daily task of learning. This happened in Tom's case; it was not long at all before he took to research and learning outside the textbook.

An element of constructing knowledge that was difficult for some of the parent teachers was having the ability to recognize the student needs for differentiation, but it made much more sense to learn to accept different products, as in daily reflections on the same topic. An example from Chapter IV is the way parents approached lunchtime and PE. I have often thought that one reason for the chaos at PE was that it was the time of inconsistency every day. Because the parents changed, the expectations for the group change. It seemed like many of the parents parented to the needs of their particular child and applied that to the group. Where the preschooler's mom might have every rounded close by within her sight, an older boy's dad might not even face the group as they played. Thankfully, there was never a serious incident during P.E., except of high blood pressure and consequences of being overly stressed, as was the case with Miranda's mom. Still, it was important for everyone to have learning options. We tried to keep out learning real.

Authentic Activities

Why do we have to do that? Good question. I used to wonder the same thing myself when I was a kid, even when I was an adult. Learners learn best when the experience is relevant and meaningful; when they are interested in a topic and can make connections; they learn best by doing, not by being told. We made it our goal at ECHO to make every learning experience relevant and meaningful to the students in the tradition of Dewey's experiential learning (1938) and Iran-Nejad's (1994) wholetheme authentic learning. This is nearly an impossible task; there is never enough time or work force to teach every child everything they needed or wanted to know and do it in an engaging way. But we tried.

When we did math, we played games, read math stories, and we shopped the grocery store ads. We used candy for math – we weighed it, measured it, and counted it. We did polls

on who liked what best, figured the percentages, and calculated the nutritional information for more or less than one serving of food. Then, when we were all finished, making math with that candy, we tasted it and wrote about the glorious flavors and textures, smells and crunches. We spent time with that candy! We cooked at least once a month and made lots of goodies every Christmas. Everyone participated. The Children brought the ingredients, and then divided up the treats to take home for gifts or just to devour. We made math more than just a subject; it was what we did in our real lives.

As the teachers took each activity, each conversation, each new topic of study and learned to make connections, the students followed suit. Tom, Mark, and Lola commented on how our reflective form of discipline, discussing the problem and seeking better options might have made an impact on them. As they read the newspaper every morning, they were reminded of something they had learned or they might be inspired to find out more about something new. Sophie noted in a reflection in Chapter IV how she read about a plan to divert Hurricane Creek for the interstate and stated she would be contacting the governor.

When we studied communities, we tried to solve problems in our neighborhood. When we learned about government and civic duty, we conducted a mock election at school, then went to the mall and voted for president. We always went to the mall on voting days to make children grow up feeling part of the voting process and to eat Chinese for lunch – Yum!

We ate Chinese food, too, on Chinese New Year and celebrated at the Mexican Restaurant on Cinco de Mayo. When we studied our state, we traveled around our state to see the sites we had read about in books. We went on field trips and had guest teachers visit the class. Several students in the interviews noted that going on a fieldtrip was one of their favorite activities, Whether walking around our downtown neighborhood, the students learned from the

places we visited, even sometimes when it did not seem like learning, according to Sophie and Maddy's mom. DeAnna's recalled, "I remember sitting with them at the end of the year saying now go back, remember this field trip, what did you learn?"

We went to the Native American Festival and the Civil Rights Museum every year, and every year we learned something new. We could never get enough of some things. We experimented with science, we sang songs, and we played music every day. We made cells in science with gummy worms with DeAnna's mom and DeAnna and Lola still wrote their reflections about the true topic of study: meiosis and mitosis. And as we completed all these wonderful activities, we checked off the objectives on our courses of study, one by one. Most of all, the students and parents and teachers at ECHO learned to respect the views, talents and ideas of each other, not just the leader or the teacher or whomever might be in charge. Tom reminisced:

Of the teachers and parent participation at ECHO School, Tom remarked, "I remember you there overall. Um Kylie's mom, her husband is a mathematician. She actually gave me a lot of personal help. I ended up working with a lot of elementary kids on like long division and arithmetic so I added a little there. We had Maddy, Sophie's older sister was teaching us Spanish. We had Callie and Gabriel there and their mother is a native Spanish speaker, so we got to actually practice a little of that. We had someone to come and teach us art year round. DeAnna's mom came in, and she was the one that actually taught us sewing. She also did a lot of art stuff, but she did it within science" and "Oh! Mrs. Pappas, how did I forget her?! Yeah we had creative writing class and that was so much fun. She's the one that drug me to that creative writing club in the first place. And I've done that like every semester since 9th grade. That was really memorable to me.

The students were like a family. Many took care of each other. It was touching to see a student and her mom take special interest in Cassie, a child with more special needs than any three people would deserve.

Always trying to keep learning real and relevant, we were willing to put on hold what we were doing in order to experience a teachable moment. One day, when we heard a crash, we

went investigate. There was a wreck on the bridge behind our school, so we walked out to see what the commotion was. Each student took on the role of a news reporter and wrote a story. The three examples in Chapter IV are very different in content and in ability level. However all three students express the event and all three were acceptable. As students completed activities and projects, they learned that just as they were different, so were their processes and products. It takes time, but the concept begins to make sense. As we teach without a script, there is no book of answers. In a wholetheme authentic learning setting, student learning is individualized to each circumstance. As learning occurs, knowledge is reorganized, mixed all together with what the student already knows and becomes just as unique as the child. Piecemeal learning, although much easier to structure, predict outcomes and grade, is not nearly as engaging or meaningful. Each activity is judged on its own merit. The children would gradually begin to understand that just as they were unique, so was their work.

Technology

Because every child was different (notice how everything leads back to the diversity of the child) and none of us were rich, we did not have class sets of every textbook for every grade. We depended on technology. It was imperative that we sought information on the Internet. We had an excellent library, better than some public schools I have visited, and we visited our public library every Friday. But we wanted to go beyond a single source model. As part of the class assignments, children were expected to investigate at least three sources for each study. The Internet allowed many children to search for resources. Further, they were able to locate current and accurate data not always found in textbooks. For example, many science books are out of date before they are even published, but, chances are current information can be found on the Internet.

Tom -- “I learned a good bit about chemistry and biology. I kind of gained an interest there, and that’s when we were doing our research projects. We just went out and found something, looked all over the internet and library about that subject and wrote a short paper or presentation about it. [It was] a really simple concept, just a few little requirements. We were given the Alabama course of study but also the freedom to learn other things about the subject. And I enjoyed reading the sections on biology and biochemistry and that kind of got me off onto physical science.”

Technology in the ECHO classroom was not limited to the computers. Many other media were implemented regularly to process and store information (computer, camera, video, tape recorders/player, etc). Technology was also useful for the students’ presentation of information. The students routinely took pictures, interviewed each other and made videos. How boring would it be if every presentation was a report or a diorama? Students were encouraged to use technology creatively. Nathan was the first grader who, once he learned how to make a PowerPoint in one afternoon, wanted to do research every day so he could make a PowerPoint presentation.

Technology allowed ECHO students to meet their individual needs. We were able to adapt technology to the needs of diverse students in the classroom. We used laptops to assist second graders who had great difficulty writing. Learning to recognize the red and green underlines in Microsoft Word helped children recognize their spelling and grammar errors. Tape recorders allowed emergent readers to hear themselves as they improved their fluency. CD players assisted struggling readers with complicated texts. Wherever we encountered a problem, we sought a solution. Technology combined with ingenuity, helped solve many of our problems. Because many of the students in our class had attention problems, it was a blessing when everyone could be on a laptop or computer to organize their work and lives. We also, as mentioned in Chapter IV, had students with disabilities who used the computer to support their writing, spelling and language. Unfortunately, the public schools were not so accommodating.

Caring

The student is infinitely more important than the subject matter. (Nel Noddings, 1984, p. 171)

I knew it! I knew that caring was important in schools. It was intuitive and when I read Nel Noddings, I felt I could have written that book. Finally, I found what I always knew; we must care for our students to do the best job we can for them. What other reason would we teach? For the money? For the summers off? Teachers must care about the children and care about their learning. According to Noddings, the need to be cared for is a human universal. It is imperative, not only that people care; but that they *know* they are cared for (Bergman, 2004).

Noddings (1992) argues that instead of spending all our resources trying to make our children first in math or science, our main education goal “should be to encourage growth of competent, caring, loving, and lovable people” (p. xiv).

In an undergraduate teacher education course, the professor began wrapping up a lesson by asking what important characteristics a teacher must possess.

"You have to love children." one student replied most assuredly.

"No!" the professor responded adamantly. "You don't have to love children to teach them."

He went on to relay that an exemplary teacher must know the content, adequately prepare a lesson... and follow a carefully laid lesson plan. Whatever he said was unimportant to me, because I was stuck at the point he had shouted "No! You don't have to love them."

Fifteen years later, I have seen teachers who genuinely cared about their students and those who cringed at the site of some of their charges and I can tell you that children know whether a teacher cares about them and it most certainly does have an effect on their learning. Caring is one of the most important foundations for teaching. A teacher should know their students, and understand their needs; they have to see the face of the Other.

I think it is, perhaps, my seeing the faces of many others in my life that allows me compassion for people who are different. I was always different, because I was always new; I went to 8 schools in 12 years, 3 high schools in 3 states in 4 years. Everyone needs someone to care about him or her. I know that. I can do that.

We thought that, too, at ECHO.

Caring for others does not just happen. Children must see it in the home and in school. Caring should be modeled and practiced. At ECHO, caring was a part of the curriculum in many different ways. Children were afforded the opportunity to help one another, work with many different partners, and go outside the school to help people in the community, as we did with our adopted retirement home family.

March 30, 2007

Today was a fun day at the nursing home, because I planned it. The parents kept getting in the way but they caught themselves. We died Easter eggs. I had to be at Cassie's table and that was not part of my plan. A lady almost drank the egg die.

April 20, 2007

DeAnna

... Today we made balloon hats with them I think that they really liked it all except for Mr. Bill he was pulling and tugging on the balloon. So I moved away from him so that when it popped I wouldn't be next to all the noise. Oh I all most for got about one man; he was so nice and the lady sitting next to him took his balloon. Then Mr. Bill took the same guys balloon hat. But, the funny thing was that the man didn't even realize all this was happening so I just kept on making him more and more hats until he had a bought 4 hats.

We were a family. Nathan, my little first grader, would always ask me if he was part of my family, and of course, he was. Nathan adored my grown son and my sweet dog. My son and Nathan were incarnations of one another. How did they do that?

Just like any family, we had our ups and our downs. Mark Fox

I think me and Ms. Minear had this kind of rivalry and friendship going on, or I thought we had. I respected you a lot. I look at every adult as someone who thinks they have power, but really, I'm stronger than them. I'm not kidding, that's seriously how I thought. I thought of Ms. Minear as the one person who could see into my mind and see what I'm doing. So when Ms. Minear was around, things were different.

I laughed when Mark told this anecdote. Mark Fox was one of my favorites. (They were ALL my favorites – ask any one of them.) We had the same sense of humor. And it was true. Every one of them was my favorite in some way. It's almost like trying to choose my favorite color,

they are all so beautiful; I always choose rainbow as my color! It is like having to choose my favorite grade to teach; I just could not do that. There is something special about all of them.

Equity in Our Schools: We Are Not There Yet

There is nothing so unequal as the equal treatment of unequal people. - Thomas Jefferson

How can you insure equity in a group of such diversity? It might be important to define equity. Do we expect that all children get the same thing or should we hope that all children get what they need? Our educational system attempts to maintain equity by spending the same amount of dollars on the same textbooks, technology and instructors. But is this equitable?

If there were only one right answer, there would be no need for alternatives. If one size fit all, there would be no need for different sizes. If one food satisfied everyone's needs, there would be no need for variety. If one medicine cured every ailment, there would be no need for competing pharmaceutical companies. If one topic could appease the interest of the masses, there would be no need to study a variety of viewpoints.

Dewey's notion of experience and Vygotsky's of social learning open the way for inclusivity of children with differences. Whether inclusivity means children with disabilities, or children of different cultures, or even different ideas or backgrounds, children learn to include others. It is especially important that they learn tolerance a celebration of diversity at school, when they do not learn it at home. In order to educate a whole child, he or she must be able to see the others of the world. As Bruner (1996) was quoted in Chapter II, "We learn an enormous amount not only about the world but about ourselves by discourse with Others" (p. 93).

There were student stories that overlapped and intertwined, some alike and many quite opposite. There were two stories in particular that were so very much alike, yet worlds apart. Those were the stories of Xander and Cassie. They did not know each other; they were students

at different times, but when they were ECHO students, Xander was a seventh grader and Cassie was a sixth grader. Xander and Cassie had similar difficulties in school. They both had trouble learning, but the reason, I believe, for the difference in their experiences and especially their outcomes was that one was a white girl with professional parents who asked for what they wanted and got what they needed from our educational system. The other, a black girl with one parent on disability, an absent father, low socioeconomic means and very little, if any social capital; the system controlled them. With similar beginnings, one is in a private boarding school and is learning how to take care of her needs, while the other has been pushed through tens years in eight different schools and still cannot read or do simple mathematical calculations (add).

But, the one thing that the two had in common at ECHO was that they were able to stand on level ground, even if only for a little while, and learn something new and experience success without being bullied.

There is No Panacea

As school populations become more diverse and curriculum becomes more standardized and mandated, more students are marginalized. How do we get those children up from the cracks? If you take a child, such as our Cassie, the story is lamentable, yet all too common. As early as preschool, she was labeled as behind. By kindergarten, she was a behavior problem, set in a corner or suspended from school. At six, she was remanded to the local alternative school for children with behavior problems too severe to be dealt with in the neighborhood public school. From there, she went to another program in another school, then another, then another. By the sixth grade, as she had attended seven schools, she had a history of occurrences and suspensions that nearly filled a file box. At that point in her young life, she still did not read or write beyond a first grade level. Struggling to form some of her letters, I wonder how many

hours and how many days, weeks, months she had missed academic instruction in a classroom with her peers. Behind at the start, she could never catch up – even if there had been someone to stop all the madness and begin again, afresh, anew.

Compare Cassie’s story to that of Xander. I wonder is social capital and financial stability could have afforded Cassie’s story a happier ending?

Why then, do some of us believe that one curriculum fits all children? Why do we think one method will cure all classroom management issues? Why do we expect every “like” class (same grade) to be on the same chapter on the same page on the same objective at any given time in a school, a system, and sometimes a state? Layla B. Fox confronted this very problem when she entered public school kindergarten already knowing how to read.

At ECHO, it would not have been in the best interest of equity toward the student to give everyone the same thing. When bombarded with “Why didn’t I get that?” or “Why do they get to do something I don’t get to do?” and “That’s not fair!” we would stop and discuss the differences between our wants and needs and the wants and needs of others. It was easy to do in a class of children in different age groups. The examples could be made understandable using first and fifth graders or using boys and girls. Does a four-year-old girl need the same thing to learn about animals as a ten-year-old boy? From those discussions came talks about diversity, differentiation and how they affect equity. The best I could do was to ensure each child that I would fairly allow them what they needed to learn, but they would need to recognize that every person is different and everyone of them have different needs. It was quite a difficult concept for children. I believe that when children learn to celebrate their differences, it is easier to accept that it is an advantage to have your individual needs met rather than trying to fit everyone into a cookie cutter curriculum.

How do you make school equitable for children who come to school with a five-year deficit? *And the answer is...* Teaching ALL Students as they are gifted.

There is a story of a young teacher who was beginning her first high school teaching job. Nervously, she reported to school on her first day, the week before school would begin, unsure of where to start. Her principal greeted her and handed her a list, her class roll, and then continued down the hall. As she walked to her room, she scanned the piece of paper: Mary Jones 140, Jim Johnson 133, Jennifer Thompson 155, Tameka Woods 151 and so on. She was amazed.

“They have assigned me the gifted class!” she thought, mumbling silently. “Oh, my, I need to change my lesson plans.”

She rushed to her classroom and pulled out her textbook, knowing that it was not enough to engage a class of gifted students. Immediately, she got online and searched for enrichment resources that she could add to her repertoire.

School started and she greeted her class with enthusiasm and excitement. “I am so happy to have this class; I am honored to be teaching such a fine group of individuals. We are going to have a great time this year; I have planned some extra special activities and learning experiences.”

The students were somewhat stunned, but found that they really liked the new teacher and her imaginative presentations were quite interesting. The year was wonderful. The students were doing a great job and the teacher met the challenge of filling the needs of her students. It was a lot of work, but it was paying off.

Nearing the end of the year, she met the principal in the hall one day. “I’d really like to thank you for entrusting me with my 4th period class. It has been great! I wasn’t sure if I was experienced enough, but we have had a great year.

The principal stood, a bit bewildered. What do you mean, Miss Fitts?

Why, the gifted class, my fourth period class... the ones with the high IQ’s. You gave me the list the first day I came to school, it had their names, and IQ listed on it.

The principal grinned, then smiled, then almost laughed. Why, Miss Fitts, those were their locker numbers.

What had that teacher done? She taught “non-gifted” students as if they were gifted.

And, what were the results?

If you treat an individual as he is, he will remain as he is. But if you treat him as if he

were what he ought to be and could be, he will become what he ought to be and could be.
–Goethe

Even though it is only a story, and probably a made-up story, at that, it happens. I have seen it happen. I decided at the beginning of my teaching career that all kids deserved to do the engaging activities. When I was learning to be a teacher, I would go home and practice on the kids in my neighborhood. Being in a small neighborhood, I had to take what I could get. As in any neighborhood, we had a passel of ABC children (Baum & Olenchak, 2002), however, they were all able to complete the tasks I set for them.

Teaching Outside the Box: How to Grab Your Students By Their Brains by Lou Anne Johnson, the author of *Dangerous Minds* (that became a movie with Michelle Phifer) caught my attention because of the title. I bought the book without hesitation. It did not really matter to me what was in the book. I love the image that the title presented. Grabbing students by their brains is exactly what teachers need to do. Teaching is so much more than telling and testing. Teaching is inspiration, putting the imagination in gear and letting it fly. (By the way, the book is very good; it gives many ways to grab those students by the brains!)

My aunt told me that two of her four children went through gifted programs in school. She said there was nothing her children did in gifted class that her other children could not have done and would not have enjoyed. I have since informally surveyed many of my friends whose children were in gifted education and asked them the same question. So far, the consensus is unanimous; there has been nothing too hard in the gifted class for “regular kids.”

I can tell you that I have taught a gifted model to every class and every grade I have taught for the last thirteen years and have been quite successful. It is called a School-wide Enrichment Model (Renzulli, 1986) SEM – school wide enrichment – enrichment for all. What is good for gifted education is good for all education. When students are assessed, given a plan

of teaching and taught according to their interests and needs, they are motivated to learn. They become engaged and active in their learning.

In her 1998 article, Coleman begs the question: *Are we serious about meeting student needs?* If we are not doing these things:

1. Grouping kids for instructional needs.
2. Reduce class size.
3. Provision of additional resources.
4. Increase the amount of time.
5. Additional support personnel.
6. Personnel preparation.

Then we are not addressing their needs.

Where We Have Been and Where We Are Going

Antwanette Jones opened and closed ECHO School. She was the education staff writer at the Tuscaloosa News who had followed the comings and goings of all things educational. We cheered when she wrote *Wanting More from Education* as we made our way through the first year at ECHO. We were solemn when she wrote *ECHO Shuts its Doors* at the end of our fourth and final year.

TUSCALOOSA | While some of the marquees on schools around town offer students their wishes for a happy and safe summer, a more somber message hangs at the ECHO School. Taped to the front of the school's nondescript building on 27th Avenue is a for-rent sign. (<http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20070617/NEWS/706170367>)

We began with a group of idealistic people who thought they could have something better in education than what was offered by the public school system. Ironically, the school we built was from the foundations of a public school with an exemplary program. As our original charter group of families, grew up and moved on, new parents coming into the school, who came for various and sundry reasons, like the idea and agreed to the financial and parental involvements commitments. But it cost too much money and it required too much time. As commitment

waned, the school could no longer support itself. Even as a new school, thinking we all agreed on the perfect idea for the perfect school, we all brought with us, our past backgrounds, our lived experiences, and we found that we did not always agree.

Ironically, the same thing happened at the magnet school. The program was formed by a committee of progressive thinking teachers and a superintendent who had a vision for a world-class school system. As he moved on, so went his support and gradually, new teachers were transferred in, untrained and new students were placed in the school that did not understand or buy into the experiential learning concepts. Without full support, the system collapsed.

I would be interested to know of schools of this type that have succeeded over the long haul. During this research, I did encounter progressive schools built from the foundations of Dewey and Vygotsky and Piaget. They had their heyday and then the popularity dwindled, but some have come back. I would love to know what it takes to sustain a school where all children can learn, there is more opportunity for success across the diverse population and children learn for the joy of learning (Kohn, 2004). In his book, *Punished by rewards* (2004), Kohn cites research in Colorado where teachers were divided up and while both taught the same curriculum and same objectives, half were told they would have a standards based test at the end and the other half were not. When both were assessed at the end, the classes who had not prepared for the test excelled over the group that had been preparing to learn to make a grade. What do you think?

Conclusion

ECHO was a fabulous experience. I would love to see it taken back into the public schools, as with our dismantled Magnet program. Offering enrichment to all children can create life long learners. Our town has recently created a new magnet school, similar in program to the

previous constructivist school, implementing project based learning and creativity. BUT, it is offered to the “best” and “smartest” children based on (long scratch on the chalkboard!) Test Scores.

This program of enrichment needs to be implemented in the most needy schools. I think ECHO School. Those are the children who have not yet experienced the joy of learning. For the gifted children, gifted education is just more of the same. An enriched gifted education should be available to ALL children, especially those who have never been exposed, because when you have high expectations in a truly engaging, interesting and challenging program, children really do want to learn. That is an equitable education.

For the Future

What would I have done differently? I don't think there is an answer to that because I think we had a good base for the curriculum. I think we did a good job differentiating and using multiple resources and methods for teaching. The rest is the luck of the draw as long as you are following the child in a student centered learning environment.

A teacher can plan every detail of a lesson and have it written out and turned in on time, but no one can predict what comes out of the mouths of babes. If you decide to follow the child and create a student-centered classroom, a teacher must be ready and willing to give up control and go with the flow. It can get messy, but the rewards are great.

There are things that we did at ECHO that I had done in my public school classrooms. Teachers have to be the ones to make sure that their students are finding meaningful learning experiences. Those are not generally found in the curriculum. Neither are they found in a step-by-step, systematic instruction guide.

For a teacher to be willing to put down the textbook and allow students to challenge them, they cannot take the stance that they know everything and the students do not know anything. That will automatically set them up for failure. If I couldn't answer a question, I certainly could locate a resource to locate an answer. My favorite challenge was to have my kids "find something I didn't know" about their subject. It was ironic that they always loved this challenge because many thought I already "knew it all." Oh, but I did not and I learned every day with them. They saw me as a life long lover of learning – an old woman who still did not know it all.

This is a "goodbye" that I wrote to my parents at the end of our four-year run. We learned a lot in those years and I wouldn't trade the experience for anything!

Everything I learned that really matters, I learned at ECHO School.

Thank you to you and all those wonderful folks who helped me live my dream. I have been allowed to "play school" for the last four years, using all of the wonderful ideas and activities that I have learned along the way in my educational and professional teaching career. I have been able to teach children.

I have learned that grades damage children. Bad grades hurt feelings and squelch motivation. Good grades make children think they've 'done enough' and squelches motivation.

I have learned that learners can do anything they are motivated to do.

I have learned that attitude is everything. (And motivation comes from attitude.)

I have learned that children will do what you expect them to do. We must always set high standards.

I have learned that children have different needs and need to be taught according to those needs.

I have learned that it is best to compete against yourself instead of others and what someone else does usually does not have a thing to do with what you do.

I have learned that to be 'fair' everything does not always seem fair.

I have learned that for every idiosyncrasy a child has, there is a proud parent with strong genetic and environmental influence.

I have learned that before you criticize anyone or anything, you should have to do their job for a week.

I learned that in a Cooperative, some people are more cooperative than others.

I have learned that children need to learn to get along with children. Children need to learn to get along with parents (their own and others). Parents need to get along with children (their own and others). Parents need to learn to get along with parents (their own and others).

At ECHO, we have had the opportunity to :

- work with diverse students in a family-like environment.
- Learn cooperatively from others.
- Go on many, varied and unusual field trips.
- Learn to write with real live writers!
- Learn to read by reading.
- Enjoy parents and family as teachers. After all our families are our first and most important teachers.
- learn to think
- learn!

Be the change you wish to see in the World. (Gandhi)

Epilogue:

A Letter to the U.S. Superintendent of Education

Dear Arne Duncan,

It seems to be a Blame Game.

The solutions that are offered for our “failing schools” seem to be one size fits all: fire the principal, shut down the school, and change the curriculum.

What makes us think that these tactics will be the cure? Are we merely making changes to make it appear as if something (anything) is being done?

We need to get our priorities straight. When I hear excuses like, “We can’t do this because it is too expensive,” I wonder how important education is ranked in the scheme of life. Everything in our society is dependent on our teachers and educational system.

Do we really want to educate all of our children equitably? Do we REALLY? If we really do want to change, then we need to look at the deeply embedded causes of our

educational problems.

I offer a few ideas for consideration...

Fire the principals. And where shall we get new and better principals to replace them? Is there a pool of gifted principals waiting in the wings somewhere? Why haven't we hired them already? Do we really think that principals in "failing schools" are the reason the schools are failing? Does anyone know that principals must answer to boards of education and superintendents? Why not fire the superintendent? But then the superintendents must answer to states that then, in turn answer to the federal government.

Fire all the teachers. And where shall we find those exemplary replacements? I wonder if they are waiting around just like that batch of awesome principals.

Should we take all the teachers from the "winning schools" and plop them down to make their miracles in the "failing schools?" Just FYI, it is far easier to teach gifted upper middle class students than struggling poor students. I doubt those gifted teachers would last long in a failing school. Hmmm, but there's an idea. What if we taught all the kids as if they were gifted? I'll get back to that.

What about the parents? Can we fire them? What do we do about the parents who experienced the same negative practices in school as their children? What about those who are strung out on drugs and don't know any better? What about the ones who are unemployed and have no resources to encourage their children? What about those who are too busy in their careers to take time with their children?

What about those who care more about themselves, who push their children off on family, strangers, or boarding schools? What do we do? After all, parental participation in a child's education is the number one predictor of a child's success in school!

Does it really matter what we teach? Does it really matter how we teach? Or does it matter that children learn? What if we taught children what they were interested in learning? What if we let them read what they found intriguing?

Any fool can teach out of a textbook. Actually, textbooks were created at a time when teachers were scarce and students were plenty, so that, yes, any fool, could teach. Unfortunately, textbooks stuck and became an easy way to "cover" the curriculum, when what we need is teachers who inspire students to "uncover" the mysteries of learning. Do we want learners who can repeat back what we ask them to memorize or do we want young citizens who can think and make decisions and become leaders.

Stop labeling schools as FAILURES. How would you feel if you attended a failing school? It is almost an oxymoron. Schools should be for learning, not for failing. When you label a school as a failure, you include children, teachers, principals, staff and families in the community.

Children are not failures. We are failing our children. Take a close look at children who are “failures” in school. First, let me say that one can be a failure in school and an utter success in life; there are many examples – Einstein for instance. But back to those kids who aren’t already reading when they enter kindergarten. They take the DIBELS and they are labeled “not quite up to par.” Five-year-old failures. How sad. Consider that perhaps they are one of those many, many school children that are not ready to read until third grade. My goodness, they will have been failures for nearly four years by the time the reading kicks in. Many of them have already given up. They are the ones who get all the way through high school (if they don’t drop out) who never have the advantage of all the wonders there are to learn in school. They spend their time “faking it” so no one will know they cannot read, or they become the class clown to cover the failure, or they are “too cool” to be smart, or worse, they are “too BAD” to be smart.

Schools should be full of winners. Winners love to learn. Children will be whatever you expect of them. Our high expectations should be that every child does his or her best, not that they achieve a certain score on a test that doesn’t matter anyway. I have actually taught some “losers” who became “winners” and loved every minute of it.

Instead of labeling and categorizing children, we as educators must recognize that all children are different and have different needs. We must understand that we need a large array of educational tools to meet the needs of each and every child. What works with one child in one particular school, may not work in another, but we must be willing and able to match teaching to the learner.

We must understand that children have interests, opinions, needs, struggles, successes, good days, bad days, just like we do.

Solution: Ask the students what they need. Ask the parents what the children need. Allow the teachers to be the professionals that they are and give them a chance to teach children instead of “teaching to the tests.” Separate the job of the principal into administrative and educational leadership. They are in conflict with one another. If we are allowed to teach our children, we can find a way. If we are bound and gagged, we accomplish little.

Forget the textbook. Forget the fancy technology. A computer with Internet opens the world to a learner. A library full of books creates a place for imaginations to soar. Provide each student with a magnifying glass, a tape measure and paper and pencil. That’s science – now go do it. Talk to each other. Seek out the stories of families in the community. Notice your likenesses and difference. Understand why we are as we are. That’s Social Studies. Celebrate it. Offer a pack of dice, a deck of cards, a bucket of rice with measuring cups and the Wednesday grocery ads, classifieds and weather report and a calculator. That’s math - calculate that! Offer paper and pencils, pens, markers and crayons if you are lucky. Make lists, write letters, take notes, keep a journal, and write a story or a play. That’s writing – be an author. Read what makes you laugh, what makes your spine tingle, what carries you to another world, what teaches you lessons, what inspires, captivates and stimulates your mind. That’s reading. Now go share it. And

finally, most important of all, reflect each day on what you have done, what you would still like to do and what you plan for tomorrow and how you helped someone else do something or feel better.

Yes, there is a Nirvana;
it is leading your sheep to a green pasture,
and in putting your child to sleep,
and in writing the last line of your poem
[or dissertation].

Kahlil Gibran (1883 - 1931)

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Example School Schedule

Date: August 25, 2003

Echo School Schedule

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
	Mu Ma	Mu J G	T		Ma
7:30-8:30 Enrichment →	Morning Work – length of day	Maps MUSIC?	Character Traits - Attitude	Spanish	Reading/Writing Marathon -
8:30 – 10:00 Writing →	All About Me	Hundred Penny Box	Creative Writing with Theresa		Transportation – Planes, Trains and Automobiles
10:00 – 11:30 Math →	Measure body parts	Graph family members	Penny Time Line		Airport, University Mall planes, Tusc Trolley, Bus Station, Train Station
11:30 – 1:00 Lunch / P.E. →		J			Boat – Bama Belle River TSW write in
12:00 – 1:30 Reading →	Listening Centers SS Projects →	G – Spanish			Transportation Journals
1:30 – 2:00 Enrichment →	Science → Projects	Research, Write, Present			
2:00 – 2:30 Writing → Winter Count →					
Parent Duty		C	B	C	

HW – Read 30 Minutes, Watch News, Watch an Educational Show

Appendix B

Field Notes: Student's First Week

<p>Miranda</p>	<p>P K</p>	<p>8/9/03 Miranda is a precious 4 year old who is wise beyond her tender years. As the youngest student in our little school, she already writes her name as well or better than a K or first grader. She follows directions well (i.e., writing in her journal, playing PE games with the older children- Red Rover and has a good attention span (for a 4 year old; however, she does get up and move about during extended lessons or “lectures”). She is enthusiastic about being in school and fits right in with the rest of the group. Miranda will benefit a great deal from the enrichment of being with all of the older children that she is attempting to emulate.</p>
<p>Ben</p>	<p>K</p>	<p>8/9/03 Ben is so excited about being in “big” school. He is enthusiastic about learning and wants to do all of the things the big kids do. He is proud of his journal writing and writes “cursive”, but “forgets” what he has written and wants an adult to read. He is in the scribble stage, but he seems to write from right to left, top to bottom of the page. Ben enjoys stories and makes good comments, predictions and draws conclusion from what he listens to. Ben writes the B N of his name. We will work on letter ID and writing, continue to read and talk about letter sound relationships. Ben enjoys drawing and shows detail in his pencil drawings. He drew a picture of his house, a multi story dwelling with an elevator to the second story, a light bulb, and a trampoline on top of the house. 8/19/03 Ben made the leap from writing in scribbles to writing letters today. Allen and Noah have been working with him (me, too) He wrote without me even having to remind him. He was proud of his work.</p>
<p>Drew</p>	<p>2</p>	<p>8/9/03 Drew is ready to go! He loves being with all the kids and likes to “be in charge” reporting on the other children’s behaviors. ☺ We have begun with journal writing and reading on the first two days of school. Drew’s mentor for the first day was not as attentive as needed, because I found the second day that Drew had not written in his journal or communication notebook, nor taken it home. I will need to keep a closer eye on Drew’s progress. When we read the second day, Drew squirmed and wriggled, hesitant to choose a book, then more hesitant to read. He recognizes several sight words, but does not seem interested in reading. (I remember that Hannah did not want to read, going into 2nd grade – I started her on books on tape. – I will try this with Drew I need to find the enthusiasm to read and write. I will put Drew, Sophie, Ben and Miranda in play centers this week and they will read and write in context – hopefully.</p>

Sophie	2	8/9/03 Sophie LOVES her new school. She is a joy, ready to take on whatever we send her way. She chose non-fiction (nighttime Animals to read and asked to read aloud to the group. She reads word by word and asks when she needs help. She does not seem to be intimidated and she enjoys her work. Sophie writes in her journal and communication folder. She gets along well with others and is calm and sweet natured.
Kylie	3	8/9/03 Kylie
Hunter	3	8/9/03 Hunter is fitting right in at “real” school after being home schooled through 2 nd grade. He is enthusiastic about learning, is a good solid reader and
Max	4	8/9/03 Max is writing a mystery story that include such mystery characters as Miss Marple, Poirot, Sherlock Holmes, etc. We both love MONK!
Maddox	4	8/9/03 Maddox is making steady progress on the Order of the Phoenix – Harry Potter book. He has been
Chad	5	8/9/03 Christopher did a magnificent self portrait. He and Allen are writing a story book about the Anatomy of a Baseball. It is a fiction story based on non-fiction information. Chris is the illustrator.
Lola	5	8/9/03 Jen came in with tears in her eyes on the first day. I know she wanted to be here, I am not sure if she just had a rough start the first morning before school – or what. She did not choose to discuss it . Jen has taken a bond to Miranda , helping her with her work and mothering Miranda . Jen is very bright and needs the push to move forward. I want to involve her in teaching and research, as she is not interested in writing or reading just to do the task. I want her to take time and do her best work, rather than rush to get on to the next task.
Conner	5	8/9/03 Allen and Chris are writing a story book about the Anatomy of a Baseball. It is a fiction story based on non-fiction information. Allen has found his “Cordell: in Ben
Tiffany	7	8/9/03 Tiffany came in quietly, as usual. She worked with the youngest children well. At lunchtime, Tiffany asked to work on the computer, and I allowed that, but she went to play games. We must stick to constructive activities. I am sure once we get the babies situated into our routine, I will be able to work with the older kids and get them moving along. 8/19 Tiffany works well with Miranda – steals her away from Mel!
Meghan	7	8/9/03 Meghan came in quiet, but was smiling and happy by the end of the

		<p>morning. She seems happy to be here. She is reading and does everything quietly. I have not had a chance to assess her yet. We will begin the 7th grade Saxon math book.</p> <p>8/19/03 Mel will teach the middle group the 4th grade math book. The uppers (5th and up) will work in an 8th grade Literature and Math book</p>
Maddy	12	<p>8/9/03 Maddy has been an excellent assistant with the class, working well with the younger children and especially, Sophie. She has been reading my professional books and is especially interested in teaching children with special needs. I would like to recommend that she make an appointment with a Shelton counselor and get an idea of the class load for next year, perhaps even take a class this year.</p> <p>8-19-03 Maddy was out sick today</p>
Miner		<p>8/9/03 The first two days of school were spent establishing rules and procedures and getting the youngest children situated. We did several activities that partnered younger kids with older mentors. I want to explore many combinations of children to find which work best. For example, the “brightest” children are not necessarily the “best” helpers. One particular combination, even though it was chosen by the older child (nick, left the younger (Ben on his own as the older went about tending to his own needs for exploration.</p> <p>I have told the upper group that they will soon experience a greater task load, once we get the younger kids on task.</p> <p>I NEED to start an attendance book!!!!!!</p>

Miner Messenger

Greetings! * Important Dates to Remember *

Terrific Tuesday – JaZZ & Lighting Christmas Tree

12/6/04

Friday – Arboretum 9:30 – 11:30 \$1

Next Week: Mon - Parent Meeting / Recital

Fri – Museum of Natural History



Only 2 weeks until winter



Social Studies

DEADLINES ARE HERE

Country Project Presentations began Monday.

Assignment:

Tuesday – Be prepared to present your geography contract. Be sure you have completed all the requirements listed on your rubric.

Character Trait: Accomplishment

How does it feel to accomplish a major task? Take a deep breath and relax. The country projects are coming to an end.

Next Semester's Project – Student Choice

Reading & Writing

Reading Club – Thursday 2:30 – 3:30

All readers are welcome! (I have a new book to read by Saturday morn



Exploring Language...

Sentence Says?

I made a “proof” game last week. Be thinking about the parts of a sentence to add to this really fun learning game!

Everyone try it this week.

Make a sentence out of these letters: K T Y M C

One word must be an ANIMAL. 😊

This week at the Library

Take a break – You have earned it. Choose several books “just for fun!” Look at your grade level lists again for some excellent suggestions. There are also book recommendation sites online.



White Elephant Sale

Bring sale items **THIS WEEK!**

Sale : Monday, December 13, 2004

How shall we spend our proceeds?

We investigate REAL math...

Is that a fact?

First – third graders are practicing addition and multiplication “facts” while 4-8ths are working with factors.

Can you divide any number in half – in your head?

When you have a complicated division problem, do you ever equate it to money? (You might not know ½ of 150, but you might know ½ of \$1.50

Think about it... Make 24 from: 8 3 2 2

Remember: Math Club Tuesday 2:30 – 3:30

It is totally painless – dare I say...FUN?!

SCIENCE

Mad Scientist Labs

Thursday/Friday – Be Prepared

...especially if you did not present last week.

Science Fairs coming this spring. This will be a long term project using the steps of the scientific process. Begin thinking about a great science project NOW!

Trash to Treasures

was a blast! We want to try it again in the Spring, so save up your “good trash” (at home.)



GET ONLINE!

www.echoschool.com

Reminder: the elves will begin working in Santa's Workshop this week – so parents, try not to peek. And don't let these (big-mouth) kids give away any trade secrets.

Appendix D

Next week at ECHO

By Martha Grace
October 27, 2006

Monday: Preparing for Halloween Party and Nursing Home visit. We will also be preparing for the Crafts bazaar; we need more people to come please let Mrs. Minear know if you will be there. You may bring a pumpkin to carve. Gloria will be doing P.E.

Tuesday: we are going to the nursing home after we do Spanish and health with Maddy.

We will also be going to Mr. G's after the nursing home. When we get back from Mr.

G's we will have our Halloween party provided by Kesha and Mrs. Porter.

HAPPY HALOWEEN!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Wednesday: Mrs. Pappas is back and for the people who haven't met her she is our old creative writing teacher, but she had to stop teaching us for a while and now she is back she will be coming at 10:00am for creative writing!!!

Thursday: we have science today with Mrs. Paige. Since we have nothing else's today I'll just winding down from the week.

Friday: We have weekly contract which is a guide for the week and shows us what we have to do for the week. The weekly contract will let us know what we need to work harder on for the next week.

Appendix E

This Week at ECHO

January 9, 2007

Happy New Year!

Coming up.. MLK Jr. birthday, President's Day and Black History month (Feb). We will be reading and writing biographies.

Welcome back. **Monday** – we spent the morning READING. We will be reading a LOT this year. We will focus on reading things that are too hard for us, so we can figure out what to do when we don't understand what we read. This will takes lots of practice. Please check to be sure that your child is reading daily and especially that they are reading CHALLENGING material.

Tuesday – Maddy taught Spanish and Health. In Spanish we practiced vocabulary by playing Jeopardy and matching games. In Health, we talked about Eating Disorders and Diet. We also started on Persuasive Speeches today. Everyone has chosen their topics and are compiling lists of arguments for their subject. Rough drafts of the speeches are due Friday. (Anyone not planning to be here Friday needs to finish by Thursday. Speeches are due Tuesday.

Wednesday – We need to be sure to write Thank You letters to all those who have done things for the school. Also, Anna Keene wants to know what we enjoyed about Hurricane Creek and what we want to do next, so we need to write to her.

Creative Writing.

Thursday – We will visit our buddies at the nursing home. **Bring Dancing Outfits.** We will get to repeat our program for the folks who were sick before Christmas and we will go out for lunch after. Bring lunch money for The Northport Diner.

Friday – Read-a-thon at the farm. We'll meet at school and go out to the farm from there.

Next Monday – MLK Jr. Birthday – No School

Appendix F

Talents Guide

Communication

1. Give many, varied **single words to describe something**.
2. Give many varied **single words to describe someone's/something's feelings**.
3. Think of many, varied **comparisons in the form of a simile**.
4. Let others know that **you understand how they feel by sharing a personal experience**.
5. Make a network of ideas using many, varied **complete thoughts in oral or written language**.
6. Show your feelings, thoughts and needs **without using words**.

Planning

1. Think of **what** you are going to plan so someone will know what your project is.
2. Think of all the **materials and equipment** you will need for your project.
3. Think of all the **steps** needed to complete the project and put the steps in order.
4. Think of any **problems** that could keep you from completing the project.
5. Think of **ways to improve** your plan.

Forecasting

1. Make many, varied predictions about the **causes** of a situation.
2. Make many, varied predictions about the **effects** of a situation.

Decision Making

1. Think of many, varies **Alternatives** things you could do.
2. Think of the varied **Criteria** questions you need to ask about these things you could do.
3. Use your answers to **Weighing** help you make a decision.

4. State your final **Decision**.
5. Give many, varied **Reasons** for your decision.

Productive Thinking

1. Think of **many** ideas.
2. Think of **varied** ideas.
3. Think of **unusual** ideas.
4. **Add to** you ideas to make them better.

Appendix G

Stop Sign Letter

May 4, 2004

Dear City of [Sunnydale],

We would like to bring to your attention a dangerous intersection in downtown [Sunnydale]. [Main street] at [15]th Avenue is one of the few downtown streets that does not have a 4-way stop sign making a very dangerous place to drive.

[Main street] is a bustling route, from the jammed up traffic [at one end], to student filled streets of the University, to the spacious downtown lanes lined with shopping, dining and other business establishments. Nearing the end (or is it the beginning?), approaching [the] Park, there is a serene, neighborhood appeal to the road. Cars park in the center aisles and traffic diminishes. Peaceful? No!

As residents of [15]th Avenue, we hear tires screeching and horns blaring throughout the day. It is nearly impossible to drive onto [Main street] from [15]th Avenue (from either direction) without stopping twice, once to get to the middle and twice to check the road again on the other side of the parking places. It is difficult to see oncoming traffic past the parked cars. I wonder how many near misses occur weekly.

This problem could be simply solved with the installation of 4-way stop signs. It would not only make crossing the road more safe, it would slow down the traffic, making a safer place for children, residents and people who walk in the neighborhood. We hope you will consider this request.

Thank you sincerely,

ECHO School Kids

Appendix H

Xander's Story

The following story is about Xander (pseudonym), a young girl who attended ECHO School as told by her mother and stepfather, who are both mental health professionals. The family had attended meeting in the summer of the first year, but decided to continue in the public schools because of the girl's special needs. They came to ECHO the following year.

MM: Why did you come to ECHO School?

Xander's mom – "I was unsure [about coming to ECHO the first year] because I felt it was not a real organized as a school system that it was so disorganized... very hard for her to push herself as far as she could with you and far as... then, her social problems or difficulties, she does have Asperger's and social problems. Actually, she had a very good teacher at [her previous school] the first year and what happened is that when she started the second year at [the previous school] she could no longer have [the teacher she had done well with] -- and all of the demands or expectations of highly qualified teachers -- it was just garbage....was a fabulous teacher. Xander was doing good by herself, they had a cut-out classroom, which was kind of Asperger's kids and she was a big star and she just loved it and was helping the others learn and stuff like that. But then they forced Xander to mainstream -- and my sense -- is in regular school."

"I don't believe in mainstreaming -- not in that way -- unless you have a very small school, and the kids work together and everybody knows everybody and they are very helpful. So, when kids with learning problems, they take on that wonderful community, you take care of everybody in the community whether they have a mental illness or they can't read or write and they take care of them."

The big huge schools, we have are a real problem. And what happened the second year [at Xander's previous school], in seventh grade, she was so-called mainstreamed, there was only one class she really.... Mainstreamed for her meant to be with conduct

disordered kids or the retarded kids, that's what it meant to her and so, she was in the lowest track and she was one of the few girls in that low track because you know girls don't usually have such bad conduct problems. She never had any problems, she was put in those classes, because it was the dope group, you know the dopey group. And for the first time, she was like, "Oh Mom, these guys in the back of the classroom started fighting and they punched each other right in the face and knocked them down and the police had to be called and dragged them all." You know the violence was unbelievable and the only class that was really [good], she had with the most wonderful teacher, Mr. [X], and he was fabulous. And she was put in the midlevel band and Xander is tone deaf, unfortunately. He allowed her to play the snare drum, because he felt she could do rhythm, she could definitely do rhythm. I got her some private lessons and she loved it. I think she had some real remarkable stuff, with a really good teacher and he was wonderful, understanding, he helped her and it was rather wonderful and that was the class she loved. Well, the trouble was the sixth period all the stupid kids had to be in the special class, Ok, so they brought them all together and that's what I say. I mean you can call them special children, but Xander had a word that was "the dope class." That's what the kids call each other for sure.

"They were kind of different kids, kids with learning disabilities and they want to put them in the retarded classroom, because then they don't teach them ways to learn around their disability. And so what they did all they did in the class was they went over the test and they highlighted, memorize this, memorize this, this will be on the test. I was so resentful and angry."

Xander's stepdad: And what I did was trying to help Xander with her homework one night and she was studying her math, and she had a question for me, what is the next prime number past eleven? And she said it's "C". And I said what do you mean it's a "C", then she said it's C on the pink sheet. I said what do you mean and she showed me this pink sheet that had 1 A, 2 D, 3 C, you know and I said what is this and she finally said here's the answers and C is the answer. And I said, "Xander what is a prime number?" and she didn't have a clue, but she knew C was the answer she was supposed

to put down. I said, “What kind of use is it to Xander, who at that point couldn’t make change, to teach her prime numbers and just teach her what the answer is?”

Xander’s mom – “Well this is what we were doing when we came to the second semester of seventh grade because we would come home, [stepdad] and I, and what we would be doing four to five hours is we would be taking the information, breaking down and teaching her in a way that she could understand. We’d make tests on the computer, we’d mix them all up and we’d really work with her, because she does get it when you [take the time], but we’re not teachers for God’s sake, we’ve got full-time jobs. I mean [we were] ready to jump off the roof. I was exhausted. It was just hell.

I’m trying to help with math homework and the subject is prime numbers, which I’m not strong on anyway. Yet, she knows that the answer is “C”. And it’s like, you know, I am not spending my time to teach her to answer “C”, to take the pink sheet and get the answers.

It was terrible.

We really, literally had a beef. Xander would not make change correctly and that was what she needed, not prime numbers. It was the same in most of her classes -- that was the one that was worst -- just glaringly wrong to me.

Xander’s mom: I just wanted her to learn the basics, so she can take care of herself. Xander is a fabulous presenter, we know, because when she was at [her elementary school] she did, we worked like hell on those presentations. I made costumes, but it was trying, what we had to do was, she got all the information, but what we had to do is the executive function. We took hours to break it down, organize it, help her organize it, and then once we got it organized, we taught her how to do it put it on the little cards and everything. It’s always been the teachers who told us, “Do not put her in the retarded class; she’s not retarded. That kid is not retarded.”

That's all they've ever wanted to do, but she has the most horrible learning disability, because it is expressive and receptive speech. So, it's horrible. How do you get to it?

When she finally caught on with the stuff with her Amelia Earhart presentation, she realized, "Oh I am telling people that I am Amelia Erhart and I'm talking like she would be doing." Then she started doing things, like, "Oh, I just don't know whether I can fly this airplane or not."

At the end, she said I really should have learned how to use that radio. If I used that radio, I wouldn't have crashed in the ocean.

"So, why did we bring her? I was desperate to tell you the truth."

Xander's mom: So, why did we bring her? I was desperate to tell you the truth. What happened to us one day, Xander came home and she said, "Mom, I am so stupid." And I said did somebody call you stupid, "No, no." And I said what do you mean you're stupid? And she said, "The other kids, they get this stuff all the time and all they are doing is fighting in the room, they get this stuff in minutes, it takes me forever to get it. I'm really stupid." So, she is quite aware that all the "dumb kids" were getting it and still getting it in time to go around doing bad things and getting into trouble. They would get this stuff quickly and she could not understand it. And she just felt really badly about herself. In addition to that every body ignored her and the kids were so behaviorally problematic there, that she would come home having been banged against the lockers, because the boys were just running through the halls like maniacs. So, nobody ever tried to hurt her purposefully, but it's like nobody liked her. They ignored her. She's tiny. All she was supposed to do was memorize stuff. And I had to take her out of that d--- band class. It was the only descent class that she had under a teacher who understood, helped her fit in, I mean if she became a band weenie it would have been fine with me. She would have had a nice group and the kids liked her and helped her and she really would listen. So we came to ECHO at the end of her seventh grade year. And I tell you, I really, I really did love ECHO. The kids could teacher her stuff, I mean she would just pick it up, it was a small classroom, she would just pick up stuff. When she came home knowing

that power point it really put me to shame, I had to go learn power point and believe me I didn't learn it in one afternoon. I yell, scream, and curse at the computer to learn it; it just took me forever. Of course, I didn't have someone teaching me that really understood it, I was embarrassed to ask {Xander's stepdad}. It really, it was real impressive and it was a group; they took care of each other. They had really tolerated the differences in each other. It was more like family, a little community and I really, really liked ECHO for those reasons.

Why did you leave ECHO?

Xander's mother describes the reasons ECHO school was unable to accommodate Xander's multiple needs.

But why did we take her out? That's probably important. I'll tell you that one of the big reasons we took her out, actually -- there were two things. One, we just could not put the time into ECHO as we should have and as we should have with any school like that is that as parents we need to be there. [*One of the requirements at ECHO was that parents participate in the program 5 hours each week.*] I tried to be there. At times, I had to hire [a tutor] to come in for me and it was just full time. The great part about it was that she didn't come home with four hours of homework, so that stress was off us. But the fact of the matter was that it was so incredibly hard to do the volunteer part and I hated having to hire somebody to do it for us. Well, actually there were three things.

The second thing was, and I can't mention the name, I don't think you want me to mention the name, I think it was [Todd] was so disruptive; I was extremely angry, because I think to stay in there I think mother should have been told -- she had to have him to a child psychiatrist and to be on medicine. I am a child psychiatrist, I didn't see him gaining a lot; you can't because you had to be on medicine. I know she didn't want him on medicine, but when I did come in I saw him disrupting everything. And it took one parent, it was always one parent was full time with [Todd], keeping him off the other children And, and that it was just not necessary because, Mother should have been told, get him to a doctor and get him on the right medicine. Because then he would've really

been able to, I am a child psychiatrist; I took care of little kids like that. It was like a miracle, you get a good doctor, you get then on the right medicine and they can learn and they start feeling good about themselves. But, running around and being ADD and knocking books off and constantly have people chase him was not...He couldn't access it, couldn't access it even if he was with one to one."

"As a child psychiatrist, and I have had Xander on medicine since she was suspended in kindergarten. They called me up and I had to leave work -- I was a single mother -- because you know they suspended her. For the day, what was I supposed to do, they couldn't handle her, how could I. And so, I had to start her on medicine, there was just no choice. And then two weeks later, when I finally got to the school meeting, they said you know we don't have any problem with her now it's like a miracle. And I thought, "I know why, [I] got her on some medicine."

MM: I do really respect the right of parents to say, "I want to find something else [besides medicine for my child]." And all of all the things that you've said are all the things that have happened in every school. There's not a place for [children who are different]. There are not enough teachers; the classes are too big. Schools don't have a community. They try to make everybody do the same thing and everybody doesn't get it the same.

Xander's mom: "I've told parents, I was very, very strong and opinionated about this because I was in practice eighteen years, and then I went and had a kid who did have horrendous problems. And she was impossible to work with, I always had tutors and things for her and they saw one day I forgot to give her medicine and they came and said, "What happened? You know it was just awful she was just crawling up the wall."

"And you can't get to them, and I think I would have left her in ECHO if [Todd] had been, he needed either take the medicine or be out of the program, **because I found it really disruptive to Xander's learning**. Because she has enough trouble as it is and then when I did have someone in there with her or I was in there with her, he was just constantly you know, I would take her off to a space to work and work on stuff with her

trying to get away from him, but it was always somebody chasing him around getting him not to disrupt. I think the mother was very lucky that medicine worked for him, because then what do you do with kids when it doesn't work. But I think that that disrupts the other children so much that it's just isn't allowable."

"With Xander, she really cannot, her mind is jumping all over. She herself notices it and realizes the medicine helps her focus and learn. That was the second thing and the third thing that was I was having trouble with is that I was having tutors after school who to work with her and to help her with her instrument, learning her instrument and all this kind of stuff and it got to the point that where I was having a lot of trouble finding tutors and to do what they were supposed to do."

"School got out earlier [in the afternoon]. It was a nightmare. It was real hard, because we both work full time and we just could not leave. So anyway we went to, what did we go to Southern Hills, ...What's the name?"

MM: Talbot School. (pseudonym)

(Xander's parents discuss the struggles and frustrations of trying another well-regarded private school, one with good intentions, but does not follow through on the family's expectations.)

Oh yeah, we went to Talbot School, because when we interviewed there, they said "Oh yes, you can drop them off first thing in the morning, you know, early and we'll work with them and you pay a little extra" and "what happens is that we work with them after school and keep them until six". So, I thought, "Thank God" and I said now I had always heard it was for gifted children. I said Xander's just a normal kid, but she has horrible learning. "Oh we can fix it" and they promised all these things and I thought well thank heavens they understand. I told them everything and they said, "Oh we can handle it and it was like a little beautiful school house. And I thought here is the community and they'll work with her after school. Well, what was happening was that in class she was doing absolutely nothing all day. They didn't do any tutoring, as we had paid for and as they

had promised, and she was coming home with four and five hours of homework. And it was like, they said, “Oh no she’ll do it at home. I was furious. We had to pay for the whole year. We had her with you for the last semester of seventh grade and starting eighth grade we had her in there for the first half of the year. She was learning nothing, it was real clear she was learning nothing. It was a nightmare.

Basically they were nice people. Very nice people and all like that. They made her take... Spanish and German and I said, “No, no, no, just basic stuff, just basic stuff. Well the guy who’s in charge, was Spanish speaking and she loved him and loved his Spanish class. I thought why you know I can’t even do the Spanish homework with her. Now in German I could help, I came in and sat in on the German classes; I had three years of German. I said to him in German, “Please go slower” and he just went, “Ha ha ha.” He was just talking and I don’t how anybody knew anything that was going on in that class. German was not his native language, it was a second language to him, and it was one of those Slovakian basics. And how in the hell, I think when I learned, I learned really from an American who had learned German and he spoke slowly and we understood everything that he said, because he used the words in the book. And I have also had teachers who were native born and they just talk ..this and that, it’s terrible, you just can’t learn from them unless they are a real teacher. You know, you study the book and learn the basics and make up your mind how you’re going to teach. Are you going to teach like Rosetta Stone which is you know talk talk talk talk or are you going to teach in a different way, which is the classic way you study the vocabulary and stuff. But, I was very distressed with that because I sat in that class and I don’t know how anybody understood anything, because I’ve had three years of it and I didn’t know what the hell they were talking. You know, he was not going slowly enough and I was asking him to go slower in German and he laughed at me and I just really didn’t like his attitude much at all, So, it was like, she was not learning there either. It was those several years were a nightmare, weren’t they?

[Xander’s stepdad]: Of course, we had been looking and looking for some place that would offer Xander the services that would take care of her. As I told [Xander’s mom], we can’t have a system in which you have to leave work at two o’clock in the afternoon

and drive her to [Pleasant Street] and then hire somebody that picks her up at [Pleasant Street] and takes her over to [Hwy 96] and then somebody else picks her up and carries her back to sit with her for two-hours until we get home from work. Aside from the cost of it, it's just the stress of trying to coordinate it all with like twenty people shifting Xander around and one or the other of us would wind up having to fill in the gaps whenever there wasn't something going right. I mean, I can remember carrying Xander somewhere at ---o'clock at night, in the rain.

It was horrible. She always been good; she's been normal motor wise, gross motor. She was in gymnastics for years, but I think it is the back-hand spring that's sort of like, if you can do the back handspring, then you've reached a level you get all the good teachers. It's like a level you must reach. She kept trying and working and trying to make it. And so what I did, is I couldn't seem to get any private coaches over at the coliseum, so I took her over to the other place, can't remember the name, and it was so damn far away and they did not start the lesson until seven or eight o'clock at night because the team had to practice. The team practiced and had the whole gym. Then the kids would sit and watch the lesson, it's like they weren't really teachers. So, I tried the gymnastics, I tried this lesson, that lesson. I tried to keep her in it to see if there was any kind of specialty thing that she could do to be that she could be a normal kid and be good at.

Xander's parents talk about how she found the program where she is enrolled today.

[Xander's stepdad]: ... before she had started at Talbot School. We had taken her to a summer program for this camp for Asperger's kids. We were dubious because they are out in the middle of nowhere, but they were very attuned to Xander and they understood Xander very well. And there were other kids there were just like her and they said, "She's exactly the kind of kid we work with and she fits in fine" and all like that. And so we thought, OK, great we'll do this month long program in the summer and she'll learn skills and stuff, but it's like OK what do we do the rest of the time. Then, my daughter got married January the 13th, I think it was 11th, 12th, something like that in 2007 and so I

drove down to Louisiana, which at the last minute I had to take Xander and [Xander's mom] couldn't go because the other doctor's kids got sick and so [Xander's mom] had to cover that. I had to go to the wedding so Xander and I went to Louisiana together and all like that. So we get back to Tuscaloosa and they have called [Xander's mom] and said we're opening the academic program and we've got a slot for a girl, do you want Xander to come? So, we packed everything she had, put her in the car, and drove the next weekend to North Carolina and put her in school up there. And she has been so much better, twenty-four hour a day structure.

Xander's mom: It was really quite rough the first year, but if I hadn't found that program, I don't know what we would have done. And they assured me that it was not a program for behavioral kids, that kind of problems you can forget it.

Early educational advice...an aside.

And that's it beats throwing her into the retarded classroom and they told me when they first saw the problem in pre-school, the head of the Cincinnati Center for Developmental Disorders said for education she was always fall in the crack. There's not going to be a school for her so you have got to go to really good public school who will be able to address her problems. Up in Cincinnati, Ohio, [where the family had lived previously] they actually hired a teacher specifically who could handle her, but the school was just like – you know, the money, the money was tremendous.

Back to the new school...

But as he says, it's 24-hours a day, and what does she learn, the classrooms are six to eight and one teacher. They teach, they told me they teach, they will hand out a paper, like in history class and the paper will have several paragraphs and it will have like blanks, OK, and then they'll have a list, [of vocabulary] -- the blanks within the writing that's called cloze procedure. [The student, then fill in the blanks with the correct vocabulary.] And they told us, "this is the way we teach." They say ok we are going to study so and so, and then they talk about it briefly and then they say, ok, now look at your paper, read that and fill in the blanks. I mean she's getting A's. She's getting A's and

she's really learning stuff. So what did they do, they did it orally, they did it out loud, they did it with reading and then they had a list that she could actually pick it out. She knew what the word was. [They are] supporting her – yeah!

With every single, solitary way that you could probably learn. *There were not projects; instead, they would travel.* She must know the Civil War by heart because they went to Fort Sumter and got to crawl all over the cannons there. So, when they study something then they go and of course the camping hard is kind of hard in cold weather, but they go to camp spots and they learn the basics, they learn reading, writing, arithmetic.

Xander is now, I mean you know, they are an accredited high school. Xander has is finishing her junior year in high school, now and she's taken Algebra, she's taken world history now, I think it is and she excels at phys ed.

Xander is finally learning life skills.

Xander's stepdad: When she came home, she decided to order pizza. Ok, she called Domino's, she ordered the pizza, she got the kind of pizza we liked, and paid for it. But, you know, she did that it without bothering to check with any of us as to whether we wanted pizza. But you know, compared to a few years ago, where if I just said, "OK Xander, how much does a pizza cost, here's my wallet".

Xander's mom: Blank, blank, deer in the headlights.

Xander's stepdad: The concepts of how to do that and what to pay and everything just didn't get through and she understands those things now. And you know, she has her driver's license now. She's driving a car.

Xander's mom: She passed the test.

Xander's stepdad: She can go to the grocery store with her money, drive down to the grocery store, go pick up stuff, bring it back. We can give her a list and say get this. She always picks up a few candy bars and stuff like that she wants along the way.

Xander's mom: I would never have expected her to be able to drive or pass those tests. It's unbelievable. Her big, big problem is still social. And the reason it relieves us, I cannot tell you how it relieves us and of course she is always begging not to go, because she comes home and doesn't really have any friends. So, she just does computer, and TV, and computer games and stuff like that and it's hard for her. The work, she works ten times harder than anybody else at such simple things and it's very hard for her. And they have a levels system. They have a counselor in a cabin with her and makes sure that she brushes her teeth, showers, puts on clean clothes.

Xander's mom: Exactly, use deodorant, clean up after your self, have your bed made, and have your stuff. Stuff that with a normal kid you know you do it.

MM: Even with a normal kid you tell them for a couple of weeks and then they learn how to do that thing.

Xander's mom: Xander, its years

MM: They have to do it. They have to make a habit of it and that is the difference in being in a place that addresses special needs and being in a public school, is that you've got two days. They think if they tell it to you, you should know it. And you take the test on Friday and if you didn't get it, that's too bad. You don't get to keep on doing it until you learn it. You have to go on to the next thing and you fail. You're set up for failure.

Appendix I

Example Student Progress Report

Student Progress Report

Grading Period 1 2 3 4 Mid-term Final

Student's Name _____

Teacher _____ Grade _____

Topics/Activities covered during this grading period _____

The activity I enjoyed most was _____
 because _____

The activity that was least interesting to me was _____
 because _____

I would like to learn more about _____

I could study it in this way: _____

I do my best work in (give an example): _____

I need to try harder in _____ How will you do this?

Student Performance	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely Needs to Improve
I read daily for a variety of purposes.				
I completed weekly homework assignments.				
I completed assignments independently.				
I was considerate of classmates and teachers.				
I used my imagination and creativity.				
I participated in discussions, projects and problem solving.				

Student's Signature _____ Date _____

Parent's Signature _____

Comments:

Appendix J

Cassie's Narrative Report

Cassie – Final Narrative May 07

6th grade

ECHO Homeschool Cooperative

Cassie has been a student at ECHO Homeschool Cooperative for the past year. In this time she has worked with a group of multi-age/multi level students from 3rd to 8th grade. Cassie has made significant gains this year; however she works well below her age/grade level. She struggles to read on kindergarten level and does math at first or second grade level. Cassie

Before ECHO, Cassie attended school in the City and County School systems. (PreK – C Elementary, K – S Elementary 1st – H Elementary, 2nd – H Elementary, (BP School – 6 months, 2003) 3rd – S Elementary, 4th – S Elementary, 5th – N Elementary, A Elementary, 6th – ECHO.

She came to ECHO school as a 6th grader at age 12, but unable to read. Cassie recognizes the alphabet and know most of the sounds of her letters, but she does not sound words out in context. She can read, with much practice, simple decodable books by memorization, but she cannot read words out of the sentences (context) and does not remember the words on the next day. In math, Cassie can do simple addition and subtraction computations, but does not understand procedures used in the context of word problems. She recognizes money, but does not add and subtract or make change, nor realize the value of money. She has had a great deal of practice over the course of the year using money in stores and restaurants with assistance. In actual content areas such as social studies and science, Cassie does not read, but learns from pictures and does well when explanations are repeated and practice over and over again. She feels successful and is proud during these times. She has presented projects with assistance from teachers and peers. Cassie loves Spanish and has actually done very well with beginning Spanish vocabulary. Cassie's handwriting is very difficult to read, so I have had her do the bulk of her work on the computer this year, having her use spell check and e-mail to send work. She has also worked on Mavis Beacon Teaches Typing, but has not completed the course.

In the time that Cassie was at ECHO she has participated in Reading and Writing, Science and Social Studies, Math, PE and Spanish. As a cooperative, we have had parents as teachers through the years who have taught various extra subjects creative writing (with a published poet parent: Theresa Pappas), Spanish, Art and Music. In addition, we have worked closely with Hurricane Creek with Miss Anna, swimming lessons with a certified lifeguard, and, completing their program objectives contained in our courses of study. We have been on myriad field trips including Moundville, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Sharktooth Creek, Golden Flake, 3 days in Atlanta visiting the Birmingham Zoo, Georgia Aquarium, Fernbank Museum, CNN and Stone Mountain. She has attended Children's Theater Plays and has participated in monthly activities with our adopted friends at a local retirement home. (Cassie is very compassionate and caring with the elderly people at XYZ Assisted Living facility.)

Cassie struggles in school. I think she has had one of her first positive school experiences this year, however rocky even this year has sometimes seemed. Cassie wants to learn and loves to

“play school”, but she does not “get” everything like her peers and is teased and alienated. In response, Cassie acts out physically and emotionally. She can be very sweet and cooperative or very loud, emotional and non-responsive, depending on the situation. Cassie mirrors her surroundings. If she is in a positive environment, she behaves well; negative environments evoke negative behavior. Cassie needs to be in a school where she can experience positive learning. I DO NOT believe that public middle school is Cassie’s “least restrictive environment.” Cassie like to help and I think she could learn many things helping others, perhaps leading a group of younger children with special needs.

It is my recommendation that Cassie re-enter public school as a 6th grader in the 2007-08 school year at a school for or in a program for students with special needs, such as OH School in the city or S School in the county. I have no doubt that she will benefit from such a placement.

Appendix K

Echo School Field Trips for Feb and March 2006

Date	Place	Time	Cost	Bring
Thursday Feb 2	All Fired Up, Northport, Al	10:00-11:30 Leave school at 9:45, return at 11:45	\$10.00	0
Friday February 10 th	Ruffner Mountain Nature Center in Birmingham	10-11:30, and eat lunch in Pavilion. Leave school at 8:30, Return to school at 1:00.	Cost \$7.00 each, plus \$3.00 for gas fee.	Wear sturdy warm outdoor clothing.
Wednesday February 15 th	Warner Art Museum at North River	10:00-11:00 Leave at 9:45- return at 11:15	Cost \$3.00	Dress Nicely- You are going to the Yacht Club!
Thursday March 9th	Golden Flake Potato Chip Factory in Birmingham	Tour is scheduled for 12:30, we may do something else before this.	The tour is free, Gas fee is \$3.00	Wear closed toe and heel shoes (tennis shoes are great!)
Thursday March 30	Old Cahaba Historical Park, Archeology Mystery Tour	Be at school at 7:45! Tour is from 9:30- 12:00, we'll return to school by 2:30-3:00	\$4.00 for park, \$3.00 for gas	Bring your lunch, wear outdoor clothes and sunscreen.
Cost for all trips			\$24.00	

Appendix L

IRB

Office for Research
Institutional Review Board for the
Protection of Human Subjects

THE UNIVERSITY OF
ALABAMA
R E S E A R C H

March 31, 2010

Andrea Minear
Department of ELPTS
College of Education
Box 870232

Re: IRB#: 10-OR-090 "Teaching Without a Script: Developing a Curriculum of Authentic Learning Activities for Differentiated Learning"

Dear Ms. Minear:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

Your application will expire on March 30, 2011. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of Continuing Review and Closure Form. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the Continuing Review and Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent/assent forms to obtain consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,


Carparkato T. Myles, MSW, CIM
Director & Research Compliance Officer
Office of Research Compliance
The University of Alabama



152 Rose Administration Building
Box 870117
Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35487-0117
(205) 348-5152
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Application for Institutional Review Board Summary of Proposed Research Project

Title of Research Project: *Teaching Without a Script: Developing a Curriculum of Authentic Learning Activities for Differentiated Learning.*

Purpose/Brief Description of the Study

The purpose of this study is to describe the wholetheme authentic learning experiences of a diverse group of multi-age, multi-level, and multiple ability students in a homeschool cooperative which used differentiated instruction in order to meet individual learning needs. ECHO (Every Child Has Options) School (2003-2007), a private replacement for a popular public magnet school program employed a curriculum of differentiated instruction using themes based on The Alabama Course of Study. Because the group of 12-17 students ranged in age from 4 to 17, instruction was delivered via a school-wide gifted model of teaching to encourage independent and critical thinking in students without textbooks or scripted lessons

My interest in this study is to describe the phenomenology of how the stakeholders of the school perceived the non-traditional curriculum as being supportive of students' different learning needs utilizing authentic learning activities. For the purposes of this study, I will interview students who attended the school and the parents who were also teachers, without whom the school could not have functioned. Working together as a co-op, all participants wore many hats. I was the one certified teacher, and just about every parent taught something at least one time or another. It was a group effort. The parents functioned as teachers and as parents changed, course offerings changed and as a Certified K-12 teacher with experience in a wide range of grades, I filled in the blanks. I will relay their narrative accounts of ECHO regarding how the participants built a curriculum based on the Alabama Course of Study for children with diverse learning needs. In addition, I will tell the story of ECHO School from one teacher's point of view (mine) and refer to documents and artifacts that represent the school and the students.

Participants

For this study, I will interview former students who attended ECHO (Every Child Has Options) School. In addition, I will interview parents and other stakeholders who were involved in the school during the four years of its implementation and who experienced the inner workings of the school. I believe the results of this interview will provide examples of wholetheme instruction using authentic teaching activities to provide differentiated instruction for a diverse group of learners. I will attempt to interview those whose experiences represented the diversity of the school's demographics. The current age range of the former ECHO students is 10 – 24 years old.

(Demographics: In the four year operation of ECHO, 35 different students attended. Of those 35, over time (with overlap), there were 1 PreK student, 5 Kindergarteners, 1 first grader, 5 second graders, seven third graders, six fourth graders, ten fifth graders, eight sixth graders, two eighth graders, one ninth grader and one twelfth grader. Although ECHO School did not categorize children by labels, for the purpose of describing of diversity and using labels assigned before and after ECHO, there were (at least) 2 children with dyslexia, 17-20 with ADHD, 13 gifted, 3 with Asperger's/Autism spectrum disorder, 6-8 with Specific learning disabilities (SLD) and one with what is classified as mental retardation (MR). They were a group of ABC children (Baum & Olenchak, 2002). There were seven African American children, two Hispanic, and the remainders were of white European descent.

Students and their families were contacted via e-mail. Of the 33 children, in 26 families, who attended, 18 families responded and 33 people were interviewed (including children and parents)

3. Research Procedures

- I will first obtain a) the formal consent of parent interviewees and b) the assent from the (minor) student participants and consent from their parents using the attached informed consent and assent forms (See Appendix A). Once I have explained the consent form and the participant decides to sign it, we will mutually decide the dates and the places to conduct the interviews with the participants (See Appendix B).

- **Research Study:** I will conduct individual and group interviews using an interview protocol (see Appendix B and C) with the students/parents. The interview protocol questions will serve as a guide for the informal, conversational interview. It may be necessary to conduct additional follow up interviews, if needed. The interview will be audiotape recorded and the tapes safely stored in a locked drawer in the office of Dr. Vivian Wright.

When possible, collaborative group interviews will be conducted as the basis for a narrative study of the students' responses to wholetheme authentic learning activities at ECHO School. It is hoped that the memories of students/parents will spark reminiscences of others in the group and that they will corroborate each other and/or lead to deeper inquiry.

- Appendix B, written with the students in mind, may be modified only slightly to address the parents and/or the survey for both students and parents. The content will remain the same.
- The interview will be audiotape recorded and the tapes safely stored in a locked drawer in the office of Dr. Vivian Wright.
- The tapes will be transcribed verbatim and the data will be coded into conceptual themes. Only pseudonyms will be used in the transcripts to protect the privacy of the research participants.

Informed Consent

The adult (parent) interviewees will be asked to sign a copy of the informed consent form and minor students will be asked to sign the assent form with their parent(s) signing the consent. The consent/assent forms explain the purpose of the research in language understandable to the participants. There are no risks, discomforts, or immediate benefits involved in participating. Since the only procedures used in this study are interviews, no treatments are being given and/or

withheld. Confidentiality will be assured through various mechanisms. Pseudonyms will be given to all participants, names of towns, businesses, and/or other geographical references, and any other personally identifying information. Audiotapes, after transcription, will be kept in a locked file in Dr. Wright's office in 315 A Graves Hall. After the interviews are transcribed, the tapes will be erased.

The consent form clearly indicates that participation is voluntary and that participants have the right to withdraw at any time with no penalty or loss of benefits. .

Informed Consent for a Research Study

You are being asked to take part in a research study. This study is called *Teaching Without a Script: Developing a Curriculum of Authentic Learning Activities for Differentiated Learning*. The study is being conducted by Andrea Minear who is a doctoral student in the College of Education at the University of Alabama.

What is this study about?

This study is being done to describe the wholetheme authentic learning experiences of a diverse group of multi-age, multi-level, and multiple ability students in a homeschool cooperative that built a curriculum of differentiated instruction in order to meet their individual learning needs.

Why is this study important--What good will the results do?

In a time when State and National Standards dictate a curriculum focused on a narrow "norm" I wish to show how differentiating instruction through the use of wholetheme authentic learning activities in a classroom can be used to meet a wide range of learning needs.

Why have I been asked to take part in this study?

You have been asked to be in this study because *you have had extensive experiences in this area. I believe that those experiences can be used as examples that can help us better understand how to teach in an "average" classroom full of students with multiple needs.*

How many people besides me will be in this study?

This is a descriptive phenomenological study. Only ECHO school stakeholders: students, teachers and others connected to the school will be participants in this study.

What will I be asked to do in this study?

If you decide to be in this study, you will be interviewed. During the interview I will ask you to describe your interactions with wholetheme authentic learning experiences that allowed you to meet your grade level standards and objectives while working in a one-room schoolhouse with students of different ages, abilities and special needs. When talking to you I will ask you to describe your learning experiences at ECHO school and in the public school system. Each interview will last approximately one hour. If you are willing, I may approach you to do a follow up interview, only if needed.

How much time will I spend being in this study?

Being in this study will take about at most 2-3 hours of your time. The interview may take about one hour and and we may need an extra hour or two for a follow up interviews on other days.

Will I be paid for being in this study?

You will not be paid for being in this study.

Will being in this study cost me anything?

There will be no cost to you except for your time participating in the interviews. We will either come to your house or we will meet at my house to do the interview.

What are the benefits (good things) that may happen to me if I am in this study?

There are no direct benefits to you from being in this study.

What are the benefits to scientists or society?

This study will help administrators and teachers understand the challenges children face with a strict, standardized curriculum currently utilized to serve the needs of a widely diverse range of students. It will show that it is possible and preferred to offer authentic learning activities that differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students with different needs and interests.

What are the risks (dangers or harm) to me if I am in this study?

The most serious risk is a potential loss of confidentiality. In order to minimize this risk, you will have the choice to be interviewed in a group setting with familiar, former classmates and their families or in a private space where others cannot overhear us. Your identity will not be revealed and will be protected in data presentation.

How will my confidentiality (privacy) be protected? What will happen to the information the study keeps on me?

Your interview will be taped and all tapes will be kept in a locked drawer in Dr. Wright's office. When the tapes are transcribed, we will use pseudonyms for you, and the school system as well as the teachers, administrators, and other people who you may mention in the interviews. Once the tapes are transcribed, we will destroy them. You are also free to refuse to answer any questions that you think are too personal or upsetting or that you fear will put you jeopardy with the school system. The only person with access to your information will be me, Ms. Minear.

What are the alternatives to being in this study? Do I have other choices?

The alternative/other choice is not to participate.

What are my rights as a participant?

Taking part in this study is voluntary—it is your free choice. You may choose not to take part at all. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with me, the school or any of the students or parents who were stakeholders. If you start the study, you can stop at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of any benefits you would otherwise receive.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board (IRB) is the committee that protects the rights of people in research studies. The IRB may review study records from time to time to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as planned.

Who do I call if I have questions or problems?

If you have questions about the study right now, please ask them. If you have questions about the study later on, please call the investigator Andrea Minear at (205) 333-8507, or co-advisors Dr. Vivian Wright at (205) 348-1401, or Dr. Nirmala Erevelles at (205) 348-1179. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Ms. Tanta Myles, The University of Alabama Research Compliance Officer, at (205)-348-5152.

I have read this consent form. The study has been explained to me. I understand what I will be asked to do. I freely agree to take part in it. I will receive a copy of this consent form to keep.

Adult Research

Subject: _____ Date: _____

(Parent/Grandparent)

Witness: _____ Date: _____

Investigator: _____ Date: _____

CHILD’S ASSENT

The minor child _____ is willing to take part in the study called *Teaching Without a Script: Developing a Curriculum of Authentic Learning Activities for Differentiated Learning*.

The child understands that the researchers from The University of Alabama are hoping to describe the experiences of a group of students with different learning needs and how they used authentic learning techniques to complete their specific learning objectives (lessons) at ECHO Homeschool Cooperative where he/she previously attend school.

The child understands that he/she will do an interview with one of his/her former teachers, Ms. Andrea Minear which will be audiotaped. The minor child will be asked about how he/she specifically used authentic learning activities to learn his/her learning objectives that were different from other students in the class. This study will take place either at the minor child's house or at Ms. Minear's house and should take altogether about 1-2 hours of the child's time in approximately 1-hour intervals.

The child is taking part because he/she wants to. The child has been told that he/she can stop at any time, and if he/she does not like a question, he/she does not have to answer it. No one will know his/her answers, including (name people that will not have access to answers, i.e., strangers, parents, other children, etc.)

The investigator has explained the study to the child in language appropriate for his/her age and level of understanding. He/she has been given an opportunity to ask questions and to decide about his/her participation. The signature of the parent(s) and the investigator certifies that the child is agreeing to be a subject in this study.

Interview Request Letter

Hello ECHO Friends

I want to plan a get-together. Read on...

As you may know, I have completed my doctoral coursework and I am writing my dissertation this semester (hopefully!). It will be a *Phenomenological Study* (participants' personal feelings, memories and views based on their experiences) and consist of stories (narratives) about ECHO. The purpose of the dissertation is to share our stories and hopefully encourage other teachers to undertake some of the authentic learning activities that we found most successful. The working title of the dissertation is:

*Teaching without a Script:
Educating a Youniquely diverse group of children in a one room schoolhouse*

OR

Why can't ALL kids be taught as if they are gifted?

I hope to be able to interview as many of the ECHO students, parents and other participants as possible, to put together a comprehensive view of what we did in our 4 years of homeschool co-oping.

I met with two families last weekend at my house (the farm) and we had a grand reunion, as usual, as we shared portfolios, old pictures and fond memories. I have developed a research protocol and it is simple:

Why did you come to ECHO? What did you experience while you attended ECHO? Why did you leave ECHO and how do your subsequent experiences compare to ECHO and/or affect your current educational life. (Some of the younger students might not remember *WHY* they came, but they may answer what they have since inferred as the reasons.)

In an effort to remain unbiased, I offered the first group their choice of interview techniques: individual with me, individual(s) with another individual(s) from the group interviewing each other, as a group, or in writing. This particular group chose a group interview and it turned into them interviewing each other within the researcher/subjects interview.

I am setting aside the next two weeks to meet with those who are willing and available. I would like to meet with families and if you want to group up, 2 or 3 families. Any combinations are fine with me. My plan is to meet at my house (and have food, of course), but I am willing to come see you if it is more convenient. I'd like to get together on Saturday or Sunday, but I can meet any day except Tuesdays when I teach in Livingston.

So, can you make it? Is there anyone in particular that you'd like to group up with? Would you prefer an individual meeting?

Let me know what works for you, and whether or not you will allow me to interview you. I really look forward to seeing *everybody!* :-)

Love

:-) miminear

PS If you have your portfolios, any writing about ECHO that you have done *since leaving* or any other mementos you can share, please do! Some of you have written essays about ECHO in your new schools.

PPS The first group said, "Is this it? Are we finished? We can't come back?" Of course, we are never finished and you are welcome to come to every single gathering if you wish, but I do have to *focus* and do the interview!

ECHO Interview Prompt Questions...

For the participants who responded online, I used a list of interview questions that I had developed at the beginning of my IRB proposal. That list was subsequently reduced to the three focus questions:

Why did you come to ECHO?

What did you do at ECHO?

And Why did you leave...so what?

Think back to when you were very young. How did you feel about starting school? What do you remember about beginning school? What experiences did you have in school before ECHO?

Tell me about when you came to ECHO School. When was it? What grade(s)? What school did you come from? Why did you and/or your parents choose ECHO?

What was it like when you first started coming to school at ECHO? What was your first impression?

How did your perception of the school change over time?

In what ways did you grow as a student during your time at ECHO School?

How would you compare the ECHO School curriculum to other schools you have attended?

Now, I am going to ask you some questions about LEARNING? How would you say students LEARN something?

Can you name some different ways that people can learn? Which do you think are best? What is best for YOU?

What do you like to learn about? What is your favorite subject?

Do you remember how and what you learned when you were at ECHO? What was your favorite subject then? What were some ways that you LEARNED lessons?

How was LEARNING planned at ECHO? How were assignments decided?

How did students in different grades learn lessons together at the same time? How did they study the same subjects?

How might you teach different learners on different levels the same thing?

What kinds of technology were available to students at ECHO? What were some ways technology was used as LEARNING tools?

Can you think of some examples of you or other students using technology for learning?

What were your favorite uses of technology?

How did your use of technology at ECHO influence your uses of technology now?

Who were your teachers at ECHO? What did they teach? How did they teach? Were YOU a teacher at ECHO? Explain.

How were parents and families involved at ECHO?

What is Differentiated Instruction? What do you think it means? How would one go about doing it? Can you think of any examples of how to use DI?

How would you describe yourself as a learner? How would you describe yourself as a student? What is the difference?

Tell me about something you LEARNED. How did you LEARN it?? How do you KNOW you learned it?

Are you considered a good student? Tell me about that. Do you wish to be considered that way? Tell me about that.

What are some memories you have about being at ECHO School?

Why did you leave ECHO? What influenced your decision to leave?

Tell me about your transition to a new school.

Do you have choices in what or how you learn in school?

If you were a teacher, how would you teach your students?

If you were the principal, how would you run your school?