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## if: Poems from the Unstandardized Perspective

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Honors Research Project

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**If: Poems from the Unstandardized Perspective**

When I was about six years old, I used to read a new sports book every week. The protagonist was always a five to twelve-year-old boy who was slightly dorky and had a minor quirk. Maybe he counted the number of seams on a baseball every morning, had an imaginary pet goldfish, or only wore blue shoes. He was also imaginative and interested in sports, most often baseball, but sometimes soccer. The boy usually went through a series of trials - raising money by painting a fence, helping his grandparents move to a new house, or teaching his little sister to ride a bike - before he could be part of a team. The boy and the team would then face even greater challenges. The personalities and working styles of teammates - like Jimmy, the great hitter, slick dresser and poor loser, Jorge; who liked to pretend his glove sucked in baseballs when he played outfield and often fell asleep; and Keyshawn, the great, but shy runner and fielder, but poor batter - clash until the team would eventually learn to *use* their differences to forge a strong new group identity. This bond allowed the team members to achieve greater individual performances, thereby compelling the team to exceed all expectations and win a championship trophy. In these books, I related to the struggles the team had to endure throughout the season and learned this lesson: the greatest teams were those that did not ignore their diverse elements and instead recognized the importance of every individual and adapted the dynamics of the team to take advantage of these differences.

When I read such books, I invariably imagined that I was the protagonist. It was easy for me to relate because I too spent the majority of my childhood playing sports. I always wanted to be part of an ideal team in which every player was equally important. When I could not find other kids to play with, I played full games of soccer, basketball and football against myself while announcing the play by play. I too possessed quirks, and when I played sports I imagined all the individual qualities and talents of myself and my fellow teammates, real or imaginary, working together. In my imagination, my fellow players and I learned from each other and became an even better baseball, soccer, hockey, football, or even badminton team. I dreamt of the ideal group, and I always hoped that one day I could be part of a group that was founded on individual differences and reflective of these interests.

I found one such group in my Advanced Placement English class in high school, senior year. My small class of eight entered a school-wide competition to raise money to benefit The American Cancer Society. The most money raised by a class after a month won a free lunch from The Olive Garden. We realized our class was at a significant competitive disadvantage due to our size, but we believed in each other as a team and we shared the same philanthropic drive. We occasionally interrupted our lessons on Ibsen's *A Doll's House* to develop our fundraising strategies and discuss our progress raising money. We decorated a can with favorite quotes from books, and class members took turns using it each day to collect funds from fellow students. Most of us had jobs. I worked at a fish market, Dave mowed lawns, Preye worked at a hair salon and we all made significant contributions from our salaries. The school announcements kept a daily account of our progress, and it came as no surprise that we were competing with two

other classes more than three times our size. On the last count before the money had to be turned in, we were losing by a little over one hundred dollars. Together we rallied as a class and raised even more money from donations we solicited from students, teachers and our parents. Manuel even pulled out his saxophone and played the blues in the main hallway during passing periods to raise money. I made a final personal sacrifice and donated the entire contents of my childhood piggy bank.

Just before we turned our money in, our teacher made a surprise contribution that put us over the top. We were so incredibly proud of our efforts. I remember The Olive Garden tasting especially good the day they catered for our class of eight, but the reward did not seem necessary. The bond that we had formed as a class was a reward in itself. I will never forget the looks on my classmates' faces when I stood above a giant pile of change and the broken remains of my glass piggy bank. It was a time when education transcended the traditional barriers of the classroom – it touched our lives and has become a lasting memory. I was proud of our class because each student contributed in his or her own unique way to help us achieve our goal. I cannot remember a single character's name in *A Doll's House*, but I remember the name of every student in that classroom: Manuel, and his sax; Dave who got his entire family to donate, including their dog; Megan who had a bad case of “senioritis” and hardly showed up to class, but donated on the last day; Preye, who was the best and quietest fundraiser; Jenny, who was our resident artist and can decorator; Lou, who motivated the class and counted the money; and Josh, who repeatedly tried to make textual connections with fundraising, usually ending in a chorus of “nice tries” and laughter. I not only learned enough English to pass the AP standardized test with flying colors, but I was also part of an ideal group,

one that I learned of in sports books, that was flexible enough to form its unique identity based on our individual talents.

As one who has gone from student to teacher, I have always cherished the surprising instances in which education transcends the traditional barriers of the classroom by recognizing individual human differences and utilizing these differences to create stronger group bonds and lasting friendships. The brilliant diversity of human nature is precisely what makes education so fascinating and complex. Schools must be flexible to adapt to the constant change that is present in both their diverse environments and populations. Unfortunately, schools are often threatened in their abilities to adjust to such diversity by the force of standardization. Standardization of education derives from the hope that all schools can be improved by instituting a set of standards, and holds teachers and schools accountable for practicing these guidelines. The standardization movement is based on the principle that teaching can be measured and its results can be empirically validated (Beyer 242). The inherent problem with standardization is that schools lack the consistency and simplicity necessary for such a scientific treatment.

Certain arguments against the ability of standardized tests to measure the quality of education are especially well-known and well-regarded. Standardized tests most often use multiple choice questions instead of essay questions to find “precise” answers, but rarely allow students to justify their answers (Bracey 32). Critical thinking and individual analysis of answers are essential to understanding a student’s approach to problem solving, but these are lost in standardized tests. Moreover, the results of the tests are misleading because they claim to measure understanding in each subject matter, while test publishers admit that they cannot evaluate the full range of a subject in so few

questions (30). The results of standardized tests also place too much of a burden on comparisons of test scores to the scores of other schools which are intended to set an average level of education that each school should reach. But schools are just one of many factors that affect a child's test scores; therefore, it is unfair to hold them solely responsible. Studies show that factors outside of school such as economic background and parental involvement have a major impact on test results (17). A disturbing result of the emphasis on high test scores is that teachers are pressured by the government, communities and school administrations to focus their teaching specifically toward the topics of tests, most commonly math, science and English, thereby narrowing the scope of the curriculum (34). Schools are incredibly diverse institutions and narrowing the scope of curriculum limits the schools' ability to create personalized learning experiences that are the most essential tool in recognizing all students and granting them a quality education.

The narrowing of school curricula is one result of the pressure caused by standardization. In my experience observing a variety of schools, I have discovered that the environment, populations and teaching styles of each school are too diverse and dynamic to systematize. Each school, each class, each teacher, and each student is vastly different and demands individualized and tailored approaches. All standards lack the flexibility necessary to adjust to this diverse and dynamic environment of schools. I discuss some of the results of standardization I have witnessed in schools here, but my poetry collection, central to this project and attached to this paper, is a more complete and livelier collection of meditations and my perspectives on the threat by standardization.

## **Educational Perspectives**

As a student in the Illinois Public School system, the standardization's effects were not as pronounced as they are today. The trend of standardization has gained a lot of support in recent years, especially from the federally legislated No Child Left Behind Act. During my time as a student at Illinois Wesleyan University I had the unique experiences of working in suburban, rural and urban settings as a student teacher. At Jones College Preparatory School on the South Side of Chicago, and Normal Community West High School, and as an observer at Bent Elementary School and Bloomington Junior High School I have witnessed the negative affects of all the Illinois State Standards even though the Illinois Learning Standards, for example, are thought to be exemplary - they have been translated into multiple languages and adopted in a number of countries (ISBE). The standards highlight certain aspects of education that are important, but pressure teachers to follow what they consider important for all schools in the state and leave out critical elements of lessons that are adapted to fit individual schools and students whom they teach. Beyer, a leading critic of standardization, writes that

Standards fail to take up the central questions that need to frame teacher education. Since education is a human undertaking, and educational studies is a normative domain, teacher education must be infused with the kind of critical scrutiny about social purposes, future possibilities, economic realities, and moral directions. (Beyer 240)

This shows that standards fail to recognize education as human undertaking and miss the crucial elements of students as individuals whom schools must recognize. Disturbingly,

the failure of standards to identify the complexities of education as a human undertaking has had seriously negative consequences in the schools that I have observed. In each school, I witnessed the pressure standardization has had on limiting our educational system, particularly in terms of its effect on the school environment, populations of schools and teaching styles within the schools.

Standardized tests force teachers and schools to pay special attention to the subject areas most tested across the nation: math, English, and science. Teachers are pressured to teach to the curriculum of these tests and thereby discouraged to utilize the vast resources of their specific learning environments. A plethora of different factors of a school environment influence education: the location, size and design of the school, the community surrounding the school, the Parent Teacher Organizations, the campuses used for sports and play, and the local festivals and events impact a school's environment in innumerable ways. Each element of the environment presents its own distinct challenges and possibilities that require the schools to be adaptive. Schools are losing the benefits of their environments because they are so concerned about teaching to standardized tests.

A specific example of environment being used well, but inhibited by the use of standards is found in my experience student teaching at Normal Community West High School. In rural Illinois, many students have a background in agriculture, but agriculture is not included in the state standards. When I taught at Normal Community West High School, a school almost entirely surrounded by cornfields, the Agricultural Department was fighting to remain in the high school because the school was struggling to maintain above average standardized test scores and the Agricultural Department's material, however beneficial, was not included on these tests. The school's administration was

evaluating the Agricultural Department and considering termination of the program in the school. However, the benefits of the agricultural department were visible and extended beyond the range of standardized tests because they helped relate to the backgrounds of students, and in some cases motivated them to achieve and stay in school.

One of my best students, Bobby, the son of a farmer who had gone to war in Iraq, told me one day that the agricultural department helped keep him in school when he nearly dropped out because he saw relevance in what he learned. He was proud of the work he had done to beautify the school and it helped him feel that he was a part of the school. Students learned to plant trees and care for flower beds and gardens surrounding the school. In fact, directly next to the entrance of the school is a rock garden, designed and implemented by the agricultural department. For Bobby and many other students, the Agricultural Department was the source of motivation for them to achieve in school because it was one of the parts of school they felt most reached their personal lives and had lasting benefits. Luckily, a number of parents and students in the community recognize these benefits and are fighting to keep the Agricultural Department in the school, despite the influence of standardization. The Agricultural Department is a great adaptation to the environment of Normal, Illinois, but one approach to school environment, like the approach standards take, is obviously not sufficient. One approach cannot adapt to all the diverse environments I have witnessed in teaching.

In Chicago, for instance, some of the students at Jones College Prep had never even seen a cornfield and an entire agricultural department would have been ridiculous. The teachers at Jones College Prep who recognized the inability of standardization to relate to their very diverse student body adjusted to their environment differently. They

recognized that they had to liven up the school environment to make it more welcoming and friendly to students. Jones is an old office building that was refurbished by Chicago Public Schools. The school has no gymnasium, and it seems the only major adjustment made in the building to become a school was the addition of lockers. The teachers recognized how bland the school was and decorated the hallways with colorful posters. Teachers rearranged the furniture and lighting in rooms to make the environment more friendly and conducive to education. When the weather was nice, teachers would walk the students a couple blocks to Millennium Park to teach class. These adjustments worked well for Jones College Prep students. Schools need the freedom to adjust to environments to utilize the individual challenges and possibilities each school environment presents.

Not surprisingly, the populations of schools, which are equally broad and complex, experience the same pressures of standardization. Each school contains diverse, inimitable amalgamations of people that are too expansive for standards to represent. Students and faculty display an expansive range of cultures, religions, ethnicities, dialects, sexualities and opinions. Everyone in every school brings his or her background each day. Like the environment, the standards also limit a school in its ability to adapt to diverse populations by placing a tremendous importance on standardized test results.

Today, the high school I attended, Wheeling High School, is pressured to teach to the curriculum of the standardized tests and some of its traditions that I valued most as a student, such as Cultural Day, are already lost. When I was a student, Cultural Day was an especially positive tradition in its ability to recognize and highlight different cultures

with which individual students identified. At Wheeling, our student body was especially diverse and many of the students were recent immigrants. Certain students, including myself, still had relatives in other countries, or considered a country other than the United States home. In order to help students feel welcome at the school, there was an annual Cultural Day in which students collaborated, decorating tables that demonstrated the culture of their home countries.

Students represented thirty or more different countries on Cultural Day and tables covered with art, books, statues, pictures, homemade foods, and music packed both sides of our main hallway. All students traveled from table to table conversing and learning about other countries and cultures. Two of our largest populations in the school were the Mexican students and Polish students. These groups were so enthusiastic about Cultural Day that each year they attempted to make a more impressive display for their country. In my senior year, the Polish students assembled a huge log cabin in the main hallway and decorated it with Polish flags and other cultural items. That same year, the Mexican students brought in eight low-rider bicycles in addition to their table. While students brought items reflecting their culture to school, they were also bringing themselves through these and this made them feel as if they were part of Wheeling High School. Instead of simply attending classes at the school, students understood how important they were to the school and established a bond.

One of my favorite memories of Cultural Day is of my friend Dan from Latvia. He was the only student in the school from Latvia and he had tremendous pride for his country. Dan single-handedly made his own Latvia table and brought two carloads full of flags, books, and clothes to represent Latvia properly. He even brought a small boom

box and demonstrated a traditional dance while dressed in traditional clothes. Even though he was the only one student from Latvia, he recognized his diversity and proudly displayed his culture for Wheeling High School.

Cultural Day was successful because the administration recognized the magnificent diversity among the student population. Rather than work to define it for themselves, through statistics or charts, they empowered the students to share their backgrounds. Cultural Day was a remarkable learning experience that encouraged students to learn from each other and develop as a community. This event was a worthwhile learning experience that assisted in the creation of a community reflexive of individual differences. The insistence on the concrete curriculum of the standards led to the removal of one of Wheeling High School's most important events. It is highly unfortunate that we lose events so essential and valuable to schools because standardization fails to recognize all of the varieties of a valuable education.

The range of possible teaching styles also spans beyond the limits of standards. There simply is not one good or "competent" way to teach. Standards pressure teachers into teaching curricula defined by standardized tests. While much of the material on the standardized tests is important, the pressure to boost test scores limits the flexibility of teachers to adapt classroom instruction to match the students and, in turn, the students lose out on potentially life-changing and enriching experiences.

My two favorite English teachers in high school, Mrs. Gelb and Mr. Blackbird, had opposite teaching styles. Each teacher's style was successful and made an impact on many students, but Mr. Blackbird's style is especially threatened by standardization. Instead of following the standards, he adapted his instructional technique to fit his

students. Mrs. Gelb had a tidy classroom with tables put into exact rows, bookshelves along the walls and a podium in the front center of the classroom. Just down the hallway, Mr. Blackbird removed the door from his classroom and replaced it with beads, removed the tables and chairs and replaced them with yoga mats, and removed the fluorescent lights and replaced them with light from a scattered array of lava lamps and several standing lamps. He did not make himself the apex of his classroom either – we sat in a circle on yoga mats on the floor.

The teaching strategies of both teachers tended to match their classroom environments. Mrs. Gelb followed a set of topics we needed to address each class period and kept us on schedule while Mr. Blackbird made the classroom flexible to fit the desires and interests of his students. I appreciate the Mrs. Gelb's style because it was especially useful for teaching literature. She shared her vast knowledge of literary techniques, and we covered many books in a short time. But I appreciated Mr. Blackbird's style because it helped me feel comfortable in the classroom and made me more willing to share my own experiences with the class and take risks in the learning process.

While Mrs. Gelb would have no problem matching standards and holding the classroom to a firm itinerary, Mr. Blackbird constantly experimented with form to find better strategies of teaching and connecting with students. Because of this, his teaching usually diverged from that of the "typical" classroom that standardization defines. His teaching was an art that went beyond the realm of scientific understanding because the classroom was subject to instantaneous shifts and movements that could not be pre-defined. He used the texts of the class and our writing to help us think more deeply about

ourselves and the environment in which we lived. This process is one that I found so valuable that I have adopted it in my own teaching. Mr. Blackbird showed me the potential that each text has to relate to my life, and the possibility of writing as a means of self-exploration. In class we were encouraged to share our own writing, which was often very personal. It was not uncommon for students to cry in the middle of reading poems, or for the response to a poem to be a group hug. Mr. Blackbird was a published author of several books and shared his writing with us – modeling the behavior he hoped to see, instead of dictating it as the standards do. This made me feel even more comfortable in the class and helped me relate to him as a fellow writer and scholar. His teaching methods went beyond standard’s ability to describe competent methods because his were cognizant of *individual* differences and adjusted to these differences. Though Mr. Blackbird’s teaching style was not standard, it was very effective.

Mr. Blackbird recognized the diversity in the classroom and adjusted his teaching style to match the needs of the students. Of course, the standards would encourage adapting the classroom to fit students’ needs. For example, the Illinois Professional Teaching Standards include a standard on diversity:

**STANDARD 3 – Diversity**

The competent teacher understands how students differ in their approaches to learning and creates instructional opportunities that are adapted to diverse learners.

**Knowledge Indicators - The competent teacher:**

- 3A. understands the areas of exceptionality in learning as defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and the State Board’s rules for Special Education (23 Ill. Adm. Code 226).

3B. understands the process of second language acquisition and strategies to support the learning of students whose first language is not English.
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(ISBE)

Standards are presented by the Illinois State Board of Education in this matrix, boxed form. They recognize the importance of adaptation, but in practice, the standards actually discourage flexibility. Mr. Blackbird's lessons would have never fit a standardized form. Let me illustrate this with an example. To encourage accountability, Mr. Blackbird is supposed to list Illinois Learning Standards addressed in each unit and lesson he designs. Teachers are even encouraged to list the standards they will address on the board prior to each lesson for the students to observe. The matrix form in which the state standards are presented lend to them being used as a checklist. But Mr. Blackbird's lessons could never have fit a checklist. They were crafted to match the needs of students which were constantly changing. Mr. Blackbird could never have picked a certain group of standards to fit his lessons before he taught them because he realized that the classroom was too diverse and rapidly changing to force into a system.

Even in my short time student teaching I have had a similar problem. When I was student teaching in Chicago my favorite lesson I taught was on George Orwell's satirical novella, *Animal Farm*. I planned to teach a lesson comparing the leaders of Russia, Stalin and Trostky, to the two pigs in *Animal Farm*, Snowball and Napoleon, in order to help students begin to understand satire. I chose the following Illinois Learning Standards for the lesson: "1.C.5a Use questions and predictions to guide reading across complex materials," "1.B.5a Relate reading to prior knowledge and experience and make connections to related information," "2.A.5d Evaluate the influence of historical context

on form, style and point of view for a variety of literary works,” “4.B.4b Use group discussion skills to assume leadership and participant roles within an assigned project or to reach a group goal,” “1.C.4e Analyze how authors and illustrators use text and art to express and emphasize their ideas (e.g., imagery, multiple points of view)” (ISBE). I began the lesson by asking if the students knew any background information on the Russian Revolution. I faced a room full of blank stares. So, I tried a new question to spark discussion. I asked if any students had ever visited or lived in another country – gradually, eight students’ hands raised in the air. I was shocked. As it turned out, eight students in my classroom were born in other countries and moved to the United States later in life. A discussion originally intended to compare the leaders of Russia to the pigs in the book turned into a discussion of the differences between the United States and eight other countries, representing nearly every continent. Other students in the classroom were just surprised as I was to learn that so many of their peers were from different countries. We learned of their experiences traveling from other countries to the United States to add context to the book, and to get a better sense of the United States as part of a global community. There was not enough time in the lesson to even begin explaining satire, but when we did get to satire a day later, the background this discussion provided and the perspectives we had established earlier helped us understand satire quickly and catch up with the other classes. In this lesson, I followed the Illinois Professional Teaching Standards, but was not able to follow my Illinois Learning Standards.

The class period only addressed two of the five learning standards that I had intended to address when designing the lesson: 1.B.5a and 4.B.4b. Still, the lesson was

successful. While the lesson did not match my learning standards, I was addressing the Illinois Professional Teaching standard of diversity by “creating an instructional opportunity that was adapted to diverse learners.” In this case, the concrete nature of standards comes in direct conflict with the content of the standards. Because schools are such diverse and changing institutions, standards must include adaptability, but the standards themselves are not adaptable and, therefore, counteract their own preaching. Due to the sometimes erratic nature of classrooms, lessons have and *should* have the tendency to undergo dramatic changes. Standards may allow for flexibility in the designing of lessons, but they still cannot account for the rapid and often enlightening tangents that occur in the classroom.

Luckily, while standardization is threatening teachers’ ability to be fully flexible, many still recognize the importance of diversity in schools and take risks in lessons to account for them. In my last week student teaching at Normal Community West, I showed my English Literature class a ten minute comedic version of *Hamlet* performed by the “Original Reduced Shakespeare Company.” In the play the actors criticize Ophelia’s indecision by having half the audience flail their arms wildly in one direction and shout in piercing voices “Maybe!” while the other half flails in the opposite direction, shouting “Maybe not!” By the prompting of one my students, and with my enthusiastic approval, the entire class copied the audience as soon as the video finished. If I had not been willing to take this risk in the classroom, I would have missed out on this experience which was especially helpful to students who later enthusiastically used the line “Maybe, maybe not” when analyzing Ophelia’s complex character. I am proud to say that some

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classes still contain these moments of incredible connection but unfortunately, they are becoming rarer due to the pressures of standardization.

I do not fault the reasoning behind standardization at all. Advocates for standardization hope to improve the quality of education by making teachers and schools more accountable for what they teach. The website for the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards, a board that sets precedent for standards nationwide including Illinois, states, “The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is rooted in the belief that the single most important action this country can take to improve schools and student learning is to strengthen teaching” (NBPTS). Perhaps this is right. After all, what draws me to education is my sincere belief that one person can make a dramatic effect on students’ lives. In order to do this, our society must find a deeper accountability for education that allows teachers to adapt to the individualities of students. The possibility of change *is* perhaps more necessary now than ever to recognize what is truly essential to education.

In response to this failure of standards, we need to search for a deeper accountability in schools to understand the importance of diversity and flexibility. If we stop looking at education as a solution to a problem and begin viewing it as opportunity in a lifelong process, we might find ourselves in a much better, more positive situation. Why not found education upon a flexible core so that teachers and schools can individualize learning? Students are not merely an 11 inch strip of shaded dots, or percentages of a colorful PowerPoint bar graph. Students are dynamic people with opinions, cultures, traditions, dreams, hungers, and interests.

### **The Poetry Collection**

I have learned in the process of becoming a teacher that reflection is a crucial step to understand situations and work to solve problems. Though the standards I am forced to use in my classroom lack a complete description of the complexities of education, they highlight many of the important subjects. Reflecting upon the standards is a useful start to understanding the demands of teaching. However, most teacher training programs limit reflections to a specific form, and this dictates the content of the reflection. Reflections on standards in Illinois Wesleyan University's education department are written in the traditional form of an essay.

There are lots of problems with this form. For one, reflections, which ought to be personal and should challenge students to think deeply about their experiences, are graded by the professor for content, understanding, and depth, not to mention organization and grammar. Instead of finding deeper meaning in educational experiences, education students often spend their time trying to cater their reflections to the desires of the teacher and to get a better grade. There is usually a page limit that students need to meet that leads students to watering down observations to match a page length, rather than focusing on content. Like most other formal writing assignments in college, reflections usually are not documents that students enjoy writing or find themselves looking at many years later. Some of the alumni of the department I know hated reflecting so much that they had a party in which they burned their reflections. Because reflections are so formal and prescribed, students are discouraged from continuing reflective practice in their own careers as teachers.

There are other methods of reflecting. Instead of requiring a particular form for reflections, such as the two-page essay, I think that student teachers should be challenged

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to experiment with many forms and find a medium that is most suitable to them.

Students should be allowed to write stories, poetry, draw pictures, write songs, or do anything else that captures their learning experience for them. Students should recognize their individual differences and be allowed the freedom to choose a form or style that is most fitting. If students choose a medium that challenges them, they are more likely to find new solutions to problems and have more thoughtful reflections.

For me, the medium I find best for reflecting is poetry. At first, my writing for this project was instinctual. I began writing my reflections for class about Bent Elementary School in 2004, at the same time I began writing poetry. Thus, reflection through poetry seemed natural. At first, most of the poems I wrote were autobiographical, such as “i can trace my history in school,” “i am the child,” “the hotdog haiku” and “capitalization.” In fact, “capitalization” recalls the worst grade I ever received in school, a C-minus for penmanship in third grade when I was first introduced to cursive writing. My handwriting is especially bad. This poem exemplifies my frustration trying to master cursive and my resulting justification for failing. Because I could not master cursive, I resolved to create my own structure by following in my dad’s footsteps and becoming an architect. Obviously, my direction has changed a bit since then, but I still have terrible handwriting, and I am resolved to succeed in spite of it. Writing the poem allowed me to find deeper meaning in this experience because it is a more personal medium than the essay. My poem allowed me to reflect on the trauma associated with the grade, and enabled me relate the structure of cursive lettering to the occupation of my father as an architect.

The process of creating this project was much like Robert Tremmel describes in “Zen and the Art of Reflective Practice in Teacher Education,” an article arguing that more mindful reflection in teacher education, similar to the type of meditation in Zen Buddhism, is necessary. While writing this project, I realized, as Tremmel suggests, that finding my own perspective was one of my first tasks (Tremmel 96). In order to master the craft of teaching, teachers must first understand their backgrounds and become more familiar with their inner selves (98). Similarly, once I felt that I was actively investigating and exploring my own character, it was much easier to branch out and consider a multitude of perspectives.

Considering schools from multiple perspectives was essential to a fair treatment of schools because one perspective is too limited to understand all the factors in education. I wanted to share the brilliant diversity I had seen among all the schools I observed – much of which was not often considered in educational theory I read. I wrote poems about janitors, kickball, the playground, lunch ladies, nurses, parents, and foursquare, to name a few. Sometimes even people with the same position are presented in collection from opposing viewpoints. For instance, there are two opposing instances of principals: the principal in “the principal” is a bear-like man disinterested in students while the principal in “without my desk and executive” is dedicated to learning about his/her students and working for them. The broad diversity of perspectives shows the incredible range of opinions about schools and illustrates just a few of the many possibilities for education.

Many of the voices I include in this project are those that are not commonly heeded in educational research. I have realized, like Sonia Nieto in “Lessons from

Students on Creating a Chance to Dream," that researchers tend to listen less to those who are more engaged in the process of education (380). This is a problem that educators need to address because it not only shuts off a great deal of insight, but it also sends a disabling message to the students - people who educators are trying to instill with a sense of hope and pride in the future. Nieto writes, "A growing number of studies suggest that teachers and schools need to build on rather than tear down what students bring to school" (Nieto 379). I feel that if students leave the educational system valuing their individual differences and hold an idealized vision for the world that it can do the same, then schools have done a great job. There is absolutely nothing wrong with having high expectations for the world, but our society cannot hope that students share these expectations until it views students as capable of marvelous achievement.

During the creation of this project, different poems have appealed to me. I have gone through phases of liking and disliking certain poems. For this reason I believe that each reading of the collection may yield different results. One of the advantages to a collection is that it allows further connections to be explored between poems. Each poem can relate with the other poems like a class discussion working towards a higher understanding. The poem "This is the space in which I learn," is simple, and without being included in a collection that is especially interested in using space as a symbol of possibility, it has little meaning. The following poem is a completely blank page with a note at the bottom in parentheses, "the day the copy machine broke." For the second poem, the blank space on the page allows the reader to imagine the nightmares of schooling without a copy machine, while it also suggests, especially when compared to

the previous poem, the positive opportunities that might be realized if teachers did not rely on copy machines for a day.

The poems form a community of perspectives on education and are so diverse and engaging that a natural theme emerges: the poems as a multitude of perspectives challenging standardization. A poem alone, like the perspective of a student, could not possibly capture the essence or the feeling of the educational system. Standards work by classifying and grouping education, but people are too heterogeneous to fit into educational groups. Many of the perspectives found in poems such as the “janitor,” “nurse,” and “playground,” are outside the range of standardization. Additionally, the poems collectively contain a sense of surprise, of instantaneous change that often occurs at the end of the poems, which standards cannot account for due to their inflexible form.

One of the key features challenging standardization in my collection is the use of the haiku-like structure. This structure is made to surprise the reader and is fitting because with the multitude of perspectives swirling about schools everyday there comes a great deal of surprise. Haikus traditionally consist of three lines that have five, seven and five syllables, respectively. However, it might be better to think of the haiku structurally: the first two lines usually establish the setting of the poem and the third line creatively undercuts or changes the setting dramatically. The third line is similar the punch line of a joke in its matter of surprise and can be considered the result of a meditation. Consider a haiku central to the collection:

a shoebox full of rocks  
a curious boy tilts it  
he holds the ocean

This haiku creates a simple setting with a boy carefully examining a box of rocks while he tilts it. The brevity and simplicity hides the surprising depth – the boy realizes he holds something massive, not the actual ocean, but the potential of the ocean as demonstrated by the noise the rocks create. The careful observation of the boy parallels how I felt as the author of this collection, manipulating and analyzing my experiences. The shift in logic is a surprise that is intended to engage the reader in an internal dialogue, searching for deeper meaning. Additionally, the surprise, or instantaneous change, is the antithesis of standardization. Standardization would have this boy only hear the noise of the rocks sliding in the box and never realize the potential for what is really there. This is because the inflexible structure of standards do not allow for it to recognize anything but the most tangible results of education. Surprise is what education contains that standards can never match.

One of the most apt metaphors in this collection and its struggle against standardization is found in the poem about a child considering the design of a chair. In this poem, a student complains that the design of a chair does not fit his or her body. The discomfort of the mass-produced chair is so distracting that it prevents the child from learning.

the grooves in the seat are mocking  
they were placed to give the impression  
that comfort was a consideration;  
maybe for mannequins

The designers of the chair are much like the designers of standardization: both fail to create something that molds to the human form. The chair might fit a certain individual,

but in this case, and probably in most others, it fails to perfectly fit all students. In response to this, the high school-aged student concludes with a message of hope: “I can make a better chair one day.”

Stylistically, the short poem fits this purpose. The brevity allows me to present an idea and leave the reader to personal reflection. The standards of education, along with the reflections education students typically write about education, tend to be lengthy. If a few words on a page might reach a depth that many pages of writing can reach, they offer a stark, illuminating contrast to the ultimate failure of standardization. It was my hope that I could craft such a style and that the open space on the page might be filled in by the reader if necessary, or just enjoyed as a possibility. Ideally, each poem might gently inspire its reaction, whether that be in the form of a “hmm,” a grunt, a silent reflection, or even a laugh.

While the poem is sometimes a serious meditation on educational standards or an illustration of a perspective, it is also fun. The surprises at the end of the poems are often tied in with humor. The parallel is intentional: the process of learning should be fun. Humor is also seriously lacking from standards, and in my own experience I have found humor to be a powerful force in the classroom. Students especially liked it when I used scenes from Monty Python’s *The Search for the Holy Grail* to give a background on the Medieval Period when I was teaching *The Canterbury Tales*. I found that humor helped the students relate to the lessons and begin to take part in them on their own. One of my students wore a plastic helmet and wielded a blow-up sword in class to demonstrate a scene with the Knight. Humor is a great source of connection with the students.

I will end this paper with the first poem in my collection because I think it is the most representative of my view of education. “if” is brief and yet surprisingly compelling. Alone, this poem could not help looking lonely and incomplete. However, when fully considered in its context, the word expresses precisely what I hope for education: possibility, opportunity, surprise, and a chance for change. Alone, our thoughts on education can hardly trigger a great change, but together, many opinions and perspectives can make an impact. What we read on each page in this portfolio or in each study of education, or in each new standard from the state or national government is not permanent. Everything is subject to this change. If education can recognize the individual differences of learning environments and instructional techniques and utilize these differences to create a stronger bond between students and educators, education might restore hope. Education desperately needs to recognize its own potential for change. It also needs a system that allows it to adapt to all the quirky peculiarities of its members that make it exciting. Great teachers find ways to make education surprising and exhilarating and, after all, it should be – learning should be an investigative process into the unknown with infinite possibilities.

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