

Encouraging Learning in Rural Mexico from a Relational Approach

The author brings forward ideas posited by Kristof and WuDunn in 2009, namely that improvements in education are critical to upholding basic human rights by breaking the cycle of poverty, achieving gender equality, combating disease, ensuring maternal and child health, as well as by challenging the power dynamics of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, and colonization throughout the world

This inquiry refers to inequities as a *poverty of opportunity*, and identifies them as triggers for violence globally, linking the expansion of education opportunities with achieving larger goals for humankind, such as peace, prosperity, health, universal human rights and a sustainable environment .

Specifically, the author adopts a constructionist/relational lens to find ways to encourage learning in a small, rural, coastal town in Mexico where, historically, formal education has not been well regarded or supported, especially for girls. The themes that emerge relate to disharmony between rural lifestyles and the predominant education system, the intersection of poverty and gender inequities in family decision-making, the need for curriculum reform, teacher challenges, and the importance of familial and cultural factors. Suggestions to improve education are noted.

The inquiry employs an action research methodology, documenting the actions taken to encourage a love of learning amongst scholarship students in the community. Reflections are noted and discussed throughout the text, which inform further actions. The author attempts to promote interactive and collaborative learning with the intention to: engage the students in the learning process, help them develop critical thinking, equip them better for the rapidly changing world, and thus create a more just, sustainable world.

Keywords: rural education, collaborative practice, gender inequity, poverty of opportunity, Mexico, colonization, youth, collective culture, poverty, teacher training, scholarships

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Recent sketch of the Education Foundation.





Gathering with volunteers and pictures of scholarship students (becados p. 146)



Dedication

In September 2014, 43 teachers college students disappeared in the Guerrero city of Iguala, allegedly killed and incinerated by a drug gang working with local police and politicians. At the time these rural teachers were protesting the educational reform. I dedicate this manuscript in their honor and to their memory. May this event become the catalyst to address the injustices, inequity and systemic corruption that continues to plague Mexico today, and to work towards creating a flourishing, thriving educational system and country.

Acknowledgements/Giving Thanks

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Chapter One

Encouraging Learning in Rural Mexico from a Relational Approach

This inquiry explores the topic of education. Specifically, I am interested in exploring, from a relational approach, my experience with influencing and encouraging learning among students in a rural coastal Mexican town.

I reside in Vancouver, Canada, where I have worked as counsellor in the past and more recently, in a private university as an educator of students in a counselling program. The past six winters I have lived in a small, rural, coastal community in Mexico that I shall refer to as Pueblo.¹ It has roughly 1500 full-time inhabitants with a seasonal influx of tourists. I enrolled in Spanish classes at a local private school, where I formed a friendship with the founders and learned about the education foundation, part of the language school's non-profit work. That friendship further led me to an awareness of the foundation's struggles to foster and promote local education. I wanted to practice my Spanish to become more familiar with Pueblo, now that I had spent many winters enjoying and reaping the benefits from this experience. Through ongoing conversations with the education founders, volunteer foreign teachers, local students, and families, I came to learn more about the challenges and dilemmas in the local education. Though education is compulsory in Mexico, in daily life I observed many teenage mothers and youth working alongside their parents in stores. I learned that there was no high school (preparatoria) to attend in Pueblo at this time.

¹ *Pueblo* means "small town" in a general sense in Spanish; in the case of this thesis, I have used it as a proper noun to refer to the town I was involved in.

The consensus is that education is not valued by most local families, reflected by students showing a lack of respect and disregard for school. Yet some students had applied to the **Wings Scholarship Program**,² demonstrating a commitment to learning, suggesting they had a more robust commitment to learning and in many cases, a financial need for assistance. I was struck by the wide discrepancy in the level of interest in learning in the student population of Pueblo (less than 20% in the scholarship program).

Intrigued by this discrepancy, I decided to become more informed about the current state of education in the community. By now, I felt connected to Pueblo and wanted to contribute personally to it. After consultation with the education foundation founders I was welcomed to explore this further, and to understand and explain to others the predominant attitude towards education in Pueblo. **How had it come to be that these scholarship students, seemed to derive some value and meaning from formal education, while the majority did not? What made it different for these students and what sense would I come to make of this difference? How might this learning help my work with other students?**

Initially, in order to proceed, I needed to learn more about how historically education was and is currently approached in Mexico, thereby honouring the history, strengths, and challenges not only of Mexico, but of this locality. From there, I began a review of the literature to increase my understanding of the challenges of rural education, both globally and specifically in Mexico. I was already aware that rural education had historically been a serious challenge globally.

² This is the program I become involved with and attended weekly classes with as part of the program.

I took advantage of all opportunities to interact and connect with the scholarship students, both in the classroom and in the community. My local colleagues suggested that I attend the two different weekly additional compulsory classes for the *becados*, (scholarship students) at the education foundation—one for the younger middle school *becados*, and the other for the older high school *becados*.³ Some joint activities involved fund raising events. I had the opportunity to interview some scholarship students, sometimes in groups and other times individually, about whom and what had supported, encouraged, and inspired them to learn. I then created an opportunity for donors of the scholarships and for other volunteers to interact and converse about important and meaningful topics (education, learning, volunteering), while sharing our previous fundraising success. I later had the opportunity to co-teach a few of the extra classes for the scholarship students. Throughout, I continued to foster my relationship with the scholarship students and searched for ways to explore various forms of relational learning and *teachable moments*; spontaneous moments where I could show my insights, my curiosity and love of learning in hope of inviting moments of inspiration. This journey was rich with learning and meaning for me, and it focused my attention on the importance of education—or, more precisely, on what is important about education. This distinction was helpful for me to clarify my own thinking on education, which I speak to in the next chapter.

³ These are the two classes that are obligatory for the scholarship students to attend that I speak about throughout.

Aim of Education

Education is a fundamental human right. It is a pathway to development, tolerance, and global citizenship.—UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

The educational path holds the promise of freedom, the creation of informed and engaged citizenship, and the power to transform (Wang & Zhao, 2011). It should lay an initial foundation for life-long development, improve the quality of the nation's citizens and establish a common groundwork for students to become qualified citizens in the future (Wang & Zhao, 2011).

Gender Inequity as a Challenge to Education

Women hold up half the sky (Chinese proverb)

The interconnectedness of poverty, gender inequity and education is abundantly apparent. A recent beacon for the oppressed who champions the cause of education, Malala Yousafzai, claims education fights poverty and can only happen with peace, enabling safe access to schools (Yousafzai, 2009). Malala herself survived being shot on her way to school in Pakistan, which culminated in her becoming an activist for safe access to education for girls and youth in general around the world, and receiving the Nobel Prize in 2014. According to the charity Free the Children, 57 million children in the world are still denied access to schools (Free the Children Annual Report, 2012). The book and documentary film *Half the Sky* claims that, in 2007, 66 million girls did not have access to education in communities around the world, adding to the ranks of illiterate girls, and increasing the gap between men and women (Kristof & WuDunn, p.231, 2009). Nearly one of every five girls who enrol in primary education does not complete, and three-quarters of those are from ethnic minorities, isolated clans and poor

households (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). Desperately impoverished families are vulnerable to surrendering their daughters to child marriage and prostitution, increasing the likelihood of young girls becoming victims of sex trafficking and honour killings (Kristof & WuDunn, p. 231, 2009). Girls who are denied access to education are more likely to be trapped in a cycle of disease and ***poverty of opportunity***.⁴ I use this term to refer to how the experience of poverty is much more than a harsh economic reality, but also a more encompassing experience of fewer options and overall opportunities.

Benefits of Gender Equity

Education of girls is perhaps the most effective way to encourage smaller family size, greater use of contraception and increased use of hospitals in childbirth (Kristof & WuDunn, p.114; World Bank). Women with formal education are much more likely to use reliable family-planning methods, delay marriage and childbearing, and have fewer and healthier babies (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). One year of female schooling reduces fertility by 10% and a child born to a woman who can read is 50% more likely to survive past age 5 (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). Girls' education ranks among the most powerful tools for reducing vulnerability to HIV/AIDS, to which women are far more susceptible (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). Stephen Lewis claims that gender inequality is driving the HIV/AIDS pandemic (Kristof & WuDunn, p. 138, 2009). In the developing world 95% of births are to girls under 18, with 7.3 million teens giving birth in the developing world (United Nations Population Fund, 2013). Adolescent pregnancy is

⁴ I coin this term to describe a more extensive experience of poverty encompassing both economic poverty and the experience of fewer options, and opportunities.

most often not the result of a deliberate choice, but rather the absence of choices, wrote Osotimehin, the director of the United Nations Population Fund; he went on to say that childhood must never be derailed by motherhood (Osotimehin, 2013). Early pregnancies reflect powerlessness, poverty, pressures from partners, peers, families, communities and, in too many instances, the result of coercion (Kristof, & WuDunn, 2009): a ***poverty of opportunity***.

The single most important way to encourage women and girls to increase and stand up for their rights is to give them an education, and we can do far more to promote universal education in less developed countries (Kristof, & WuDunn, p. 53, 2009). The World Bank has estimated that for every 1,000 girls who complete one additional year of education, two fewer women will die in childbirth (Kristof & WuDunn, p. 114, 2009). It appears that one of the most effective contraceptives is education for girls, although birth control supplies and practices are obviously needed as well (Kristof & WuDunn, p. 135, 2009).

Disregard for women in much of the world is based on attitudes that they play only a sexual or reproductive role in society, and are otherwise not thought to matter. This attitude limits many opportunities for them, among which are attendance, performance and successful completion of school. The greatest challenge for education advocates is to change this discourse. Attitudes of misogyny are deeply embedded in patriarchal cultures, mirrored in our political system, and will change only with education and leadership (Kristof, & WuDunn 2009). Education offers the chance to challenge the power dynamics of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, class, and the influence of colonization (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). Clearly, there is little question that education improves the quality of life for children, women, communities and countries.

Intersection between Gender Inequity and Poverty in Rural Mexico

If you think education is expensive, try ignorance (Derek Bok, p. 167, 2009)

It is difficult to separate the influence of gender inequity from that of poverty when it comes to barriers regarding education. Gender inequity in rural Mexico reflects struggles similar to those in other developing countries. Girls are seen as primarily useful for their reproductive and family role. For cultural, social and financial reasons, girls often do not enrol in secondary school and frequently have children themselves during adolescence. The quinceañera (15th birthday celebration dating back to the Aztec and Toltec times) marking a girl's entrance into young womanhood remains a rite of passage to pregnancy for many girls, reflected in the large school drop-out rate at this time and high rates of young motherhood. These same young mothers transfer their impartial attitudes toward education to their offspring, influencing their children in the same way. Parents also view any additional costs associated with further education for girls as not worthy of their limited resources. Traditional gender roles are challenged by neither the men nor the women, and the cult of machismo for over 300 years still dominates rural family life and communities. Young girls are given dolls to play with while boys are given cars, enforcing traditional gender roles from a young age. Though valuable, the cultural focus on living and seeking happiness in the here and now in Pueblo and other rural Mexican communities challenges educational aspiration that requires a future orientation. The history of Mexico fostered a lifestyle in which getting through each day was enough of a challenge; idle time was enjoyed, nurturing the spirit and the soul (De Mente, 2011).

In 1988, globalization and NAFTA, (the North American free trade agreement), marked the dawning of what became the world's largest bilateral trading relationship between Canada

and United States, later to be expanded to include Mexico (Klein, 2014). It has promised to include everyone worldwide in an eternally rising wave of prosperity, although the gap between a tiny number of very rich and everyone else has accelerated rapidly in every region and in every country (Ross, p. 4, 2011), affecting the most impoverished the deepest. The poor are getting poorer while the rich continue to prosper, widening a gross inequity. Inequality affects us all by hindering economic growth, feeding corruption, and limiting our ability to put an end to poverty. It is currently estimated that over one-fifth of the global population is living in extreme poverty with rural areas accounting for three in every four people living on less than US\$1 a day (Human Development Report, p.25, 2007). This inequity has triggered violent, uncontrolled economic volatility in countries today, the Arab spring uprisings being an example (Ross, 2011). Education is a key for overcoming poverty, war and inequality (Kristof & WuDunn, p.163, 2009).

The most impoverished families appear to spend about 2% of their incomes educating children, even though it is the most reliable escalator out of poverty (Kristof & WuDunn, p.193, 2009). The founders of the “Me to We” charity claim that the interconnectedness of poverty and the barriers that lie between the child and the school door is clear (Me to We, 2013). Their goal is to build a future where every child is free to transform his/ her life in their community and his/her world, a goal that begins with education.

Economic Benefits of Education

Graameen Bank has championed loans for poor women in Bangladesh and other developing countries; these loans help them set up their own businesses and become economically independent. This project has been remarkably successful, suggesting that when

women gain control over spending, more money is spent on education, nutrition, medicine and housing (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009), and that accountability to peers might replace collateral as an incentive for borrowers to repay small loans. It helped create the practice innovations for a micro-credit movement that now serves millions of borrowers around the world (Brown, p.32, 2002).

In the past five years, the government of Ethiopia, historically a non-colonized country, has established policies to directly tackle the low levels of education, particularly in rural communities. It has increased investment in education infrastructure by more than doubling its budget, with the result that Ethiopia has one of the most burgeoning economies on the continent of Africa today (World Bank Group, 2013).

China is also an important model in this regard because it was precisely its emancipation, education, and incorporation of women into the labour force that preceded and enabled its economic take off, unlike India or Africa (Kristof & WuDunn, p.208, 2009). The United Nations, amongst other organizations, believes access to education is recognized as a basic human right and a significant factor in breaking the cycle of poverty (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009).

Some argue for the economic benefits of investing in better health for women and their children globally. However, the best argument is not economic but ethical (Senior World Bank Official, 2007). Economists claim that educational reform is the only possible cure for poverty (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). No country has ever achieved continuous rapid economic growth without first having at least 40% of its adults able to read and write (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). Kofi Annan claims it is not possible to realize our goals of equal opportunity and the elimination of poverty while discriminating against half the human race (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). Study

after study has taught that nothing is known to enhance effective economic development more than the power of women and their full participation (Kristof & WuDunn, p. 185, 2009). Children of educated women are more likely to go to school themselves, contributing to poverty reduction for generations to come (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). Establishing universal access to education is critical for eradicating poverty and hunger, achieving gender equality, combating disease, and ensuring maternal and child health (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009).

Most obviously, educating girls and bringing them into the formal economy will yield economic dividends and help address global poverty (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009).

The Challenges of Poverty in Mexico

With a total population of 122.3 million in 2013 (The World Bank, 2014) the citizens of Mexico and other Latin American countries have come to recognize the large discrepancy between the rich and poor. Mexico's economic performance has not improved since 2000 and compares very poorly with the rest of Latin America (Weisbrot & Ray, 2012). The recession in 2008-2009 wiped out almost all the gains in poverty reduction made over the past decade (Weisbrot & Ray, 2012). The government spent 5.2% of the GDP in 2011 on education, as compared to Belize at 6.6 (The World Bank, 2014). The median age in Mexico was 27.3 years in 2014 (The World Fact Book, C.I.A., 2014). Between 47-52% of the population lived under the poverty line in 2012 (The World Fact Book, C.I.A., 2014). Impoverished families in Mexico spent 8.1% of their money on alcohol and tobacco (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). The personal nature of politics and business along with the friendship factor, have led to the concentration of wealth being in a few families passed on from one generation to the next (De Mente, 2011).

Traditionally, education in Mexico was linked to and influenced by practices of colonization, creating an enormous distrust of education (Mier, Rocha, & Romero, 2003). Circumstances for the indigenous are challenging: most indigenous language speakers, roughly 6% of the total population, live in isolated villages in extreme poverty and have been the last to receive the benefits of mass education (Mier, Rocha, & Romero, 2003). Some of the indigenous groups are at risk of extinction, along with their accumulated wealth of knowledge.

Jalisco, the state in which I conducted my research and one of the five most populated states in Mexico, reported spending 6.1 billion pesos (just under 500 million U.S. dollars) on education infrastructure (Tucker, 2013). The average level of education rose from 8th to 9th grade recently, while the rate of illiteracy dropped from 5.2 % to 3.9%, and the percentage of youth attending higher education rose, even though the number of people living in extreme poverty continued to rise to 9.8% of the population in 2012, more than recorded in previous years (Tucker, 2013).

Democracy and Education

John Dewey speaks about education for freedom. Education performs an implicit role in the pursuit of democracy, justice and freedom according to Noam Chomsky (2012). Paulo Freire, widely known for his work in education, discovered that when he taught illiterate villagers living in slums in Brazil with words which designated current important issues, political action was taken as fast as they learned to read (Freire, 1973). He described the culture of silence of the dispossessed and came to realize that their ignorance and apathy was a direct product of economic, social, and political domination (Freire, 1973). It became clear to Freire that the whole educational system was one of the major instruments for the maintenance of

the privileged culture (Freire, 1973). For Freire, education either functioned as an instrument used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system to bring about conformity to it, or it became the practice of freedom (Freire, 1973). This practice would allow people to deal critically and creatively with their situation and to discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. He believed that freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift, pursued constantly and responsibly and is the indispensable condition for the quest of human completion (Freire, p. 47, 1973).

Evo Morales, the first elected indigenous leader in Bolivia in 2005, accessed the mostly illiterate indigenous population through the union infrastructure, using it to organize and to gather people together. Organizers would then teach the coca farmers, peasants and other union mine workers about the importance of voting and exactly how to vote. The largest voter turnout of indigenous people in the history of Bolivia led to Morales selection, with a voter turnout of 84.5%, and a winning 53.7% of the vote. Morales was the first victor with an absolute majority in Bolivia for the past 40 years (Sivak, 2010). Under his presidency, Bolivia has reduced the proportion of its population living in extreme poverty from 38% in 2005 to 21.6% in 2012, according to government figures (Klein, 2014).

Ross declares that education is intrinsic to action (Ross, 2011). You have to learn about a problem to solve it and it is only when we become aware of the box of conformity that we can learn to be critical of it (Ross, 2011). Engaged democracy gives people power and responsibility, which they might tend to use more wisely and peacefully and decision-making is better when it includes the people most affected (Ross, 2011). By having the power to decide what matters, engaged democracy offers something more extraordinary, the ability to conceive of education

as a project for democracy, freedom and critical citizenship (Ross, 2011). Extreme inequality is connected to political and economic choices.

Today, many citizens worldwide remain politically uncommitted and civically inactive, reflecting a general apathy and high level of mistrust (Kincheloe, 2007). Education fosters democracy, and when available to women, fosters women's political participation. More women with secondary educations are critical to democratic growth. If women became more involved in politics, it is likely that funds would be more judiciously distributed—that they would be given to public health programs and education (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). If we can cultivate independent minds, the democratic process could be more effective. It is crucial to understand the social ends of education to strengthen citizenship and opportunities for all members of society (Cortina, 2011).

Democracy in Mexico

In 2012, Mexico held its most recent presidential election, with 63% of the people voting out of almost 80 million registered voters (Weisbrot & Ray, 2012). The Institutionalized Revolutionary Party (PRI), the ruling party for 70 years up until 2000, garnered 38% of the vote, while the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) garnered 32% of the vote (Weisbrot & Ray, 2012) and the National Action Party (PAN) 26.4%. Twenty-one percent of Mexico's population live in rural areas, amounting to roughly 24 million people. It is difficult to obtain figures on the percentage of rural people voting in Mexico, although it would be hard to argue that democracy was at work there in this recent election (Weisbrot & Ray, 2012). Jalisco, with a population of 6.7 million, (many living rurally, as previously mentioned) reported to have a lower voter turn-out than in the previous election.

Although there was no compelling evidence of significant fraud, irregularities were so widespread and massive that it is impossible to determine who actually received the most votes (Weisbrot & Ray, 2012). Mass media, which is heavily monopolized, played a major role in influencing the outcomes of both the previous and most recent elections and has been instrumental in keeping the left, which is divided between PRD and PRI, from competing on a level playing field (Valenzuela & McCombs, 2007). Structurally hierarchical, authority is primarily used for the personal benefit of those in power (De Mente, 2011). There is general apathy and a high level of mistrust concerning voting, with many people presuming high levels of corruption throughout the entire political system (Weisbrot & Ray, 2012). Until Mexican women achieve political, social and economic equality with men its full collective strength will remain unobtainable.

The Challenge of Environmental Degradation and Sustainability

*If you capture the youth and change the way they think, then you can change the future
(Soroya, Half the Sky, p. 155)*

The current world view based on dominance and depletion is propelling us into an unsustainable depletion of our environment (Klein, 2014). We are trapped in linear narratives that we can expand infinitely by dominating the natural world, believed to be limitless and entirely controllable, and fuel our overconsumption through further exploitation (Klein, 2014). Our economic model based on extractivism is waging war against life on our planet (Klein, 2014). Global warming, fueled by overconsumption, poses a clear and present danger to civilization now on a trajectory towards 4-6 degrees of warming in the near future (Klein, 2014). Economic conditions are more volatile than in the past and a vision of a healthy planet is fast

becoming unimaginable and impossible. We must move away from the slavery of the corporation toward an ideology of shared ownership in order to strengthen the sense of community and solidarity (Suoranta & Vadan, p. 10, 2007). We need a massive mobilization to deal with the most profound threat humanity has ever faced, and reclaim our democracies from corrosive corporate influence (Klein, 2014). For the necessary changes to be remotely possible, we need to think radically differently (Klein, 2014).

A number of scientists have argued that the current global population expansion and accompanying increase in resource consumption threatens the world's ecosystems, as well as straining humanity's ability to feed itself (Matthew, 2013). The current global population is estimated at just over seven billion people, and many environmental problems, such as rising levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide, global warming, pollution, and resource depletion are aggravated by this unprecedented population expansion (Rogers, Jalal, & Boyd, 2008). Indeed, some analysts claim that the most serious impact of overpopulation is its increased demand on the environment (Rogers, Jalal, & Boyd, 2008).

Competition for resources in this competitive environment often fuels conflict, which leads to ongoing devastation and war, furthering the environmental crisis. Inequities, or poverty of opportunity, stratify us into a society of haves and have not's, often triggering further violence. Environmentalists speak about climate change as the great equalizer (Klein, 2014).

Evidence of warmer weather as a result of accelerated climate change is decreasing the numbers of many species to an extinction threshold. Increased demand for energy related to digital technology and overpopulation demands have continued to feed the ongoing

exploration and development of fossil fuels, contributing to global warming, and furthering the environmental crisis. The world needs informed young minds that are conscious, critical, innovative thinkers that can work collectively to meet the enormous challenges of this existential crisis and create different political leadership and a robust social movement away from corporations towards communities (Klein, 2014).

Educationally speaking, there is a need for an altogether new social mentality. The current education system is set up to create insatiable consumers and workers (Gatto, 2007). As long as we are not aware of the ritual through which school shapes us, the consumer cannot break the spell of this economy and shape a new one (Illich, p. 51, 1970). New methods to promote interactive and collaborative learning can help develop critical thinking and decision-making skills, thus equipping the youth of today for the rapidly changing world. The burgeoning global population of youth, with a median age of 30, creates an opportunity for us to believe that fundamental social change must begin with consciousness (Illich, 1970). Power and knowledge are inextricably intertwined (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). Environmental degradation and globalization (global-exploitation) is our civilization wake-up call and has the potential to become a catalyst to attack inequality as its core by finding creative collaborative ways to create a sustainable, just world. Humanity must address the need for redistribution of wealth and climate change is our chance to write the festering wrongs from the past –the unfinished business of liberation (Klein, p. 459, 2014).

Margaret Wheatley (2009) claims that humans have an innate orientation to the collective. We desperately need to feel in relationship with ourselves, others and the earth that provides for us. The notion that we can separate ourselves from nature and do not need to be

in perpetual partnership with the earth around us is a relatively new concept (Klein, p. 446, 2014). Aldo Leopold's radical suggestion that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts and that nature has an inherent value beyond its utility to man proves to be worthy today (Klein, p. 185, 2014). The thinking and paradigms of both the past and present are in conflict with Mother Nature and clearly inadequate to resolve the plethora of societal dilemmas we are being confronted with today. Only new and different ways of thinking can lead us to more innovative and effective ways of responding. We need an alternative world view embedded in interdependence rather than hyper individualism, reciprocity rather than dominance, and cooperation rather than hierarchy (Klein, p. 462, 2014).

Environmental pressures arise almost inevitably from surging population growth, and the best way to reduce fertility in a society is to educate girls and give them job opportunities (Kristof & WuDunn, p.238, 2009). Nearly everyone who works in poor countries recognizes that women are the third world's greatest underutilized resource (Krisof & WuDunn, p.238, 2009). Educating women increases productivity in agrarian communities, according to a 2005 report by the United Nations (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). Moving women into more productive roles will help curb population growth and nurture a sustainable society (Kristof & WuDunn, p. 239, 2009).

Today, worldwide, many educational systems are chronically under-resourced, overly bureaucratic, and financially mismanaged; combined with their largely irrelevant curricula the quality of education is substantially diminished by these shortcomings (McLaughlin & Bryan, 2005). We need to create an educational system that invites students into a coherent narrative about how to protect humanity from the ravages of both a savagely unjust economic system

and stabilized climate (Klein, p. 8, 2014). The urgency of the climate crisis could form the basis of a powerful mass movement, rebuild local communities and reclaim our democracies (Klein, p. 8, 2014). For those changes to be remotely possible, we must collaborate as partners in a grand project of mutual reinvention (Klein, p.23, 2014).

In conclusion, gender inequity, poverty, disengaged citizens and environmental degradation place an enormous responsibility on education to create a more sustainable society. In this unprecedented time, we must examine the role that education can play in the pursuit of democracy, freedom and justice. Establishing universal access to education is critical for eradicating poverty, achieving gender equality, and creating a just sustainable society. Education for freedom and equality has become a global imperative. The question is **What sort of educators and education would best enable youth to: a) function in the present society ; b) contribute to the ongoing creation of a world that is humane, balanced, tolerant, and sensitive ; c) create a world in which we can work collaboratively to deal effectively with the problems we face** (Cortina, 2011)?

Journey Map

In the next chapter I introduce, summarize, and interpret the current literature regarding rural education, initially from a global perspective, and then by narrowing my focus to Mexico, specifically Pueblo, the town in which I conducted my inquiry.

I organize the information from the literature into the various common themes of disharmony with belief systems, the intersection between gender inequity and poverty, curriculum and teacher challenges, and the influence of family factors on education. Throughout, I intersperse my reflections from the literature review, which resonated with my

experience in Pueblo. I was simultaneously reading the literature and working with the *becados*. To create context of my inquiry for the reader, I trace the history of education in Mexico to the present day. I also present the continuously evolving situation regarding education in Mexico as of 2014.

I review historical ideas regarding learning, traditional approaches to education, some of the relevant recent influential ideas in the field of education, and critical pedagogy. I then explore the barriers to rural education. Finally, I conclude by sharing reflections that emerged in the review of the literature, including how it influenced my learning process and, later, my thoughts and actions throughout this inquiry.

In the following chapter (3) I introduce the reader to the constructionist/social relational stance that informs my exploration in this inquiry. I adopt this philosophical stance because it offers a valuable contribution to the conversation of learning and education in general. The importance of collaborative learning and dialogue is explored as an alternative. I continue on in chapter three to introduce social action research as a methodology for my inquiry, compatible with the social relational/constructionist stance.

To set up the context of my inquiry, in chapter four, I inform the reader about the Education Foundation, its history, goals and current status. I also outline the findings from previous surveys completed by the *becados*. I then describe in detail my action research to the reader.

In chapter five, I summarize my experiences and learning for the reader, hoping to convey the joy of this journey. In the spirit of the social/relational perspective, I introduce terminology and vocabulary in its context thereby making the meaning apparent for the reader.

Throughout this inquiry/journey, I incorporate my reflections from this process, at times bringing forth my experiences teaching and counselling in Vancouver. For me these experiences were inseparable from my experiences in Mexico; they influenced each other, and this juxtaposition and comparison enriched my journey, and broadened my resourcefulness. In this inquiry, I hold a feminist-informed perspective, and the importance of educating girls and women is predominant in the literature and in my experience of Pueblo.

Chapter Two

Challenges to Rural Education

The first challenge that emerges when trying to explore the challenges to rural education is that there is no common, consistent, explicit definition of what constitutes rural, creating some difficulties when attempting to review the literature across educational studies (Robinson, 2012). Generally speaking, rural refers to an area with a smaller number of inhabitants subsisting via farming, fishing or locally based resources, with minimal access to education and other resources. Within that, there is an enormous diversity in population size, resources, social relationships, economic status and access to services between different localities (Robinson, 2012). This multiplicity of differences leads to huge differences in education between rural and urban areas.

Despite the fact that rural education has always been one of the most important means of development in economically developing countries (those with less income, less education and lower life expectancy), policymakers have largely ignored it, resulting in rural areas not achieving great gains in development (Gummus & Olgun, 2010). Rural communities continue to have a smaller proportion of children attending school, still lagging behind urban areas (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). The percentage is even lower for women and indigenous populations, many of which are still mostly illiterate. Metro centrism, a term used to describe the inherent urban bias in educational curricula, denies the experiences of rural communities and their needs to celebrate the forms of knowledge contained in the rural perspective (Robinson, 2012).

International development agencies, policy makers and scholars have often promoted and emphasized the importance of formal education for children in developing countries, as they regard it as essential to driving development, given its countless economic and noneconomic benefits (Jensen, 2010).

I now discuss from the literature ways to understand how it is that education in rural communities has continued to struggle to significantly improve.

Economic Complexities

Improving education is viewed as a complex situation with no easy solutions, multiple barriers and numerous challenges. First, financing for rural education is acknowledged as a worldwide problem (Edington & Heard, 1983). Economic development of nations contributes to education for children, and conversely, war-torn countries create major challenges for safe access to schools, especially for girls.

Many developing countries do not have the tax infrastructure and access to funds to contribute more money to education (World Bank Group, 2014). Corrupt politicians and leaders have been known to use what few government funds they have for their own personal interests, creating mistrust of the system (Weisbrot & Ray, 2012). This shows in rural communities frequently dealing with aging school infrastructure, geographical constraints to accessing education for students, and overall poor quality of education.

In addition, there remains a large discrepancy in enrolment between rural and urban education, with the result that development of rural education lags behind that of cities (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010). The report from UNESCO and UNICEF in 2005 showed that, worldwide,

around 30% of rural children of primary school age do not attend school, compared to only 18% of urban children. Living in a rural area lowers the probability of entering secondary school (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010), especially for girls.

Yet another complexity relates to metrocentricism⁵ or the one size fits all model (Robinson, 2012). It is important to consider that what is in the interest of a nation and what serves the interests of its rural populations may not coincide (Robinson, 2012). These differences present real challenges to engage rural youth in formal education.

Isaiah Berlin asks to what extent are those living in rural and remote communities free to pursue their dreams of higher education, and what would count as adequate educational opportunity for those embracing regional and rural lifestyles? (Berlin, 1958).

Cultural Disharmony

One of the first themes to appear in the literature is the idea that conventional schooling is in disharmony with common norms, practices, and values in rural areas (Dunn & Woods, 2006). The predominant education system is set up to be more compatible with urban life and western, imperialist culture.

Traditional schooling emphasizes individual achievement and competition, promoting an everyone out for themselves mentality, in conflict with values in rural lifestyles, which tend to be more connected to collective culture values. This clash of values can lead children to experience cultural incompatibility between school life and family/community life. For example, in rural communities, time unfolds in the context of natural cycles and is open to very loose

⁵ An urban bias

interpretation. Highly prized punctuality in western and urban environments is not common in rural life which, though carrying the past holds a present day orientation. Traditionally, Mexicans have viewed time as moving in a circle as opposed to a straight line- time not used is not lost because it comes around again (De Mente, 2005). Mexicans never attempted to keep activities or events separate in precise timeslots as this was viewed as unfriendly; exact schedules were not part of the lifestyle, time frames were flexible, and hence there was no sense of being late.

Subsistence living is grounded in time, nature, and cultural knowledge, learned through stories and seasonal work cycles (Dunn & Woods, 2006). Individuals and families with rural roots bring a perspective to the classroom that values the family, community and the environment in a particular way that is fundamentally different from the consumer, capitalistic economy. Youth have a strong sense of responsibility to the community and even a stronger sense of responsibility to their family in collective cultures. Nurturing relationships with family and friends is of utmost importance and has a higher priority than working. Value is attached to what is good for the family/group rather than the individual. The boundary between friendship and family can be blurry, with close friends often being assigned family titles (aunt, uncle), accompanying similar loyalty ties. Family and friend are conditioned to have close, frequent physical contact with each other. These deeply held values are often not honoured in traditional education.

As someone raised in the North, I experienced a mostly pleasant, different sense of time in the local community. This new way of approaching time created more moments of engagement with the locals and a *seize the moment* feeling. Relationships were given more

priority than work or schedules. Long lunch breaks in the afternoon are important rituals for family life. Living came first and working came second in the overall scheme of things (De Mente, 2005). These opportunities gave me a feeling of belonging, comfort, safety, and a collective sense of self. I reflected on how this was different from my other life, up in the North where daily accomplishments are a measure of success, and how much I appreciated that difference. At other times, I was frustrated by the frequent tardiness and struggled not to view it as a lack of respect.

Mexican work ethic has typically been described as working to live as opposed to living to work, an attitude usually associated with western lifestyle (De Mente, 2005). Rural Mexicans learned long ago how to live relatively full and meaningful lives having enough food not to go hungry and enough material things to ensure minimal comfort (De Mente, 2005).

Locals greeted each other daily, and there was a familiarity between people that was often absent in my other life. Frequent physical contact with each other, standing and sitting close, touching, shaking hands and hugging were common. I appreciated being known and greeted, and I observed many of the foreigners adopting and benefiting from these friendly gestures. If I felt the need for connection, it was easy to locate. Isolation, even for foreigners, was uncommon.

It is important to understand and recognize that rural families are likely to value formal education differently from urban families. This difference is related to many factors, including the poor value of the education offered and is reflected in their view of formal education and their lack of participation and support in their children's education, common in many rural communities. Students are taught conformity and obedience to authority rather than how to

solve problems and think creatively, and are conditioned to downplay their intelligence and talents in the presence of superiors with authority (De Mente, 2005). They are conditioned to remain passive and wait for instructions from their teachers, resulting in young people having a weak sense of personal responsibility (De Mente, 2011).

Higher levels of education require students to exchange the values of their home and family for a new identity that is based in the ideologies of the education system, claims Bradley Levinson (2009), a professor of education who focuses on Latino studies. He also suggests that the existence of low literacy levels among rural Mexican communities supports the argument that students are not taking full advantage of educational resources (Levinson, 2009). Moreover, the path to education and employment create difficult choices that are complicated for families of rural communities where relationships rather than material success, have been honoured.

Soon after my first arrival in this rural town, I came across the lack of regard that families and children showed toward formal education. Everyone, from the people who ran the Education Foundation to teachers and foreign parents, told me that the youth were not well behaved in class and showed disrespect for their teachers. I saw limited involvement of parents in their children's education, and it seemed quite acceptable for children, especially girls, to drop out of school, even though attendance is legally compulsory. Those who had completed high school and left the community for further education either returned underemployed, just to be close to their families, or simply did not return.

Western democratic values privilege individualism, autonomy and materialism. They encourage each person to live a life that supports thinking for oneself alone and success is

measured by income. These values are inherent in the dominant education system. Most importantly, skills taught in schools are often disconnected from the rural experience; they emphasize the value of individuality and personal ambition. This set of values doesn't just conflict with rural life; it actually poses a threat to the stability and sustainability of rural life (Robinson, 2012).

In addition, higher levels of education do not translate into better lives unless students are willing to leave their home communities in order to reap the full benefits of their educational investment (Meyers 2009). For many, the risk of leaving home and losing a sense of their collective self is too great a loss to consider, much less imagining voluntarily choosing it. If they do choose this path, when they eventually do return home they are likely to struggle to integrate two different worlds and are at risk of then feeling bereft. The choice of whether to take the path to economic improvement in rural communities is complex.

The technological revolution has provided a greater divide between the haves and have-nots. The spreading of Western knowledge technology in English as the business and scientific language around the world, has created an even greater gap for those not literate in English or computers, referred to as the digital divide, which favours Western, developed countries while hindering access to developing countries (Cortina, 2011). The digital divide is a term used to refer to the distance between those who have access to computers and technology, as compared to those who do not. In addition, one barrier that English speakers often overlook is how necessary English literacy is to digital access.

Coupled with this divide is the even-bigger-than-usual generation gap it creates between youth, who have become somewhat technologically savvy, and their parents, who have lagged

far behind. This creates a further divide within family life between the parents and children, also seen in Western culture.

I witnessed many of the local youth using cell phones, mostly texting each other on a regular basis. The phone and text communication was frequent, even while in classes I attended at the Education Foundation. Facebook was commonly used as the main form of communication. I did not see many of the adults using cell phones to the same extent, and when they did use them, it appeared to be for business purposes only. In some cases, cell phones were more easily obtained than land lines, often due to the lack of necessary infrastructure.

Western culture has worked very hard to erase indigenous cosmologies that call on the past and the future to interrogate present-day actions, with long-dead ancestors alongside the generations to come (Klein, p. 159, 2014). The marginalization of oral indigenous knowledge and of spiritual traditions, presents enormous challenges in developing countries with regard to the educational system. The requirement of literacy and proficiency in English for technology and business, disregards other forms of legitimate knowledge, rich with history and experience. Education became the means through which Western concepts and forms of knowledge would be used to reform the undeveloped areas of the world (Escobar, 1995). It has relied exclusively on one knowledge system, the modern western one (Escobar, 1995).

Perhaps the oldest method of learning and teaching is storytelling. Its purpose has been to pass along relevant cultural teachings and learning from one generation to the next, often through elders. Oral language and knowledge, (vulnerable from colonization), that accompany

rural communities need to celebrate the forms of knowledge contained in the rural perspective (Robinson, 2012).

Western education has tried to discredit and eradicate indigenous knowledge about health, medicine, agriculture, philosophy, spirituality, ecology, and education (Kincheloe, 2007). Knowledge of flora and fauna, cultural beliefs, history, teaching and learning informs indigenous lives and contributes to a rich social resource (Kincheloe, 2007). For millions of indigenous people, indigenous knowledge is an everyday way of making sense of the world, and the relationship between self and given locality (Kincheloe, 2007). It is how indigenous people have come to understand themselves and their relationship to the natural world, viewing no separation between them and nature.

Rural children may be more likely to benefit from teaching practices that are respectful of rural cultures and utilize strengths cultivated in rural life (Dunn, & Woods, 2006). The friendly and cooperative aspect of rural life has not received the attention it deserves, despite the fact it lends itself well to the creation of sustainable, healthy communities from my experience. It is clear that rural schools must introduce activities that promote their local life. The hope to do so lies in being able to link the classroom to the outside world so that education becomes more relevant and compatible to local life, thereby supporting rural values, ensuring more buy-in from the local community.

The Intersection between Poverty and Gender Disparity

A dominant theme that appears in the literature regarding improving rural education is related to socioeconomic disadvantage, or what I term a poverty of opportunity. Compounded together, gender and parental social economic status have significant impacts on school

attendance and completion. The intersection of gender and socio-economic disparity and/or gender and rural location create greater impediments for girls' education and pose greater obstacles (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010). Three groups remain significantly underrepresented in higher education: students from low economic status, students from remote areas, and indigenous students (Robinson, 2012). This finding demonstrates the interconnection of rural location, economic status, and culture. Research conducted in various developing countries suggests that the children who are not in school are disproportionately female, impoverished and rural (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010). These children are triply disadvantaged and less likely to acquire the benefits of education.

The Program of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development and UNESCO 2000 millennium developmental goals calls for closing the gender gap for formal education attainment between boys and girls (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010). Seventy-five million children in the world are currently not in school, the majority of them girls (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009).

Economic conditions of the family are one of the most important influences on educational performance for children (Cheung, 2003). A major perspective used to explain the decision by families or households to educate their children is the household reduction framework proposed by economists (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010). This framework recognizes that it is the parents, more often fathers, who make investment decisions that affect all members of the household, including regarding the education of the children, and their decisions are guided by expected differences in future economic returns for the family to schooling for each child (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010). The labour market discriminates against females in developing

countries by restricting access to employment, or paying them lower wages than males, making the perceived financial reward tip very much in favour of educating sons (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010). Cultural differences offer additional explanation regarding parental decisions, suggesting that religious values, patriarchal norms, and gender stereotypes often influence and affect education decisions (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010).

The biggest challenge to educating girls is poverty, as families do not have money for associated school fees, often giving preference to their sons as it is more likely that boys could use the education to maximize their future earnings afterwards (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). Of the 781 million illiterate adults in the developing world, two-thirds are women (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). Educating girls is often viewed as a waste of money and not a wise investment, even more significantly for socio-economically disadvantaged families. Patriarchal lineage and socially constructed traditional gender roles for women which specify their role in life as wife and mother are at the heart of gender disparity (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010). Formal education is not presumed to be necessary for girls or beneficial to the family, given the girls' prescribed domestic roles and frequent early motherhood (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010). Parents may find school to be irrelevant or in conflict with community. There may also be a cultural bias against educated girls, who are perceived as being too willful and self-sufficient, which will make it more difficult for them to find husbands (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). Girls may also be confronted by gender-stereotyped curricula, teachers' low expectations, and limited course options (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009).

Another critical issue, particular to rural education of girls, is safe access to schools, as they can be targets for acts of sexual and other forms of violence when they walk to and from

school. Currently war-torn countries have epidemic levels of sexual violence against women. Rape becomes a tool of war in conservative societies precisely because female sexuality is so sacred (Kristof & WuDunn p. 83, 2009).

This legitimate concern invites parents to be more likely to keep their daughters at home and in safe proximity. Global peace would clearly offer more safety for females. Safe access to education provides girls with self-confidence, which is critical in the development of essential leadership skills that empower women to take active, decision-making roles in their homes and their families (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). It enables women to participate as fully qualified citizens, and gives societies the many benefits that flow from the participation of all. These attitudes make visible the gender expectations and constraints for girls to attend school.

I became aware that many young teenage girls in Pueblo were not attending school and often had a young child. In contrast to Northern cultural norms, this situation did not appear to be judged harshly or perceived as shameful, and was more of the norm. Until 1970 the government urged women to have as many children as possible. I became aware of the *macho* attitudes inherent in this community and the accompanying gender roles. Women were mostly in the home cooking and cleaning or working at similar jobs outside of the home. Men were involved in manual labour outside of the home or otherwise seen socializing with other men. It was rare to see men actively involved with their children, delegated to mothers, and I made sure to favourably comment on it whenever I witnessed it.

Though children seemed to garner a lot of affection in general in Pueblo, many young mothers do not play with, teach or interact with their children, either attending to their phones,

texts or popular television soap operas. I wondered how this lack of attention might influence children's development?

Neighbourhood children were often seen playing happily on the road, unsupervised. Though I could appreciate children playing together mostly in harmony, I was concerned about the lack of supervision at times. I did notice the natural tendency they had to help each other, though limited to their own circle of family relations and friends, and did not see gender distinctions being made among playmates. Older children typically are put in charge of younger ones. Teenagers were often entrusted with plenty of responsibility to help in their family business, sometimes driving vehicles and motorcycles while under driving age. This was regarded as an acceptable pragmatic decision and only permitted within Pueblo.

The small rural community I explored did not contain a high school initially, so for those who did manage to attend, riding a school bus was required. There unfortunately had been accidents in the past where youth had died from car-pooling on this journey. This had left a scar on their families and the community, further contributing to lower enrolment and less completion of high school.

Children who are born into families with greater financial resources are more likely to be enrolled in and stay in school. Often, urban families have greater incomes and wealth than rural families and with greater economic resources available there is more likelihood of children becoming educated. Educated parents have more economic resources to invest in their children's education (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010). Children who live in urban areas are more likely to eventually reap the benefits of their education because of the greater number of job opportunities they have access to. Research has found that children who live in urban areas

have higher levels of schooling than those living in rural areas. This suggests that the economic deprivation of rural families largely accounts for the lower prevalence of school attendance among their children (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010). Additionally, the larger the family, the less likely parents are to send their children to school due to resource dilution (Cheung, 2003).

The gap between rural and urban education is evident in Mexico. Within the rural community of Pueblo, those families who had more financial resources promoted education and its importance with their children. In general, I found that those youth who were in the scholarship program, especially the girls, had more involved and supportive mothers, despite these mothers being largely uneducated themselves (see survey results in chapter four). Strong parents, grandparents and close family friends were able to imbue a positive view of education and the ambition to achieve something better for themselves and their families.

Educated parents have more economic resources to invest in their children's education and place a greater personal value on education for their children (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010). Educated mothers are willing to educate their daughters because they are aware of the social benefits that formal education confers upon them, as they themselves have likely overcome barriers to obtain education (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010). Mothers are more likely to spend money on their children's education when given control of family spending (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010). This chain of opportunity is thus likely to continue, contributing to poverty reduction for future generations.

Curriculum Reform and Teacher Challenges

The literature speaks to the importance and need for curriculum reform (Wang & Zhao, 2011). Teaching practices and curricula require more flexibility and are the internal force for the success of curriculum reform (Wang & Zhao, 2011).

The rural setting presents unique conditions that influence the availability and delivery of school services. A perennial theme in rural education literature is the problem of attracting, preparing, and retaining quality teachers in rural localities (Robinson, 2012). Rural schools tend to have high teacher turnover, a high percentage of inexperienced or poorly prepared teachers, inadequate resources, large class sizes and poor facilities (Sheridan, & Semke, 2012). Rural teaching employment, not regarded as desirable, makes attracting qualified teachers challenging. Isolation, lack of resources and support, and difficult working conditions complicated by bureaucratic hurdles are significant deterrents to recruitment (Sheridan, & Semke, 2012). Teachers are often not willing to work in schools that are ill-equipped and those who do come often bring with them outdated knowledge of teaching practices and methods. In addition, smaller communities often have less bargaining capacity and political clout, so they receive fewer federal funds.

The Importance of Place

The amalgamation of teachers' personal and professional experience is the core from which teachers develop both the curriculum and their teacher identity (Robinson, 2012). Teacher identity is influenced by one's rural or urban background. Those teachers who hail from rural communities are better suited for teaching in them and more likely to understand close teacher-student-community relationships (Preston, 2012). However, even if they possess

cultural knowledge of rural areas, rural teachers are provided with limited access to quality staff development and professional advancement opportunities, which means that they are usually required and expected to teach subjects outside of their areas of knowledge (Preston, 2012). Teachers from urban areas may not always teach in ways that are compatible with the rural lifestyle. Teachers originally from and educated in urban areas, feel unprepared to meet the range of educational, social and behavioural needs of students in rural areas (Sheridan & Semke, 2012). Low salaries for teachers, as told to me by the Education Foundation directors, further marginalize the importance and enormity of their task. Without adequate supports in place, it's predictable that these circumstance lead to the high turnover of teachers in rural areas, evident in Pueblo. Teaching was not viewed as a desirable profession, according to the Education Foundation directors, though a few of the scholarship students indicated they wanted to be teachers.

The low salary, large class size, and limited resources available to teachers were apparent in Pueblo. It was clear that they had more than one challenge to overcome in order to find their work meaningful, satisfying and rewarding.

Few of the local teachers were from this community, and they often commuted from a nearby village, or rented homes in Pueblo in which to stay during the week. Those teachers who were originally from Pueblo were familiar with their students' families, which seemed to work in their favour at times. This situation created some challenges for them though, when it came to having a sense of privacy, boundaries, and a clear role; for example, some had their own children in their class. The number of programs and courses offered was limited by the sparseness of the population and students experienced compromised educational options.

Many rural schools are unable to offer curriculum that might be considered useful to the rural lives of the local student population. Primary and secondary school curriculum standards are less adapted to rural life and may seem irrelevant to students and teachers alike. Much of the compulsory, standardized federal curriculum and textbooks offered have a strong urban bias, founded on the premise of the superiority of urban lifestyles over rural ones. Deficit models that marginalize rural life have typically purveyed current rural education policymaking (Robinson, 2012). This is further evidenced by the majority of the research on education being conducted in urban sites (McLaughlin & Bryan, 2005).

Metrocentrism is reflected in a dynamic tension between the goals of the urban teacher and the everyday, rural social patterns of parents. Teachers from outside of the community have to learn about parents' perspectives on education. Creating curriculum more suited to the realities of rural schools and their locality is required. Rural children would benefit from teachings, practices, and materials that are respectful of rural culture and that utilize strengths cultivated in rural life (Dunn & Woods, 2006).

Honouring and including their funds of knowledge is critical in teaching rural communities, which carry rich cultural legacies (Robinson, 2012). Teachers insisting on the importance of the place-based, situated knowledge that rural students bring to the classroom would help students find a relationship between personal interest and subject matter, finding it easier to learn. Promoting a child-centered philosophy of education, with objectives of student development and fostering students' comprehensive abilities would be helpful (Wang & Zhao, 2011). Curriculum standards should be adapted so that the vast majority of students can,

through hard work, achieve the basic requirements for citizenship and focus on fostering students' desires and abilities to engage in lifelong learning (Wang & Zhao, 2011).

Familial Factors

The research speaks to the relationship between the interplay of familial influence/factors and educational outcomes. One study conducted in Britain has shown that the amount of time parents read, as well as the encouragement they give to their children to read, directly benefit children's educational outcomes (Cheung, 2003). Especially around age 11, children were more apt to perform at higher rates throughout their education if they read outside of school (Cheung, 2003). Family size was related to the amount of time children spent reading: the larger the family, the less likely a child was to read outside of school, possibly due to a larger number of siblings/playmates. Mothers tended to read more frequently to their children than fathers, and that appeared to be an important indicator of educational success (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010). Educated mothers were more willing to educate their daughters, because they are aware of the social benefits that formal education conferred upon the individual, and well educated mothers had themselves overcome barriers to education (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010). Mothers' education is more important than fathers' when it came to the likelihood of children pursuing education (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010).

Parental involvement and attitudes play an important role in mediating inequities in education (Cheung, & Andersen 2003). There is some evidence to suggest that educational attainment is highly correlated to parental education level-that parental education provides a favourable learning environment, encourages higher educational aspirations, and models the placing of a greater personal value on education for their children (Mier, Rocha, & Romeron,

2003). Parental participation and cooperation in children's educational experiences is positively related to successful student outcomes (Sheridan & Semke, 2012).

The more traditional the family, the less likely they are to invest in education, and the larger the family, the less likely parents are to send their children to school, due to resource dilution (Mier, Rocha, & Romero, 2003). In larger families, older siblings are more likely to work, creating more economics resources, enabling younger siblings to be more likely to attend school to contribute to households through participation in the formal labour market (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010). The allocation of children to productive activities, often taking on the parental role in the home, is a common familial survival strategy for poor families, with parents perceiving education as a competing activity to family survival (Jensen & Kazeem, 2010).

Decades of research findings have pointed unequivocally to the relationship between parents' attitudes, behaviours and actions, and students' learning and academic success (Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). Time and scheduling challenges for rural parents are inhibiting factors for parental involvement. Home-school partnership activities with rural parents demonstrate less frequent participation than urban ones (Sheridan & Semke, 2012). One study showed an increase in children's expectations about graduating from high school due to parents' involvement (Sheridan & Semke, 2012).

Government initiatives to improve rural education could benefit from finding ways to encourage parents to be more actively involved in their children's education. Offering a more relevant curriculum by well-resourced teachers would be a good start as well as investing more money towards vital public services, like health care and education.

Reflections

I became aware that the predominant style of teaching was largely boring the students I worked with and they were not engaged in the learning process. The authoritarian, hierarchical atmosphere in the school stifled the involvement of students in their learning process and their ability to take initiative in making decisions and doing things on their own. I too struggled to focus and pay attention in the classes I observed and could not see the relevance of the topic being presented. Many of the students talked with each other during class and seemed eager for class to end. It was a rare moment to witness students or teachers demonstrating any inspiration for the topic or learning itself.

I was surprised at the lack of parental participation in the schools in Pueblo, but in this way came to understand the history of the disregard towards formal education that the youth expressed. I did not see parents participate in helping their children with homework, which might have been, in part, due to low literacy levels among parents.

For some of the less privileged families, having their child working alongside them clearly made practical sense, especially with the seasonal employment lifestyle being common in Pueblo, though it was often the girls I saw doing this, not the boys. I did not see adults or youth reading, and did not experience much curiosity being expressed. Future-oriented thinking was not very prevalent in my experience, and I became aware of how this influenced the value not placed on education: in order to value education, one must have a sense of the future. The practice of reflecting also seemed foreign to many of the youth in this community in my experience. I wondered how the focus for day to day survival influenced this.

After coming to understand many of the barriers and challenges in rural education, at times I felt overwhelmed by the enormity of the task to find ways to encourage students to learn. How to go on from here.....?

History of Education in Mexico

The history of education has its roots intertwined with colonization (Dardon, 2010). Pre-conquest education was offered informally through elders and contained a writing system, language, art and culture (Dardon, 2010). After colonization, the Catholic Church took responsibility for controlling the Spanish education of the indigenous population (Dardon, 2010). The purpose of education was to convert and assimilate the local population and was forged in a culture of physical, intellectual, and spiritual oppression and abuse over many centuries. (De Mente, 2011). The church conspired with the military and the Spanish descendants of the country and deliberately kept the indigenous and Mestizo (mixed ancestry) outcasts ignorant, emotionally dependent upon them and powerless politically, leaving them in a state of poverty (De Mente, 2005).

After the independence of Mexico in 1810, an event still actively celebrated today, the Mexican government established secular education (Dardon, 2010). After the Mexican revolution of 1910-1917, Benito Juarez, the first indigenous (Zapotec) president, made primary education compulsory and free. The goals were to provide educational access for all and to raise the literacy rate. Thereafter, public education became state-run and there was a complete separation between religion and education (Dardon, 2010).

Change in education continued into the early 20th century: Mexico saw considerable expansion of public education, with the 1920's becoming the most significant decade in public

education in all of Mexico's history (Cortina, 2011). The Mexican ministry of education was created in 1921, with the goal of achieving national unity (Mier, Rocha, & Romero, 2003). The chief social aim of education was to create cohesion and a national identity, which was thought to be achieved only by means of literacy in Spanish (Cortina, 2011). The first Minister of Education promoted the Spanish language, which was in keeping with the consolidation of the Hispanic political power (Cortina, 2011).

The government created libraries, free textbooks were offered, and teachers were sent to help in the rural areas (Mier, Rocha, & Romero, 2003). During the 1930's the government developed a socialist ideology that focused on providing both urban and rural workers' children with greater educational opportunities (Mier, Rocha, & Romero, 2003).

With rapid urbanization and industrialization, from the 1960's to 2000, the Mexican government made great efforts to extend education to the most disadvantaged sectors of society, in particular rural and indigenous communities (Mier, Rocha, & Romero, 2003). The rapidly expanding urban population allowed for an expanded education system, with the goal to achieve national unity through mass education (Mier, Rocha, & Romero, 2003). Its aim was to build a more democratic society, based on liberty, justice and peace (Mier, Rocha, & Romero, 2003).

Education levels increased, and the number of students and teachers increased. The national teachers' union, SNTE, was formed in 1949 and became a powerful voice in education. The 11 year plan promoted by the federal government , from 1959-1970, was designed to provide primary school facilities for all Mexican children and called for the distribution of free

textbooks to all children (Mier, Rocha & Romero, 2003). Schools were to be built in places with over 1000 inhabitants (Mier, Rocha & Romero, 2003).

Between 1970-73 the federal law of education sought to modernize the population, and from 1960–1980 there were thought to be 3 million students involved in secondary school (Mier, Rocha & Romero, 2003). However, the initial plan prioritized the needs of the middle class and the urban working class over those of rural children, setting the trend of privileging urban education (Mier, Rocha, & Romero, 2003). In the 2000 Census, one half of the rural youth completed primary school and less than one half enrolled in secondary school (Mier, Rocha, & Romero, p. 32, 2003).

Recognizing the lag in rural education, in 1971, the Mexican government launched a program establishing an informal set of schools intending to improve education in 30,000 Mexican rural communities with small populations (Zehr, 2002). It was run by CONAFE, the national council for education under the umbrella of the federal Secretary of Public Education (Zehr, 2002). Quite importantly, this program offered to pay students a stipend for attending university to become teachers. In exchange, the teachers would agree to teach in small rural communities for two years; however, 15% of the teachers quit before finishing the contract (Zehr, 2002).

Another educational program pioneered in the 70's, the *telesecundaria* middle school, was created to allow more access to education for rural communities. It used television as a primary way to provide education in remote regions. Students watched a 15-minute program broadcast by satellite from Mexico City each day, and followed up with 30 minutes of related exercises or discussions with the teacher. Unfortunately, many teachers did not undergo the

necessary preparation and training to provide adequate support for this initiative. The programs were more suited for urban students and had a very strict time schedule (Zehr, 2002). The ability to engage rural students in this form of learning was questioned by Mexican educators, although it was considered to be better than nothing for rural communities by them.

Although attendance of children aged 12-14 almost doubled by 1990, during the economic crisis and devaluation of the pesos of the 80's, there was a reduction in the rate of expansion of new schools (Mier, Rocha & Romeron, 2003). Cuts to education were reflective of the economic crisis at the time.

In the 1990's, local women's organizations were empowered by the transnational women's movement; they then became the force that put pressure on educational authorities to include gender equity as a goal in national education plans (Cortina, 2011).

Although the presence of women is increasing rapidly in higher education in Mexico, their participation and voices are not predominant in political arenas, where the national education plans are established (Cortina, 2011). The deeply ingrained concept that there is a man's world and a woman's world makes it difficult for gender equality to become the norm.

In 1992, the Mexican legislature decided to extend compulsory schooling from grade six to grade nine, so in 1993, secondary school education became mandatory. However, resources available to fund this mandate were insufficient, so pressure was applied by the federal government on the state to comply with the law (Mier, Rocha & Romero, 2003). However, in practice, the law was largely ignored, the mandate continued to be underfunded, and it did not significantly improve attendance.

Current Mexican Education

The complexity and enormousness of the barriers to promote the value of education became very apparent to me in my daily encounters with the community. These barriers have been documented by research.

Despite impressive gains in the enrollment levels over the previous 40 years, significant interrelated problems plague the Mexican education system (Mexico Education, The Library of Congress Country Studies, 1996). By the end of the 20th century, the problems of basic education were apparent, with differences in educational attainment persisting today. The disparity in educational opportunity is reflected in highly disparate national literacy levels across the divides of urban/rural, indigenous/Spanish-descended or mestizo groups, and gender groups. There is still also a lag in rural education as compared to urban education, and although girls' enrolment is increasing in earlier grades, they are still dropping out at a much higher rate than boys in secondary school. Rural villages with fewer than 1000 inhabitants lack even a primary school, and agricultural and migrant children largely do not attend school (Mier, Rocha & Romero, 2003). A relatively small proportion of rural children attend high school (Mier, Rocha & Romero, 2003). The numerous deficiencies leading to this situation include low faculty salaries, limited research opportunities, and inadequate instructional facilities & curricula (Mexico Education, The Library of Congress Country Studies, 1996). The indigenous are still largely illiterate, do not attend school and are rapidly declining in health. Many primary and secondary school-aged students, especially in rural areas, fail to complete their education, and instruction quality remains low (Mexico Education, The Library of Congress Country Studies, 1996). For the indigenous, unfavourable conditions, such as language barriers, and

socioeconomic disadvantages are still the significant barriers to obtaining education, although in some schools they are now teaching in the local indigenous language.

Although operation of all non-university education was handed over to the states in 1993, the educational system continues to be overly centralized and subject to bureaucratic encumbrances (Mexico Education, The Library of Congress Country Studies, 1996). The federal government (through the Secretariat of Public Education) retains the authority to establish national policies and to assist schools in poor districts. A revamped curriculum places greater emphasis on reading, writing and mathematics. The states have agreed to commit additional resources to improve teacher salaries and training (Mexico Education, The Library of Congress Country Studies, 1996).

Each state has at least one public university, often having campuses in different cities (Mexico Education, The Library of Congress Country Studies, 1996). Teacher training institutes are separate from general universities and generally offer a four-year curriculum (Mexico Education, The Library of Congress Country Studies; CIA World Factbook, June 1996).

Approximately 19% of all school aged students in 1995-96 were in secondary school and approximately 5% of all students were in postsecondary institutions (Mexico Education, The Library of Congress Country Studies, 1996).

Students' access and retention remain a critical concern for educators. Nationally, in 1989, only 55% of students successfully completed their primary education, and graduation rates at this level were only 10% in many rural areas (Mexico Education, The Library of Congress Country Studies, 1996). According to the 1990 census, 86.8% of those over 15 years of age indicated they could read and write (Mexico Education, The Library of Congress Country Studies, June

1996). Mexico is the sole OECD, (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) country where 15-29 year olds are expected to spend more time in employment than in education, while more than 20% of them are neither employed nor in education or training (OECD, 2014).

The 2000 census shows primary education, along with rural education, is far from universal, with only 64% of Spanish speakers having finished primary school and 44% of the indigenous (Mier, Rocha & Romero, 2003). Education expansion favoured urban areas, due to the rapid urban population growth.

Though the gender gap in education has decreased as a consequence of the general expansion and accessibility of schools, there are still fewer girls attending secondary-level education (Mier, Rocha & Romero, 2003). Gender continues to make a difference in the probability of school completion and enrolment: girls aged 12-14 are less likely to enrol in secondary school due to cultural patterns and scarce family resources (Mier, Rocha & Romero, 2003). Within the teaching arena, women teachers comprise 95% of pre-primary school teachers, 67% of primary school, 52% on mid school, and 46% of secondary schools (OECD, 2014).

Various studies on rural education in Mexico speak to the ways in which schools in these areas often do not recognize the needs of the community they serve (Meyers, 2009). Often, rural students resist the pressure to adopt the values embedded in formal education, reflected in lower attendance in school and lower literacy levels among rural Mexican communities.

Though education is technically free, schools frequently claim that their funding has fallen short and they request money for school supplies, uniforms, inscription costs, and other hidden

additional costs from families, including obligatory purchase of raffle tickets and costs for classroom furniture.

In 1995, Santiago Levy organized an experimental antipoverty program in Campeche state offering financial incentives to families named *Oportunidades* (opportunities). Its essence was to pay impoverished families, in particular mothers, to keep their children in school and take them for regular medical check-ups (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). The program was so successful it was extended to other states. After three years Mexican children living in rural areas involved in the program increased their school enrolment by 10% for boys and 20% for girls, as well as having more balanced diets and receiving improved medical attention (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009).

I became aware that the Oportunidades program was also active in Puebla. However, it had very stringent financial requirements for acceptance, (very low income and single parent families) limiting its usefulness for families in Puebla.

In Mexico students generally attend school for 200 days, 4 hours a day, with the school year running from late August to early July. Kinder school is from age 3–5. Primary school in Mexico consists of grades 1–6, middle school (known as *secundaria*) grades 7–9 and high school (known there as *prepar*, or preparatory school) grades 10-12. Students rarely study English until *secundaria*. There have been national learning standards and goals, which you can see at www.pnieb.net/documentos/index.html developed for teaching English from the 3rd year of kinder school up to middle school. Though the goals and a rough syllabus have been established, there is not currently an existing English curriculum until 7th grade. For the book project (mentioned later), there is an attempt to try to align to books with these standards and

the natural language method will be used, learning language in context. Recently the government imposed two more hours of schooling without offering teachers additional compensation.

In my experience, many of the youth did not speak much English and showed little desire to learn it, though it seemed obvious to me that fluency in English offered more economic possibilities in the town due to the flourishing tourism. In some indigenous communities where children are bilingual (in their native language and in Spanish, not in English), primary school is taught both in Spanish and the local language (such as Nahuatl, Mayan, and Zapotec). Today, cultural diversity has become an acceptable part of citizenship.

A recent change in the federal government has provided an opportunity to pass yet another educational reform. In early September 2013, Mexico's Senate passed a series of sweeping reforms aimed at the country's educational system. It introduced standardized testing for all hiring and promotion of teachers, and set out to undermine the historically powerful teachers' union (SNTE), which had a history of pervasive nepotism (Smith, 2013). During this time, the teachers' union strongly opposed efforts to decentralize curriculum and program management and to retrain teachers (Smith, 2013).

The legislation sparked controversy: the government claimed it was seeking more accountability from teachers, while striking teachers claimed the reform discriminated against teachers from poorer, more indigenous regions. The union questioned whether it might be the start of the gradual privatization of the Mexican education system. They also criticized the measures by citing lack of proper consultation, and claimed that the reforms were ill thought-out, vague, and rushed through (Smith, 2013).

Though I understand the government's desire to create more accountability from teachers, I question how they are proposing to evaluate it, and its disregard for local knowledge.

Other changes in education reform are related to giving more power to the local school authorities to make necessary changes in curriculum, a step in a positive direction.

The historic and current polarized politics regarding education in Mexico have led to inflexibility and a lack of collaboration between key players. There is a need to engage the consumers and families around their concerns and desires, so all can see the value in formal education and support public education for their children.

The overall standard of public education in Mexico ranks last of the 14 OECD countries, though investment in education is similar to the OECD average (OECD, 2014). This deficit is primarily due to chronic and sustained government underfunding. The government, until now, has earmarked few resources to evaluate the school system (Mexico Education, The Library of Congress Country Studies, 1996). Evaluating teachers will not reverse the inequality or generate social mobility (Smith, 2013). Nor will it address the inherent problems with standardized curriculum which has stifled student creativity.

Mexico signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, inaugurating their membership into the global economy. For many, education has become a process of homogenization, spreading Western markets' knowledge and technology in English (as the business language (Cortina, 2011)). As a result, there is a growing inequality, greater concentration of knowledge, and a growing digital divide favouring western developed countries (Cortina, 2011).

Today, young Mexicans are poorly prepared to meet the challenges of the global economy. This recently was confirmed when a scholarship student in Pueblo applied for medical school and did not pass the necessary exam, though this particular student was considered someone with great promise because of her commitment and participation in education and good grades. Good skills in mathematics and Spanish are the main requirement and, in this community, many students do not have the necessary level of literacy in either subject.

Historical Ideas Pertaining to Education and Learning

John Dewey's most enduring influence was in the field of education.⁶ He believed that each individual had something to contribute, and claimed that we learn by doing and through interaction. He was critical of the separation between knowledge and action and believed in the unity of theory and practice, emphasizing experience, experiment and purposeful learning—well-known concepts of progressive education (Dewey, 1938). According to Dewey, we all have multiple ways of learning/knowing. Furthermore, Dewey believed that the role of teachers was to facilitate learning as coaches and guides in students' learning activities.

Dewey criticized formal education for transmitting to the new generation the attitude of docility, receptivity and obedience in students. In the traditional system, teachers were the agents through which knowledge and skills were communicated and rules of conduct enforced,

⁶ As a point of interest, John Dewey visited Mexico as the head of the Trotsky tribunal in 1937 in which Trotsky was declared innocent.

holding a position from above and outside. This system was based on the assumption that the future would be much like the past, rather than being reformulated constantly.

In contrast, Dewey promoted the expression and cultivation of individuality and learning through experience rather than through texts and teachers. He emphasized the freedom of the learner and saw educators as those who knew how to utilize their surroundings to contribute to building worthwhile experiences. He claimed it was incumbent upon the teacher to make education and life experience come together, with learning becoming integrated as knowledge. Inquiry-based learning, in which students are presented with a problem or question to work through and solve, builds on the philosophical groundwork laid down by John Dewey (1916). Various other reformers followed (Johnson, 2011).

Vygotsky (1962) wielded considerable influence in the field of educational psychology; he stressed the importance of seeing each child as a unique individual who learns in their distinct way, and repeatedly stressed the importance of past experiences and prior knowledge in making sense of new situations or present experiences (Vygotsky, 1962). According to Vygotsky (1962), all knowledge and newly introduced skills are greatly influenced by each student's culture and family environment. One gains knowledge as one develops by way of social interactions with peers and adults, according to Vygotsky. Mistakes were seen as crucial to this process, impacting future learning and becoming an integral part of a child's development. Additionally, Vygotsky believed that humans learn best in cooperation with others, through the use of the primary tool of language. He maintained that learning occurs just above a student's current level of competence or more knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1962). By building interest and engaging the learner, the

teacher keeps learning focused to keep the student from becoming frustrated. The teacher models ways of completing tasks which the learner can then imitate and eventually internalize, while also providing the necessary support and direction.

The implications of Vygotsky's and Dewey's theories for educators are several and significant. Student-centered learning, providing relevant and engaging information, giving consideration of local knowledge and cultural context, understanding the importance and the participation of the family, and creating collaborative learning activities are all ideas consistent with the information emerging from the literature review. I came to understand that the theories of Dewey and Vygotsky were certainly relevant to classrooms in Pueblo.

Ivan Illich (1970), known for his radical and critical discourse on the practice of contemporary education, challenged the ideas both of the benefits of compulsory education and of schools as places of learning. He stated that for most youth, the right to learn is curtailed by the obligation to attend school (Illich, p. vii. 1970). Illich pointed out that the paradoxical belief that universal schooling was absolutely necessary was most firmly held in those countries where the fewest people have been and will be served by schools (Illich, p. 7, 1970). At the time, he ascertained that two-thirds of all children in Latin America leave school before finishing the fifth grade (Illich , p.7, 1970).

According to Illich, the pupil is schooled to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new (Illich, p.1, 1970). There is a major illusion, he said, which the school system rests on: that learning is the result of teaching (Illich, p. 29, 1970). The institutionalized values that schools perpetuate are quantified ones, where everything can be measured, including

imagination. In a schooled world, the road to happiness is paved with the consumer index, encouraging a materialistic view of success in formal education; he also said this then initiates the mythological need for unending consumption (Illich, p.29, 1970). Illich proposed the creation of skills centers as an alternative to traditional schools, and claimed that many students, if given incentives, programs and access to tools, are better than most teachers at introducing their peers to scientific exploration. According to Illich, most learning requires no teaching and much learning happens casually and spontaneously, outside of school, something that Vygotsky (1962) concurred with. Skill centers open to the public would be available for skill exchanges, and joining learners with similar interests would be promoted. It was Illich's belief that fundamental social change must begin with the change of consciousness about institutions (Illich, p. 29, 1970).

Paulo Freire, another radical educator, was known for his method of teaching illiterate people to read and write by using words charged with political meaning. He discovered that, in a relatively short period of time, people would come to a new awareness of selfhood and begin to think critically of the social situation they found themselves in, often taking initiative in acting to transform the society that had previously denied them the opportunity of participation (Freire, 1970).

According to Freire, the fundamental effort of education is to help with the liberation of people. He was convinced that when people reflect on their subjugation, they begin the first step of changing their relationship to the world (Freire, 1970). He trained teachers to move into villages and discover the words that designated current important issues, and documented how participants rapidly grew into social awareness when engaged in this manner (Freire, 1970).

Freire, like Dewey and Vygotsky, advocated the unity between theory and practice, claiming that dialogue presented itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing (Freire, 1970). In his critique of traditional education, Freire coined the concept the banking system of education, where teachers deposit what is considered to constitute true knowledge in students, stifling their critical thinking and personal agency. He maintained that the more the students worked at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they developed critical consciousness, thus maintaining the status quo rather than becoming transformers (Freire, 1970).

Instead of transferring facts and skills from teacher to students, a Freirean class invites students to think critically about the subject matter, doctrines, the learning process itself and their society (Freire, p. 24, 1970). Dialogue is never an end in itself but a means to develop a more thorough comprehension of the objects of knowledge. Viewing teachers, or educators, as facilitators of learners who support experiential learning allows education to be seen as a practice of freedom, as opposed to a practice of domination.

Freire claims that education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system, and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the practice of freedom and the means by which people deal critically and creatively with their reality, discovering how to participate in the transformation of their world (Freire, p. 44, 1970). He said that the aim of education should be to empower students to engage critically with the institutions that affect their lives and make the necessary changes. The teacher is no longer merely the one who teaches, but is one who is engaged in dialogue and, by learning her/himself, is becoming jointly responsible for the process of

learning. In Freire's words, freedom is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion (Freire, p.44, 1970).

Reflections

I was pleasantly surprised by how well articulated Vygotsky's and Dewey's ideas were regarding learning and education. These ideas fit with my experience and provided me with a more descriptive understanding of the process of learning. While reading their work, I was also studying and learning Spanish and I took this opportunity to analyze my learning process. I reflected on the meaning within the language, and I experienced Spanish as more descriptive than English. In English, so much was assumed, and hence invisible, that we had constructed a language and way of being that was reflective of Western culture, isolated from ourselves. Language influences thought and culture in fundamental ways and all thinking takes place within language. Learning and speaking Spanish helped me to adopt more of a relational orientation. Culturally speaking, people are a product of their language and it is next to impossible to get a glimpse of an insider without having a practical knowledge of the language.

I found Freire's approach to learning and teaching inspiring and was heavily influenced by both Freire and Vygotsky's work. I became committed to looking for ways to apply these ideas, bearing in mind the richness of diversity, avoiding generalities, and respecting local practices. I could begin to understand how the chains of passivity had historically influenced Mexicans conditioned to an acceptance of their powerlessness (De Mente, 2011).

Recent Ideas Pertaining to Learning and Education

Similar to Freire, Noam Chomsky also speaks about literacy as the instrument of consciousness, and of the role of education in any pursuit of democracy, justice and freedom (Chomsky, 2003). For Chomsky, education is about the joy of discovery, rather than memorizing obscure details of unrelated and insignificant information (Chomsky, 2003). Teaching something productive promotes an engagement with learning. Tish Jennings of the Garrison Institute speaks about creating space for each person's experience, and proposes the importance of involving different senses in the process of learning, as the path to integration of knowledge (Jennings, 2011). The Garrison Institute applies that power of contemplation to education, with a focus on ecology. Tish Jennings speaks of CARE, an acronym for cultivate, awareness, resilience and education, as a guide for education and ecology. Geoffrey Canada, (Canada, 2013), a social activist and educator, and Ken Robinson (Robinson, 2013), an international advisor on education and author, claim that the education system today is based on a business plan from 50 years ago, in the time of industrialization, which clearly does not work today and in fact stifles innovation. Robinson points to the high drop-out rate in Western countries as evidence of how many are disengaged from school. Robinson claims that humans are naturally diverse, and that the role of the teacher is to facilitate learning by sparking and feeding curiosity, the engine of achievement. He suggests that human life thrives on diversity, and yet the education system is modeled on conformity. He argues that we need to change from the paradigm of standardization (the fast food/assembly line model) to an approach that is not mechanized. Facing new challenges, we need to think differently from how we have in the past and connect people to their creativity, imagination and empathy, according to Robinson. When

teachers and educators connect to learners' interests, we can then engage their imagination and create an atmosphere of creativity. At these moments, learners are in their element, in the zone, and they experience a sense of timelessness. Robinson also speaks about how learning happens in relationship, with most great learning happening in groups. Here, the old, wise expression two heads are better than one is recalled.

Anant Agarwal (2013), a professor at MIT, speaks about how the model of education has not changed in over 500 years. He claims we need to reimagine education by transforming the quality and the scale of on-line technology and blending it with traditional teaching in our classes. He concurs that we still need to use active learning practices, as students learn better when they are interacting and part of the learning process.

Critical Pedagogy

Modern, Western education emphasizes obedience and conformity, maintaining the status quo. Standardized testing has become the primary, and in many ways, only tool to measure the knowledge and success of the learner. The classroom–student/teacher paradigm is the dominant genre. Education must address the inherent teacher–student dichotomy, as teachers carry the opportunity and ethical responsibility to be agents of social change rather than simply transmitters of deemed knowledge (Giroux, 2007).

Inherent in the traditional school curriculum are values that hold up the norm of Eurocentric, middle- or upper-middle-class, male-centered values. The institutionalization of values leads inevitably to global degradation and modernized misery (Illich, 1970), with a materialistic view of success being privileged in formal education.

The critical pedagogy movement has evolved over the last 35 years and is an approach to schooling that emphasizes the political nature of education. Central to the definition of critical pedagogy is the task of educating students to become critical agents who actively question and negotiate the relationships between theory and practice, critical analysis, common sense, learning and social change. It holds a commitment to the future to ensure a way to a more socially just society (Giroux, 2007). Those who espouse a critical pedagogy must constantly be alert and attuned to the context in which politics, power and pedagogy intersect (Giroux, 2007).

Education is not viewed as neutral, it contains embedded values, beliefs and assumptions; the model encourages teachers to reflect on the value-laden nature of their authority. It takes on the fundamental task of educating students to take responsibility for the direction of society. Critical pedagogy gives education its most valued purpose and meaning: to encourage agency as a path for democracy and critical citizenship. It views students as producers of knowledge that not only critically engage with diverse ideas but also transform and act on them. From this perspective, teachers become social change agents. Paulo Freire's problem-posing method of critical literacy work in Brazil exemplifies this "praxis" (action, reflection and action) principle in action.

Many aspects of Mexican culture, such as respect for elders, hard-working values, family oriented practices, privileging relationships over materialism and productivity, and the common desire to improve the life of one's family are another example of valuable lessons to incorporate into the educational system. Indeed, a significant direction of the future of critical pedagogy rests with lessons to be learned from peoples around the world, honouring indigenous knowledge and traditions foreign to Western cultures (Giroux, 2007).

Critical pedagogy reflects on the relationship between classroom practice and issues of justice. Questions like how the school operates to validate or challenge the power dynamics of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, indigenous issues, and disability concerns are posed. Language is significant, as it is used as the primary way to interpret experience that constructs personal and social realities. Dialogue, inquiry and the exchange of ideas between teachers and students more aptly describes the learning process. Education from this perspective aims to apprentice students into critical inquiry, to get them to think more deeply about the issues and relations of power that affect them through their own experiences and insights (Leistyna, 2007).

Personal Reflections

Writing this inquiry, I struggled with the idea of traditional education, aware that the actual experience of schooling for many can be excessively boring due to the practices that pervade it. Many courses I was obliged to take throughout my own formal school years seemed to have little intrinsic value or relevance to my life at the time. I suffered from being mostly disengaged. I was aware that the standard evaluative practices seemed entirely biased and subjective, and I developed an irreverent attitude toward grades. Though I was naturally curious, inquisitive, and loved learning, there were limited opportunities for my enthusiasm to emerge.

The comment, talks too much in class, was written on my report card all too often. My father usually was mostly amused by these comments, highly prizing verbal skills which were

also culturally valued, as did my mother. The cultural values of contributing and caring were instilled in me by my father, who modelled them in his daily life.⁷ I also had an innate desire to be helpful, and a concern for the future of humankind and the planet. These qualities, too, were not recognized or nurtured and remained dormant and untapped in my formal education.

Readings on critical pedagogy gave me the language to reference, articulate and validate my personal experience of education, much of which seemed irrelevant and uninspired. Indeed, this process served as a liberating experience, helping clarify the meaning, value, and goals of education.

I experienced the reading of the literature on education as informative and invigorating. It helped me discover more about the terrain I was traveling and instigated a reflective practice to explore the learning process and various ways to approach learning. Despite my own experience with formal education, in the process of doing the literature review, I was able to clarify for myself the value of education. I agree with Vygotsky's idea that education happens all the time; that we learn from everyone in our proximity, not just in school. I found myself becoming more determined to explore ways to overcome barriers in order to create more relevant, useful education while recognizing the diversity and uniqueness of rural communities throughout the world. I learned about the importance of avoiding generalities, respecting local practices, and appreciating the richness of diversity in Pueblo.

The conflict of values and disharmony between traditional education and rural community lifestyles that ran throughout the literature was something I witnessed firsthand in

⁷ Tikkun Olam, a Hebrew phrase that translates as repairing or healing the world suggests humanity's shared responsibility to heal, repair and transform the world.

Pueblo. Formal education seemed to have little relevance for the lives of the local youth and showed little regard for the values held by the citizens of Pueblo. The intersection between poverty and gender disparity was also apparent, with many youth being under resourced, and single mothers suffering from a poverty of opportunity in their own lives.

Teaching challenges were also evident, as was the need for curriculum reform. The metrocentricism of the telesecundaria program, and the students' indifference to it, was understandable. Lack of familial participation was clearly evident, accompanying an indifferent attitude towards school. In fact, all the predominant themes highlighted in the literature readings were corroborated by my experience in Pueblo.

My actions in Pueblo were informed by my literature review. For example, from the literature I was able to clarify and articulate what set of criteria might be useful for scholarship approval in the education foundation I was working with. Clearly, gender and socioeconomic status were extremely important criteria. Giving priority to the oldest of large families and the significance of safe accessibility to school simply made good sense. It was only after reading about the *Oportunidades* program that I became aware that some of the local people were marginally supported by it.

I found myself also questioning whether requiring students to obtain a high grade-point average to gain admission into the scholarship program was a useful criterion. I asked myself what significance it held: maybe it was a reflection of their discipline and determination? How could we reach those students not engaged in school or learning? Were they not the most in need of reaching out to? How might scholarship or other financial aid programs offer assistance to those learners not yet tapped?

Although there was no high school (prepa) in Pueblo at the time I began my inquiry, as of last year, fortunately, a high school began offering the tenth grade, making high school more accessible and offering smaller class sizes. I dreamed of the future economic opportunities that having a local prepa could offer to the students, which I found exciting and encouraging. My observation of the high drop-out rate of girls in particular and students in general, from secundaria to prepa, was verified by the literature. Low levels of literacy, especially in reading, writing, comprehension and mathematics, became apparent to me. The migrant workers, mostly indigenous people, were indeed not literate and spoke only minimal commerce Spanish. Some kinds of handicraft production traditionally has been the sole industry in many villages and often it is the indigenous that keep this tradition alive.

Critical thinking, thinking for oneself, reflecting on one's thoughts and experience were invisible to me among the students I worked with in Pueblo. I attributed some of this lack to the cultural indoctrination of obedience to authority. Acceptance and accommodation is valued, while criticism of any kind is deemed disrespectful. The present-day focus in life, characteristic in Pueblo, may also run contrary to critical thinking. Again, I wondered how I might use my influence with the students by inviting them into other approaches to thinking and learning.

I did not witness the youth in this community reading, but did often hear about how much homework they were given and wondered who would help them with it at home. When I suggested it, the idea of doing homework together—learning from the *more knowledgeable other* proposed by Vygotsky—seemed to be viewed as cheating by the teachers and students, as opposed to supportive and helpful.

The lack of participation and involvement of families in the community in the Education Foundation was abundantly apparent to me, this phenomenon being documented in the literature. This was something I was determined to have some influence on during my work in Pueblo, having become convinced of the how importance of parental support and participation in the educational experience of their children.

The traditional model of education, which honours individualism and materialism, was also apparent in the Pueblo, and I became aware of how much local knowledge had been marginalized in the traditional educational system. It appeared to me that students lived with their collective values in the community, and then largely left them at the doorstep of the classroom upon entering.

Collaborative learning opportunities seemed non-existent in school, yet visible in everyday community life. I witnessed many times in action the power in numbers and collaborative practices throughout the community. The strong ties that youth had to their family and friends, also documented in the literature, were clearly visible. I began to wonder how I might make better use of these values in my efforts when working with the students and was determined to find a way to integrate more collaborative practices in my interaction with the students.

I found myself amazed that the students had any interest in learning and education whatsoever; given the boring, largely irrelevant and non-engaging experience they were likely to have had. Their ongoing attendance was a testament to their capacity for patience and indicative of their resilience. I wondered who had inspired them and supported them in their learning. I waited for an opportunity to explore this with them. I witnessed their reluctance and

lack of exposure to the idea that they could think for themselves and reflect on their lives, as opposed to simply regurgitating information. I again looked forward to creating space and providing an opportunity for reflective thinking with them.

I wondered how students would sort out their commitment to learning and education with their commitment to family life. I wondered, too, how their families would make sense of and deal with the possibility of their child leaving their family and community for further education? What economic possibilities would their child have in Pueblo in the future, with and without education? This was a culture where success was dependant on who you knew in a position of power, rather than what you knew.

This experience of doing my dissertation led me down many unforeseen paths, often filled with rich discoveries and seemingly endless possibilities of influence. It provoked my deepest desire to contribute something useful and meaningful in my world, by viewing my inquiry as a form of social action and transformation. I was learning to love the journey within the destination and experienced being in the zone, often experiencing a sense of timelessness. What I was studying and where I was located felt synchronistic.

The review of the literature invited me into a discovery of ideas about education in general, and inspired me to reflect on new ideas, which influenced my inquiry path and my own teaching practices, both in Mexico and Canada. I discovered more about the terrain in which I was travelling, and this acted as a catalyst for my own thinking and action throughout the journey. While focusing on education in Pueblo, I also found myself thinking globally.

It is clear to me that humankind is out of balance with its environment, and the current state of affairs is simply not sustainable. Knowledge from personal experiences (one's own and

others'), in both the past and present, holds great promise to helping work toward creating alternative solutions to our social and ecological problems; in these regards, the richness in diversity cannot continue to be ignored. If the dominant orientation to life remains individualistic, how can we build cooperative relations on a global scale (Gergen, 2009)?

Though I was able to speak some Spanish in Pueblo, I was aware that I would always be seen and treated as an outsider. I wondered how this could positively influence my work, and what innovative ideas I might bring forth. Influenced by my clinical background in counselling, reflections during this inquiry led me to draw parallels between the core practices of education and therapy. These included the importance of engaging those students in a relevant learning process and creating space for alternate, collaborative conversations, bringing forth new and diverse perspectives full of innovative and creative possibility. Viewing the teacher/therapist as co-learners with the student/client in this joint process, and recognizing the resourcefulness of each student/client, were other similarities. Honouring the richness of the collaboration process with clients/students was something I looked forward to. The core value of promoting social change also overlapped with teaching/education and therapy. My own resourcefulness, yet untapped, emerged, and a convergence of practices ran throughout my experience.

My subject matter of learning, in itself, has been an educational experience and an empowering journey for me, for which I was grateful. I wondered how might I transmit my enthusiasm for learning to others? I looked forward to this opportunity and any other teachable moments. I wondered how to talk to the students about what I was doing there with them. In the past, they had not shown much curiosity about my role and had just seemed to accept my presence. After all, I did not directly teach them, and our communication was limited by my

level of literacy in Spanish. I deliberately showed respect for certain learning practices: being on time, and focusing and listening when others talked. This was one way to convey my seriousness about learning. Adopting some local practices, I balanced this with teasing them mercilessly at times, and greeting them wherever I saw them.

It seemed I managed to convey my caring for the students I engaged with, and much to my joy, my involvement with them allowed me to feel more integrated into local life. Initially, it was not **apparent** to me that one way into Pueblo was through the children. I was, after all not a **parent**. My involvement with the students invited me to want to share more about myself with them. I wanted to tell them that I, too, was currently a student, not just a student of life. I wanted to tell them that I had returned to school and was focusing on my work with them. Both they and their learning were significant to me. I looked forward to opportunities that presented themselves to find ways to encourage learning in the scholarship students, hereafter referred to as *becados* in Pueblo.

Journey Map

I proceed to introduce the reader to the philosophical orientation of constructionism that I adopted for my inquiry, and to its relevance to the field of education. Flowing naturally from this, I introduce the merits of collaborative teaching/learning as an alternative to traditional education. I then share with the reader my reflections, while adopting the relational lens and collaborative learning/teaching. Also, in this chapter, I speak about constructionism's contribution to the field of research and explore, in more detail, action research, the orientation (methodology) I utilized for my inquiry. Finally, I share my reflections regarding action research and its compatibility with constructionism.

Chapter Three

“Independent scholarship” is essentially a contradiction in terms (Sullivan, Patricia A.).

History of Cooperation and Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning is not a new idea or practice. In the history of humankind, there has been great value and emphasis placed on cooperation: survival has been dependent on it (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2005). Traditionally, men hunted successfully in groups, while women gathered food, caretaking children cooperatively. The elderly passed on knowledge through stories and were taken care of by their families, with food being prepared by groups of women. Older children took care of younger siblings, working together organically and learning from each other in the process. This way of living in community, learning, and being, is still apparent among many indigenous and rural communities today.

Much of our wisdom has its roots in oral traditions. Stories create knowledge: storytelling brings forth and works with multiple voices opening up worlds of new possibilities (McNamee, & Hosking, 2012). Local knowledge and wisdom was incorporated, new knowledge acquired. The history of humankind provides strong evidence of the innateness of cooperation and collaboration, and of how they have been essential to human survival.

Meg Wheatley (2009) spoke of the human instinct to be and live in community, and she claims that community is humankind’s basic form of organizing ourselves. The film directed by Tom Shadyac in 2011, “I am,” discusses and challenges the paradigm survival of the fittest and discovers that, contrary to conventional thinking, cooperation and *not* competition may be

nature's most fundamental operating principle. In his film, Shadyac declares that collaborative decision-making is the norm amongst many species, from insects and birds to deer and primates (Shadyac, 2011). We are in fact meant to be cooperative, and, he suggests, Darwin has been misinterpreted to propose competitiveness exclusively. Rather, Shadyac says, Darwin noted that humankind's real power and strength lie in our ability to perform complex tasks with each other, to sympathize, and cooperate (Richards, 1989).

John Dewey (1938), whose influence in the field of education continues to endure, suggested that the cultivated mind was essentially a social mind (Vygotsky, 2007). Vygotsky (2007), another influential historical educational thinker, claimed that the major key to development and thinking was the immersion in social interchange. People learn best in cooperation with others, he wrote, incorporating the lessons learned from the past. He maintained that language plays a central role in learning, determining the way a child learns "how" to think, linking new ideas to past experiences and prior knowledge, having the power to create meaning. Learning, according to Vygotsky, involved some type of external experience being transformed into internal processes, through the use of language. Certainly, the gift of language, unique to humankind, encouraged and enhanced this ability to cooperate. In fact, *living in language* is the only thing that makes us distinct from our closest relative, the chimpanzee (Diamond, (1992).

Evidence of Collaboration Today

The complexity of contemporary life demands the ability to collaborate and be responsive to whatever may emerge—to work toward an unspecified future (McNamee, 2007).

Everywhere today, there is growing evidence of the need for more collaboration and teamwork. In the N.G.O. (non-government organization) world, there is a recent developing trend encouraging organizations to work more collaboratively and efficiently together towards shared goals rather than working separately individually.

Ocean stewardship is an example of collaboration, where farmers, shippers, scientists, fishermen, and conservationists are working together to plan and sustain the sea and ocean economies. This process involves a coming together and sharing of information by unlikely allies with a common goal, and requires that the voices of interested groups are heard and valued, creating space for a collaborative outcome and shared future. Other examples of collaboration are seen in the business world where the introductions of teamwork concepts and practices have resulted in more efficient use of resources. Globalization has demanded more negotiations between countries; minority governments have had to work to create coalitions composed of different political persuasions; the strength and safety of living rurally and in small communities comes from their collaboration and communal activities—and the list goes on.

In the world of philosophy and communication, the social construction movement offers a way to understand and privilege relational being and relational learning. It offers a way to construct the idea of an individual in a different way than was assumed in traditional education, by positioning us in a collaborative relationship with others (Gergen & Gergen, 2004).

Social Construction

Social construction refers to a tradition of scholarship that traces the origin of knowledge, meaning, or/and understanding to human relationships (Gergen, 2009). It marks a shift in our orientation to the world (McNamee, 2012). We construct the world in a different way,

rethinking what we have been taught about ourselves and others. Everything we consider real is socially constructed, agreed upon by people, and as we communicate with each other we construct the world in which we live (Gergen, & Gergen, p.10, 2004). Problems are constructed within conversation and hence, if we change the dialogue, we can create opportunities to reconstruct them (Gergen, 2009).

In the last few decades, social constructionist ideas have evolved and have challenged values of reason, objectivity, and scientific truth (Gergen, 2009). The relational/social constructionist lens invites us to place the relational process at the center, where relationships constitute the foundation of society (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). The central notion of social construction is the creation of meaning through our collaborative activities (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). It is with relational knowledge that people come to feel that they are part of a larger whole that sustains us and connects human beings, amplifying our strength and the power of solidarity (Park & Bradbury, 2006). This belief is in sharp contrast to western culture, which honours the individual as the source of all meaning. The individualistic orientation generates an interminable problem of individuals struggling to understand each other, promoting a world of separation, isolation and conflict (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). It portrays *everyone out for themselves*, and views the world as made up of fundamentally isolated beings where moral training is required for caring of others (Gergen & Gergen, 2004, 2009).

The relational stance teaches that the concept of self emerges only in relation with other—self *versus* other becomes self *through* other, and knowledge and learning is seen as constructed in our ongoing interactions (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). Reflecting on our experiences in order to make sense of them and of what we value, we bring forth a construction of new

understanding and meaning (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). We can construct the individual in a different way, one which primarily lives in the present, with our well-being linked to our current relationships, not bound by the chains of either history or traditions (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). Though we carry our traditions, history and *paradigms of the past* with us, we still have at our disposal the possibility of creating something new and different (Gergen, 2009). This process invites a vast spectrum of possible ways of thinking and being, creating new knowledge and learning, and, in doing so, offers an opportunity for our innovative, creative, and collaborative spirits to emerge. Either/or (binary) thinking is replaced with both/and thinking, and this shift allows us to explore, reflect, and innovate towards new possibilities.

There is an assumption that our daily interactions with others construct the relational realities within which we live (McNamee, 2010). When people communicate and construct ongoing scenarios and routines, they give rise to standards and expectations that eventually generate a worldview, with a set of beliefs and values (McNamee, 2010). Humans engage in co-creating their reality through participation with others. This orientation shifts from the mind of the individual to the kinds of relationships in which knowledge can emerge from the relational lens (Gergen, 2009).

Dialogue has the potential to create new understandings, values and ways of being in relationship with each other, so we can collaboratively build our future together (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). Dialogue offers a special quality, according to John Stewart (2000), where in holding our ground and letting others hold theirs, or as he says, happen to us, a tensional quality emerges, opening up new territories of understanding (Stewart & Zediker, 2000). From this orientation there is no foundation for claiming superiority or truth of one's own tradition.

Hence we are invited into a posture of curiosity and respect for others (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). It is important not to diminish community-based practices that are different from our own for the constructionist (McNamee, 2010). There is no single framework that can be identified as better outside of its communal or culture context (Gehart, Tarragona & Bava, 2007). Much of the knowledge that is useful to common people, whether formally educated or not, is common-sense, practical knowledge which is relevant to their situation and to their livelihood (Bradbury & Reason, 2006).

Constructionism has enormous implications for the development of therapy, organizational development, teaching, conflict resolution, and research/inquiry. For the purposes of this inquiry, I will address the implications of the constructionist orientation in relation to teaching/learning and research.

Social Construction and Collaborative Learning

Though there is little opportunity to learn collaboratively in traditional education, there are signs that collaborative learning is of increasing interest and value. Some changes in our pedagogical attitudes and classroom practices are inevitable (Bruffee, 1984). Teaching from a collaborative, more interactive and engaging way can invite students into a shared learning process, benefiting from learning from each other and grouping together.

There is an increasing interconnected system emerging in the 21st century, and an action of one individual or small group can affect the whole system very rapidly (Ross, 2011). Rapid changes in the influence of new information and communication technologies are requiring teachers to find new ways to engage, challenge and motivate students (Burbules, 2001). To incorporate all the new technologies, teachers need to act more as guides and interpreters

rather than sources of authority (Burbules, 2001). Educators face an unprecedented task of supporting people to become creative and collaborative problem-solvers and critical thinkers, cultivating their capacities to see the world from profoundly different perspectives, and nourishing their capacity for connection and caring in a fragmented and divisive world (Gergen, 2009).

The traditional method of education is simply limited, enforcing competition, disregarding learning from and with others (Gergen, 2009). In higher education, intelligence is located within the individual, measured by the individual's achievement of rote memory skills based on standardized tests, a one-size-fits-all model. The traditional teacher/ student model dominating current education positions the role of the teacher as someone who leads students to a preordained answer. Students are typically confronted with curricula that have little intrinsic interest and are subjected to frequent examinations of their ability to repeat truths as determined by the experts (Gergen, 2009). It is assumed that the teacher, seen as the expert, is the ultimate authority of what is true and relevant. The task of evaluating the performance of the student is entirely subjective and regarded as the teacher's prerogative; they determine what is considered important. These measures might indicate how well prepared a student is, but they do not reveal anything about their overall abilities (Leistyna, 2007)—beyond, that is, their willingness to be led to certain conclusions and their ability to then regurgitate those ideas.

The traditional model offers a very narrow range of communicative interactions and tends to limit alternative perspectives on teaching and learning, ignoring the particular characteristics and skills of the student audience. A teacher teaches and the student listens and

learns—it is a system that is designed to flow one way. Today, this didactic pattern is so predominant in educational practices and institutions, deeply ingrained in both students and teachers, that it constitutes an unreflective habitual pattern that teachers fall into even when they imagine that their teaching is dialogical in nature (Alvermann, 1990). This monologue process stultifies knowledge and is inadequate for generating new knowledge, providing little opportunity for the student to make sense of the subject matter in his/her own way (Gergen, 2009). Classrooms die as intellectual centres when they become delivery systems for lifeless bodies of knowledge according to Friere (p. 53, 1970). Chomsky speaks of the joy of discovery versus memorizing obscure details (Chomsky & Otero, 2003).

Social constructionism gives us a language to understand the creation of knowledge and the learning/educational process in a different way. Although the adoption of the relational stance and of collaborative principles in the classroom is still relatively new, these processes are extremely profound. Constructionist ideas have powerful implications on our teaching practices. For the constructionist, the ultimate concerns are the pragmatics and politics of education and a commitment to democracy (Gergen, 2009). I am reminded of Freire's philosophy that education should be a practice of liberation and freedom, rather than of domination meant to prepare the lower classes for a life of quiet servitude and domination (Freire, 1973).

The current system perpetuates deficit-based views of students with low socioeconomic status, students of colour, and those in the linguistic minority (Bartolome, Ed. McLaren, 2007). If we do not confront such differences in power in the classroom, then we cannot relieve oppressive conditions under which far too many people live (Gergen, & Gergen, 2004).

The constructionists' contribution to critical reflection is important to the development of democracy and ensures more participation (Gergen & Gergen , 2004). Collaborative skills are nourished and students are prepared for democratic participation in the world; they are invited to permit multiple realities and values to intersect, incorporating the lessons to be learned from peoples and knowledge around the world. In education, collaborative activities and practices in the classroom allow us to see, in their particular cultural and historical conditions, claims of truth of all kinds born out of relationship (Gergen, 2009).

The site of learning is within relationships, and we make sense of our lives by virtue of what has proceeded and what follows, (traditions that are borrowed from other times and places but do not determine what must be (Gergen, 2009). It is precisely where people differ in outlook, background, belief, experience etc.—multi-being—that creates the opportunity to learn from and with others (Burbules, 2001). The dialogical process contrasts with the traditional hierarchical teacher/student distinction, which privileges didactic teaching and the assumption that knowledge comes only from the teacher. Lecturing is replaced with dialogue among all participants; giving opportunity to voice multiple views where teaching and learning converge. The focus is not on individual knowledge but rather *collective intelligence* or *hybrid expertise* (Suoranta & Vadan, 2007). The challenge is how to create the kind of conversations and relationships with others that allow participants to access their knowledge, create knowledge and develop an understanding where little seemed to exist before (Gehart, Tarragona, & Bava, 2007).

Vygotsky stressed the role of how past experiences and prior knowledge influence how we make sense of new situations and present experiences (Dhahms et al., 2007). The lens or

perspective that we carry with us expresses our uniqueness. Learning is enhanced when we create the opportunities to learn from and with each other, said Vygotsky. He writes that people adapt to their surrounding environment based on their interpretations and individual perceptions of it (Dhahms et al., p.2, 2007)—their template, so to speak—and that legitimate knowledge is obtained through the interplay of past experiences, social situations, and the general-environment (Farris, 2008). Without co-action there is no communication, yet with mutual engagement both the teacher and student actively participate in a mutual process of learning (Gergen, 2009). Words spoken contain meaning only in their response, and language is defined in a way that encompasses all forms of expression.

The teacher must continually try to challenge his/her own tendency to fall into the professional trap of “the expert, ignoring the expertise of others and shifting the focus from *learning to learning how* (McNamee, 2007). The student becomes an apprentice and the teacher becomes *a more knowledgeable other*, rather than expert, and the student is likely to observe the teacher’s actions and ways of being, learning from both what is said and how it is done. Promoting and honouring the voices of all participants in the atmosphere of an open classroom allow for multiple perspectives and ideas to emerge, constructing new knowledge together. Co-learning engages all learners in this process, respecting the diversity and range of knowledge and useful accounts each person brings forth. Some words we hear have the possibility to bring us back and help us re-experience something that we have experienced before, tapping into our tacit knowledge. We do not always *know what we think before we have said it* and *don’t always know what we know* (Goolishian, p.89). Listening to ourselves

speak to another can allow the creation of new knowledge to emerge. I have witnessed this process in action in therapy sessions.

In the collaborative approach, dialogue becomes the preferred form of teaching; it exercises fully participatory forms of exchange, accompanying a more intense level of engagement (Gergen, 2009). Language is privileged as the medium through which people construct and express meaning and build lived reality (Gehart, Tarragona, & Bava, 2007). Words are defined only in relation to other words (Derrida, 1988); all words defer to other words. Derrida views language as a system of differences in which each word is distinct from all others (Gergen, 2009, p. 19). Chomsky's revolutionary theory of linguistics speaks to how humans learn grammar in the context of language, not separate from it (Chomsky, 1987). The constructionist view is that language is constitutive rather than representational, that language gains its meaning from its use in relationship (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). Language enhances our ability to engage in social interactions—creating meaning and constructing knowledge in the process. Since language is value-laden, social construction recognizes language as a form of social action (McNamee, 2010). Even observational descriptions cannot escape sociocultural biases because they are conveyed through language, which is embedded in the broader culture (Wittgenstein, 1978). Through constant reflective inquiry the constructionist researcher explores and makes note of how certain practices might marginalize some voices while privileging others, attempting to fit everyone into the existing world (McNamee, 2010). The taken-for-granted, dominant cultural logic holds the power to perpetuate social injustice; it is from the constructionist perspective we are invited to become political activists (Gergen, 2009).

In education, collaborative learning provides a format in which all students can negotiate their way into conversation, ideally not allowing only a few to dominate the conversation. Collaborative teaching embraces the idea that everyone has something unique and valuable to contribute. The challenge for the educator is to create the conditions where such opportunities can emerge—to bring forth what has not yet been said (Anderson, 1997). Meanings are articulated in the process of conversation, and most ideas are not stored inside the person, but emerge in the dialogue between people (Anderson, 1997).

Collaborative learning encourages teachers to adjust their status from ultimate knowers to not-knowing and to thrust themselves into the collective process of learning (Gergen, 2009). Learning with the student through the joint exploration of a topic describes a more collaborative learning process. The teacher adopts a not-knowing orientation, proposed by Harlene Anderson, guided by curiosity about what students say and how they construct their world (Anderson, 2005). The conversation invites an unfolding, more engaging process, and students' concerns more easily determine the topic, making learning more relevant and engaging. The idea of shared thinking, or distributed intelligence, as a metaphor for how knowledge is formed and created, suggests a fundamental shift in how we can conceive of the process of learning and education (Burbules, 2001).

Besides providing a particular kind of conversation, collaborative learning also provides a particular kind of social context for conversation, a kind of community of status equals—peers (Bruffee, 1984). It is important to recognize that students' achievement depends on their circle of relations with classmates (Gergen, K. 2009). Collaborative learning harnesses the powerful force of peer influence and the natural tendency to help each other, which has been largely

ignored and wasted by traditional forms of education and teaching (Bruffee, 1984). The participants never know what will be invented in collaboration with others (McNamee, 2007).

Collaborative learning occurs when student and teacher are engaged in a meaning-making learning process through their interaction with each other (Gergen, 2009). As all participants listen, question and reflect, the conversation process creates an opportunity to develop an understanding (Feldman, 1999). As they listen, they think about what is being said and relate it to their own histories, their intentions and their relationship to others (Feldman, 1999). Each person possesses independence of mind that acts as a filter to decide whether to accept the information or not, according to his or her values and ethics.

The diverse expertise of the lived experience and collective spirit/wisdom of both the students and teacher are acknowledged, honoured and regarded as resources for learning when learning is collaborative. The idea of teaching as conversation invites the students into generative conversations, inviting the experience of co-creating knowledge and of constructing an understanding for all participants. The teacher can become a learner, with students functioning as teachers in this process; what takes place in the classroom becomes a joint achievement (Gergen, 2009). Dialogue allows for the gathering of the skills and resources of all participants in the classroom, therein ensuring that education becomes more relevant and practical and useful to local community life.

From a social constructionist perspective, all knowledge is constructed through collaborative dialogue, thereby enacting an inherently relational process. In this model, to learn is to work collaboratively to establish, create and maintain knowledge among a community of knowledgeable peers (Bruffee, 1984). Students arrive as multi-beings (referred to on pg. 8),

bringing their own unique history of experiences, already participating in relations with family and friends, with each of these circles fostering a way of being with others, and favouring ways of talking and being together. Beliefs are instilled via culture and parental upbringing, amongst other ways. Students may see the same thing before them, but the meaning has shifted- this difference arising from their social relationships (Gergen, 2009).

When learning is collaborative the teacher's task lies in how to create learning structures and tools for the generation of knowledge—in other words, it is not so much *what* we do but *how* we do it as educators that is important (McNamee, 2007). The expertise of the teacher lies in the area of process and his/her ability to keep the conversation open and flowing, with all participants contributing (McNamee, 2007).

Shifting from a monologue (didactic expert position) to a dialogue (a tensional quality between people), the teacher engages the students in co-learning, giving students greater opportunity to give expression to their outside relationships and bring them into the classroom. When students bring their extended network of relationships into the classroom and into all aspects of their lives they enrich the potential for relational participation—and learning occurs most effectively through the interested participation of learners together (Gergen, 2009). The teacher aims to create an atmosphere in the classroom that is respectful and accepting, to enable students to become engaged in the process. Through dialogue, students graft on to their personal perspectives and previous experiences, what we offer from our traditions of knowing (Gergen & Gergen, 2004).

Most effective is the teacher who conveys his/her friendship and caring with the student, recognizing the potential for mutual regard in the educational process and insuring all voices

are heard (Gergen, 2009). According to McNamee (2007), when teachers convey an enthusiasm for a subject from their lived experience, learning is enhanced for all participants, students are inspired and inspiration promotes engagement. Under this paradigm, the teacher also becomes a facilitator of student development, offering useful resources providing support and direction, creating or imposing structure and controlling the interaction of students. Avoiding abstract principles teachers encourage educational conversation, fostering community, and blurring boundaries (culturally determined) between the classroom and everyday life (McNamee, 2007).

It is important to take into account that what takes place with the student–teacher and student–student relationship can be significantly influenced by the students’ home life, and vice versa. In this vein, educators come to see the relationship between the teacher and students as a fundamental source of learning, moving the educational experience from the classroom to the community (Gergen, 2009). When education is sensitive to and focuses on relationships, as opposed to isolated individuals, we enter into a new territory of possibilities, appreciating multiple traditions, realities and voices (Gergen, 2009). Formal education has meaning beyond the classroom and is about the evolving construction of citizens and citizenship (McNamee, 2007). Many constructionist scholars believe that social change should be a major consequence of their work, indicative of the methodologies conducted in research within the constructionist orientation.

The service-learning movement is only one of the exciting community outreach initiatives of recent years, taking the view that one learns by doing for others (Gergen, 2009). Participation in the service learning movement invites students and others into the relational

process of learning, both about themselves and others, through their social engagement, and speaks to the power of building community. Today there is a movement afoot calling for compassion through action. As I have heard the Dalai Lama say, *if you want to help yourself, help someone else*, also known as the principle of *compassion in action*. Action convinces people, not words (Ross, 2011), or, as I know it, *action speaks louder than words*.

Collaborative learning can be compared to a rhizome, a fleshy, subterranean, root-like stem that builds an underground network of interconnections with no central organization (leaderless), spreading its energy into multiple directions, thriving on interconnection throughout. Its very existence is dependent on a network of cooperation and collaboration. The metaphor of the rhizome could also be applied to constructionism and collaborative learning/teaching, reflecting their relational nature. I would also compare the relationship between poverty and gender inequity to a rhizome, in which poverty and gender inequality are intertwined and interrelated, supporting each other, yet invisible to many.

Deleuze and Guattari, both French philosophers, claim that the basic division in the political educational arena is between hierarchical and rhizome-like democracy. Learning is synergistic, rather than hierarchical (Suoranta & Vaden, p. 150, 2007). They propose that teachers, along with their students, compare information from various sources, negotiate their knowledge and experiences, and thus interpret the world together (Suoranta & Vaden, 2007). In this vein, knowledge can be viewed as the product of human beings in a state of continual negotiation (Bruffee, 1984). Building a sense of community in class and to create a possible space where youth and community feel connected to their school because it serves them, varies in practice from community to community (McNamee, 2010).

General Reflections on the Constructionist/Relational Lens and Collaborative Teaching/Learning

While adopting the constructionist/relational lens, one of my biggest challenges has been grappling with multiple perspectives and determining how they fit. Gergen (2009) holds that learning to live with difference is a profound problem in the present world and is the root of conflict (Gergen, 2009). As I felt I was becoming more informed on my subject matter and on various ways of approaching learning, it became more difficult for me to hear divergent perspectives. I reflected on whether I might be falling prey to the expert trap, recalling the expression, *the more you know, the more you know how much you don't know, and indeed may never know*. At times I wondered if my newly informed ideas were significant for the town in which I lived, since, after all, I was viewing this through my outsider lens. I kept wondering how I might be helpful by offering other ways of thinking, doing and being, while still being relevant to the situation and to local people's livelihood. I was encouraged by the words of Wittgenstein, if people did not sometimes do silly things, nothing intelligent would ever get done (Wittgenstein, p. 50, 1980).

As I was researching and integrating the relational lens, I came to appreciate that constructionism and collaborative learning (rhizome) are so intertwined that I could not speak, write or think about one without the other. In the process of adopting the constructionist philosophy and relational orientation to various aspects of my life, I struggled to find ways to experience writing as relational. Writing was not a regular practice for me, having been taught first to articulate my experiences and thoughts through voicing them, a practice highly valued in my family and culture. I realized that my struggle with writing was related to my way of viewing

and experiencing it as autonomous and individualistic in nature, without relational opportunities. Curiosity led me to explore other perspectives, so naturally I queried my colleagues about their perspectives. From them I learned that if I thought about the audience/reader in the writing process as someone I could inform and inspire about my subject matter, I could invite myself to be in relationship with them. This view opened up the relational aspect of writing, and the audience took on a life alongside me. The practice was to think or imagine the audience/reader as we carried on together on this joint journey, keeping the reader ever-present. It reminded me of the *internalized other* notion that Karl Tomm (1998) introduced in his clinical work and teaching, when referring to a practice of how we can keep the voice of important people inside of us, being able to access their views without having direct contact with them. In the past, I had done this with significant people in my life, and had applied this practice in my clinical work. The idea was for me to create this practice now with my readers, to internalize them.

Another aspect I was reflecting on while adopting the relational lens was how I could view solitary time as a relational experience. I realized that when I engaged in reflecting about ideas or my experiences, I was engaged in a relationship with myself—having an internal conversation—that reflecting is a relational practice. In a similar vein, when experiencing the great outdoors, I experience myself in relation to the natural world. It is here that I have come to cherish the bounty and beauty of nature which enlivens all my senses in the places I chose to spend time in. I have come to learn and understand how relational the natural world is and hold it in great value, so even in solitude, I do not feel isolated and alone.

Throughout my process of researching and writing, I also reflected on the never-ending search for the balance of time with others, in community, and time with self. Of course, creating a practice of writing invited me to spend more solitary time (with my internalized audience). Spending more time reflecting, solitary time was certainly appealing, yet I was still hungry for connection with others. I searched for opportunities to connect, knowing that this would invite more reflection and learning. As well, I began to pay attention to ways of talking with others, trying to create more space for different views.

As I took more time for reflection, questions emerged. If all knowledge is constructed through dialogue with self and other, how can people take ownership of ideas? How can one person create a new idea without grafting on to others' ideas? Does the idea that we can own ideas, be *an expert* come from the individualistic orientation, and if so, then maybe we need to rethink the notion of ownership of ideas? In the next chapter (part two), I will mention how I dealt with this issue when it surfaced in Pueblo.

As I wrote, I found myself paying close attention to the language used in the social/relational constructionist orientation. It appeared to use more action-oriented language; for instance, *emerging*, *inviting*, and *giving rise to*, etc.; I wondered about the link between how a language tends to construct its verbs and what that might reflect about the degree to which the language users adopt an active, relational way of thinking. I revisited how, in Spanish, so many verbs are reflexive, making it abundantly clear that we are continuously in relationship with ourselves and others. I realized that Spanish and other romantic languages speak in ways that are more relational, while English uses individualistic language and concepts. The tyranny

of English lies is its deletion of relational descriptions in the language, and the overuse of the verb “to be” thereby narrowing our perspectives. This awareness changed my perspective. Though it felt awkward, I began to use more relational language in my writing, frequently including words like “myself”, making visible and apparent my relationship with myself. Of course the grammar program on my computer reminded me of this English grammatical error, which I ignored, while chuckling to myself.

I found myself thinking again about how language creates a way of thinking and a belief system. I came to understand how the way we develop and use language promotes a way of thinking, and is representative of belief systems, values, customs and traditions. Park’s (2001) position, that relational knowledge is embedded in language resonated with me. This is why in the past I have found it fascinating to learn words in other languages when travelling: it reveals something about that culture’s way of thinking. Gergen (2009) speaks to the task of creating new language for the relational self due to the limited vocabulary reflective in individualistic traditions, which is something I can relate to (pun intended). In Chinese, for example, there is no distinction between *mind* and *feeling*—the same character is used to express both, revealing a belief that we know with our head and heart simultaneously (Park, 2001, p.88). In some Asian languages, there is no word for *depression*, rather *sadness* is used and implies a relational view.

Adopting the relational lens in my life allowed me to feel more hopeful about the future, something for which I was yearning. On a deeper level I know that our only hope and great strength to deal with the problems of today and the future lay at the doorways of collaboration opening us up to the vast spectrum of other possibilities.

Reflections on Collaborative Learning/Teaching in Canada

While I was engaged in this inquiry, I was already involved in finding ways to teach more collaboratively in Canada. Although, teaching collaboratively had its challenges, I mostly experienced success with it and felt I was engaged in an exciting and creative learning process. I experienced each class as different, learning as I went, incorporating acquired knowledge along the way. I noticed that some classes and students were more responsive to this way of learning together, while others were perplexed by it. This speaks to the uniqueness of students/classes and the multiple perspectives, cultures and values they carry with them.

I found myself feeling more inspired and satisfied with teaching from a relational, collaborative perspective than from the more traditional ways of teaching. I was participating and engaged in a different way, encouraging more dialogue with all students, finding creative ways to discuss relevant information, and collaborating on most decisions with students (thereby ensuring their participation), while still meeting the mutual goals of the course. After these classes, I noticed I had more energy than I had at the beginning—rather than less, as I had in the past—and I had more learning to reflect on. Feeling inspired as a teacher, I was committed to continuing to explore more collaborative ways to teach and co-learn.

Reflections on Collaborative Learning/Teaching in Mexico

Of course, my experience teaching in Mexico was different, which speaks to the importance of not generalizing, and the need to appreciate diversity. As I mentioned earlier, I had noticed how daily life was inherently relational in Pueblo, but in the classroom this relationality was invisible and uncharted. I was limited by my level of literacy in Spanish, and I

was not in a position to act as I pleased in the classroom. I imagined asking the students to work in groups and my being questioned on how productive that would be in terms of keeping them focused on the subject matter. I wondered what kind of relevant topics could I propose to engage them all in conversation with each other about? How could I excite them about learning in this additional class, obligatory for the *becados*? How might I use my influence wisely?

In my second year, I had the great fortune of working with another volunteer who was more fluent in Spanish than I and offered to help teach classes with the scholarship students. Under the guise of focusing on writing and reading skills, I fostered a collaborative working relationship with her. We began to converse regularly about problems with the current local education system and how to offer something that might be more engaging, relevant and different for the *becados*. I wondered what would be useful and pragmatic, and also what might we/I learn in the process?

I will follow up on these questions in the following chapter.

I now introduce the reader to the form of inquiry, or methodology that informed my experience.

Social Construction and Research

Research that is compatible with a social constructionist philosophical stance gives rise to inquiries such as action research, collaborative learning and appreciative inquiry (McNamee, 2010). The term “inquiry” is used to emphasize the multiple ways research can transpire, reflecting the assumptions and values of a particular community (McNamee, 2010). Research from this orientation is described as a relational process, with the coordination of multiple discourses at play, and includes the relationship between the participants and the researcher

(McNamee, 2010). Advocated by current and historic influential thinkers in the field of education, it is research “with” rather than “on” participants, privileging learning through doing. The focus is on the processes of communication and of generating understandings that open new paths to action, rather than discovering “truths,” examining entities or discovering phenomena (McNamee, 2010).

Research from the relational stance offers an exciting alternative to the traditional approach which distances the researcher from the participants (Gergen, 2009). Social constructionist research is a powerful and creative process: it allows the researcher to follow the relational path of inquiry by viewing all participants as part of the process. The researcher adopts a reflective stance toward the inquiry process so that local, situated practices of those participating is appreciated, practical concerns are acknowledged and respected and curiosity is privileged (McNamee, 2012). Positioning yourself as the researcher in relation to the participants, rather than separate from has significant impact. Dialogue is valued, learning is mutual and continuous and change occurs in the process. The act of researching therefore becomes part of the change process-part of the action-praxis.

Praxis, as defined by Freire (1973) involves reflection and taking action; as knowledge is constructed from the research process, it informs subsequent action. Praxis equals action, reflection, and practice). The researcher in a collaborative relationship with participants is guided to be responsive to them in the inquiry process, and to improvise to allow the inquiry process to unfold in a creative, natural manner. The intention and hope is that the emerging knowledge will lead to a locally determined improvement.

The values of the researcher made transparent in this model influence what is learned, how the inquiry is approached and the process itself. The rationale is that since all knowledge is open to interpretation, it implies a value orientation—better to declare it than to simply let it operate on your research unseen (McNamee, 2010).

Gergen (2009) explains that the constructionist sees the utility of research in terms of the array of action potentials (possible actions) it creates, in conjunction with the reflective critique into which it invites participants, and by extension readers. Reliability and validity are replaced with the criterion of utility; for whom and in what ways can this information be useful and relevant? “Truth” and knowledge has numerous potentials and are situated in local practices; hence, offer pragmatic resources for action. Likewise, implications are not generalizable but are a useful tool in a particular community, culture, historical, and situated context (McNamee, 2010). Knowledge is about rendering useful interpretations for preferred action, rather than simply knowing more “facts” (Bradbury, 2006).

Action Research

Action research is a method of inquiry that is compatible with social construction; it emerged again more recently after nearly two decades of neglect, as one of the significant forms of constructionist (Feldman, 1999). Action research offers ways to ask fundamental questions intended to help create a better world, blurring the boundary between social change and research (McNamee, 2010). It recognizes research as a form of intervention and by acknowledging our influence on the research as having a political nature. The idea of influence is at the heart of action research; if we can influence people—including ourselves—to think

differently about the subject matter, this in turn can encourage all involved to act in different preferred ways. The circles of influence are potentially infinite.

The main responsibility action researchers have in this model is to think and learn critically, and to use that capacity for personal and social betterment (McNiff & Whitehead 2010). Social action research makes explicit this value orientation and is structured for realizing educational inspiration. Its significance is measured in terms of the potential for contributing to the education of self and others, and to social and cultural formation (McNiff & Whitehead 2010).

Action research may begin with experiencing a sense of frustration, a curiosity to understand, and a sense of creative possibility for action, and a commitment make a difference (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, p. 2005).

It seeks to create a quality of engagement, curiosity, and question-posing through gathering evidence, testing practices and reflecting on action (Reason, 2006). It is tenaciously inquisitive, purposeful, systematic, critical, self-critical and collaborative. Action research involves an interest in how things work, a practical need to understand, and a critical sense of the social, political and economic realities (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten 2005). At its heart, community action research rests on the basic pattern of interdependency (rhizome like), and on the continuous cycle linking research, capacity-building and practice (Senge & Scharmer, 2006). Action-oriented research, designed to improve practice and knowledge, connects praxis and reflection in order to transform.

Action Research and Collaborative Teaching

Action research, in the context of teaching, is a form of inquiry designed to improve our teaching by using the information gained from observing our own practice (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2005). The researcher has the opportunity to bring his/ her practice in line with his/ her values and aspirations. A creative process such as this provides a structure for realizing educational inspiration, with students as key informants who allow their experiences to be at the center of all research. A constant pursuit of knowledge and understanding undergirds this idea, based on the premise that learning is an essential part of being human, a way of creating meaning in our lives. The educational imperative of action research contributes actively to the processes of democratic social change, encouraging participants to develop their capacity for inquiry individually and collectively (Bradbury, p.10 2006), using information gained from observation and reflection and reflecting a journey of continuous inquiry and growth (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2005).

The reflection–action–reflection (praxis) cycle indulges curiosity and critical analysis, allowing for diverse perspectives to emerge and enhancing possibilities for the application of new learning. This reflective posture of curiosity and respect for others is documented to inform future action. It can be seen as learning from our own and others' experiences of not knowing or understanding how things work in a community. It holds a generative, transformative view of change, seeing everything in a process of coming into being, capable of moving in any direction. Reflection is embedded in praxis, coming from experience and informing action. This cycle of continuous reflective practice becomes the method used to generate knowledge and is designed to improve practice (Holly, Arhar & Kasten, 2005). This

form of inquiry presents the opportunity to engage in an ongoing self-reflective process, listening, reading, talking, then acting, reflecting and writing.

Dialogue occupies a central role in the action research process; to relate is to inquire (Feldman, 1999). In the cycle of critical reflective practice ongoing dialogue becomes a learning tool and a method of coordinating information and contributing to a growth of understanding through the meaning-making processes (Feldman, 1999). Further, it is directional, requiring us to respond to others in ways that generate unintended and unpredictable outcomes (Feldman, 1999).

Dialogue aptly describes inter-action. It can lead to action, follow action, or be a part of action. As we listen, we think about what is being said; relating it to our own histories, translating it to understand what is being said giving it context. In this way, dialogue is a language unto itself as we find words to convey our thoughts and experiences. The aim of such dialogue is to make meaning of what others speak, not necessarily come to an agreement.

Reflections on Action Research

Throughout this inquiry, my teaching and learning frequently converged. I was inspired by the process of integrating of knowledge, action and practice, and felt blessed with the privilege to incorporate newly acquired knowledge spontaneously. Writing about my experiences invited an ongoing reflective practice that inspired further action and more writing. This in turn allowed me to describe my experiences, and in so doing, clarify my thoughts. Having the

opportunity to “do” and to “write” at the same time was an engaging and nourishing experience, wholly consonant with my preferred learning style.

Taking the relational philosophical stance and employing the action research form of inquiry allowed me to interact with local students and their families, building upon their ideas and dreams and thus engaging the community from the ground up. The ensuing dialogues often occurred spontaneously outside of the classroom, in keeping with the local practice. I questioned myself regularly on how I positioned myself in collaboration with the students, their families and the community and I reflected on how the students and their families came to understand my interest and involvement with them.

Keeping in mind that action researchers suggest student experiences should be at the center of attention for all research that affects them, I continued to pursue and to be open and flexible with any opportunities to interact with the *becados*. Showing interest in the students allowed me to experience a more expansive sense of place and belonging, reminding me how valued family life is in Pueblo. I began to see things through the eyes of the locals, and to begin to understand things differently. In doing so I and experienced a stronger connection to Pueblo.

According to Holly, Arhar & Kasten, (2005), building relationships of trust is a cornerstone of action research. Building trust required me to take the necessary Mexican *tiempo* (time) to build relationships with all the students and other stakeholders in the community. I reflected on the need to adapt my expectations and sense of time, and to adapt to the local practices in this regard. I summoned my patience regularly on this journey, calming myself to be respectful of local practices when I felt frustrated about the time it took to accomplish certain things. Becoming more familiar with the *becados* and other stakeholders gave me the access and the

opportunity to interview key informants about who supported, inspired and encouraged them to pursue formal education. I was still trying to understand how formal education held any value for them.

Action research/ inquiry invited me to become directly involved with the *becados* in Pueblo by sharing my own experiences. It offered an opportunity to be creative and spontaneous, responding to whatever emerged in my own way while staying compatible with local life. My own curiosity encouraged me to enter into conversations with those who lived in a different culture and place, and whose life experiences reflected differences in gender and age. The moment I began to interact the *becados* (co-participants), I was aware of the potential to create new understanding, and to honour multiple ways of knowing.

After I first worked toward understanding the local practices I quickly became aware of the traditional formal education they were exposed to which left them uninterested and not engaged and which appeared to promote a lethargic, passive attitude towards learning. I then found myself shifting to focusing on influencing the students' relationship towards learning, and working to modify the traditional format of schooling by trying to make it more engaging, collaborative and democratic. Aware that the students brought to class with them an intimate knowledge of one another and their community, I anticipated a fruitful learning journey.

One of my greatest challenges was finding ways to express and encourage a love of learning among the *becados* I tried to find the relationship between their own collective interests and any given subject matter, engaging them as a resource for these discoveries. I reminded myself of Ken Gergen's words: learning occurs most effectively with the interested participation of learners together (Gergen, p.132, 2009).

I wondered how a teacher could create space for dialogue that invited students to engage with their own interests? How could I create the possibility for students to be more likely to share their thoughts, ideas and experiences? Aware of my power to influence, how could I raise questions with educational intent that were meaningful to the students? How could I invite the students into a practice of reflective thinking, to have a conversation with themselves? These questions guided my journey.

Working together at fundraising events offered the experience of working collaboratively towards a common goal by building a feeling of camaraderie. Hosting a gathering of volunteers to celebrate our fundraising success offered a meaningful exchange of perspectives between *becados* and the stakeholders of the scholarship program. Even now, the significance of this event (see pictures at the beginning), leaves me deeply touched.

Journey Map

To set up the context of my inquiry, next I inform the reader about the Education Foundation, its history, goals, and current status. This information was collected from the website and two separate interviews/conversations, one with a previous volunteer who organized the inception of the scholarship program, the other, the Education Foundation Director, with whom I collaborated throughout the inquiry.

Following this introduction to the Education Foundation, I then share the wealth of information gained from surveys completed by the *becados* at two different times. These surveys were created, distributed and gathered by the founder of the Education Foundation to learn more about the *becado* family educational demographics, their experience of the

program, and their ideas for the future. These findings informed my initial direction in my work with them.

Following this, I outline the action that I undertook while spending five months each, during the last two winters, in Pueblo. Part one refers to the first year of my work, part two the second year. I shall continue to allow my reflections to emerge for the reader, clarifying my thoughts and further enhancing the construction of knowledge. I invite the reader to continue on this journey with me.

The Territory—The History and Goals of the Education Foundation

The impetus for the education foundation began in January 2003 when a sponsor from the community began financially supporting a program that initially offered English classes by native English speakers twice a week in the public school. This member, who was a part-time Mexican resident from Mexico City and in the business of education, graciously made the initial arrangements. Though there had been English classes in the public school in the past, it appeared that the locals were now more motivated to learn English for two reasons: it was recently required by the education governing body (SEP), and was seen by locals to be highly beneficial in a town like Pueblo, whose main employment opportunities come from the influx of North Americans arriving as tourists and/or staying and becoming citizens. Additional sponsors were sought to buy English textbooks and to become more involved with education in the local community. Soon after, a non-profit society was formed in order to involve more people in improving local education. The foundation blossomed as it offers classes to supplement both Spanish and English reading and writing, as well as math classes. Today, it offers free language and literacy opportunities to the adults and well as children in the area.

The Education Foundation was founded in 2004 as a Mexican non-profit organization whose mission was to offer educational and professional development programs to raise the literacy rate for the local people in order to have a more prosperous future (www.lacatalinafoundation.com). It was reasoned that given that the current economic base in Pueblo is tourism, learning English would greatly improve the economic opportunities for locals, especially the youth. Currently, the Foundation estimates that 90% of the area's population works in service industries, such as house cleaning, restaurants and construction, while the remaining work as fishermen. At the time the foundation was established, only 1/3 of youth who started middle school went on to high school, and 1 in 20 children from the community earned a college degree. A survey conducted in 2005/2006 claimed that 37-40% of the students surveyed continued on to high school while 60% in middle school dropped out. It is significant to note because there is a high percentage of the population of Pueblo is under 25, a phenomenon common among developing countries. The cost of living has dramatically increased over the years in general, and some in the community see training and education as an opportunity for more economic stability. In response, projects and programs have been created.

To give the reader a sense of the size of the student population in Pueblo, at last count there were a total of 86 students in kindergarten, of which 41 were boys and 45 were girls, in elementary/primary a total of 208 students, of which 96 were boys and 112 girls, and in middle school, there were a total of 93 students, 57 of which were boys and 36 girls. The new high school now has 18 students, 7 males and 11 females. In the two high schools outside of the community which the students from Pueblo attend, there are 38 males and 21 females in high

school from Pueblo. The reader can quickly deduce from these figures that although there were more girls in primary school, that situation quickly reversed itself in middle school and (overall) in high school, supporting the research regarding the high drop-out rate of girls at this time. It is clearly important during this critical time to make all attempts to encourage girls to continue attending school. It may also be important to consider the issue of sex education and birth control, although the complications arising are likely numerous; given that Pueblo is a dominantly Catholic community.

The Foundation's vision is that, in the near future, a significant number of local children will be proficient enough in English to enable them to have more local employment opportunities.

Currently, the Education Foundation offers free English language classes in public schools and in the adult community, as well as mathematics and business development training. As well, scholarships are offered to students entering middle school, high school, and university through the Wings Program. I worked only in the Wings Scholarship Program with the becadors. It also collaborates with the public school system by offering assistance on certain educational projects and undertaking fundraising efforts on the local schools' behalf. Additional programs involve art and music classes, minimally offered in public school. In 2007, it began to offer a three-week art summer camp taught by Mexicans and volunteers from Canada and the United States.

The foundation continues to grow, supporting a variety of educational activities that attempt to instill a love of learning in children. One of the Foundation's biggest achievements is a project that has developed over the last few years, an educational centre with two

classrooms, including a community classroom and computer lab, along with a washroom and small garden. This centre hopes to develop into a focal point for learning and aims to hire local teachers to further economic opportunities for local residents. (see photo page 2)

The Birth of the Wings Scholarship Program

Originally the idea of the Education Foundation was simply to supplement local education, as prior experience had demonstrated how much the local education system was under-resourced and seriously neglected. This was reflected in an extremely high dropout rate for students in the local community, especially at the point when students transitioned from middle school to high school. Many factors continue to inhibit students from continuing their education. Families' limited economic resources not only make paying costs associated with school difficult but also lead to the children's needing to start work to assist the family with earning money. Travelling to high schools in other towns (20-30 minutes by car and longer by bus) is another impediment. Further, the complex interplay between the school's lack of curriculum relevant to rural life and a lack of employment opportunities that require higher education in Pueblo combined with a culture that highly values staying close to family results in a lack of interest and motivation among students and parents, who do not see the long-term value of education.

The foundation believes that improving the local educational opportunities is key to achieving a more prosperous and stable future for the children and families of the community. The program attempts to foster students' excitement about learning and education, usually in stark contrast to their past experiences. Recognizing that many local families cannot afford the costs associated with education to support their children's school attendance, a scholarship

program was created to offer more students an opportunity to achieve their educational goals. The scholarship provides the student with expenses to cover most of the costs incurred by attending school and includes activities fee, school supplies, breakfast, uniforms, additional weekly classes, tuition, books, transportation, and 75% of lunch costs.

The Wings Scholarship Program started in 2007 with 1 student recipient, and at the moment of writing this (2014) it served 45 students, with an equal number of male and female recipients. Four of those 45, 3 whom are girls, are currently attending university. In high school there are 20 *becados* scholarships, with 9 girls and 11 boys; in middle school there are 22 *becados*, with an equal number of boys to girls. It is encouraging to know that there are equal numbers of females to males in the *becados* program, though teenage pregnancies are still far too common.

In order to finance scholarships, the Education Foundation sought out sponsors from the communities of Canadians and Americans who spend the winter in Pueblo. Though not expected, sponsors are encouraged to continue to support the student, assuming that students continue to meet the criteria. Donors often meet the student they sponsor, and the Foundation tries to facilitate regular contact, with students being required to send a PowerPoint presentation to the donor yearly. Many donors choose a candidate with whom they are already familiar, appreciating the idea of supporting a specific child and family, and often becoming long-term friends with the student and his/her family. Sponsors are invited to make contact through letters, and visits can be organized. I see the potential benefit of influence and shared learning in this relationship.

As word spreads about the scholarship program, foreign donors continue to emerge, sponsoring youth in the community where they own properties and visit yearly for extended periods of time. Many have come to view sponsoring a student as a contribution to the future of the community. Though I do not view myself as a fund raiser, I found myself in the past two years working hard to ensure that all those students who met the acceptance criteria were funded. Facilitating this goal has given me a great deal of pleasure, and when at all possible I arranged for the donor to meet the student. The introduction of the donor to the student appears to be meaningful to both. Donors offer the potential to become more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky) to *becados*, while the *becados* can share local, practical knowledge. Both donors and *becados* can practice their language skills, and I imagined this collaborative learning process as mutually beneficial.

Scholarship Selection Criteria

Potential scholarship recipients must demonstrate high academic standing and good character (as viewed by their teachers) in order to receive a recommendation to the Wings Program. The students who are chosen are seen as the most likely to pursue further education and to give back to the community. The scholarship program aims to work collaboratively with teachers and principals at the public schools to select scholarship recipients. Students must have high academic achievement (8.5/10—B+ average). The final grade is composed of a combination of exam scores, participation and homework and attendance. Students must participate in community service work (20 hrs for middle school, 40 hours for high school per year), and attend a weekly supplementary educational program (English, Spanish, writing and

reading, math). They must also submit a short summary outlining the reasons they believe they deserve a scholarship. Though I have not seen any of these summaries, I do view the students' stated desires to learn as an important criterion. In addition, those who demonstrate financial need receive the highest priority in the selection process.

Reflections on My Observations

The experience of the Education Foundation in this community supports the information now documented in the literature review. I have observed the local educational system is suffering from an abysmal lack of resources, that class sizes are large, and there is a high staff turnover. It seems to me that both teachers and students often suffer from boredom, apathy and cynicism about the current public educational system and speak of rampant corruption throughout it.

The poor level of local education offered only serves to confirm parents' views of its irrelevance, so they understandably don't see additional associated costs in education as a worthy investment. Attitudes toward teachers and learning are often not respectful. Many of the young children are products of teen pregnancies themselves, and have parents with lower levels of education and minimal interest and participation in their children's education. The issue of teenage pregnancy concerns me and I have a strong desire to change. Therefore, I am encouraging the Foundation to give priority to girls applying for scholarships due to the limiting options imposed on girls by traditional gender roles.

Since the establishment of the Education Foundation the high dropout rate seems to be shifting, with more students continuing on in their schooling, and showing more interest in their future educational and work possibilities. A recent count of students completing

Secundario School shows 24 out of 26 students continuing on in Prepa School. As I reflected on why this shift was happening I found myself reflecting on my own extended family. I was aware that although my culture supported and encouraged education and my parents were well educated, my maternal grandmother was illiterate. I knew it was because my grandmother was marginalized both as a female and a Jew in the “old country” where formal education was not an option for her.

I was also concerned that I did not witness much curiosity, or reflective thinking, from the scholarship students in everyday life or in the classroom. I wondered about how this lack of reflection might have been influenced by the present-day focus that seems to determine rural life. Reasons for continuing with formal education seemed to be more related to obtaining a good job in the future, rather than a love of learning. Viewing further education as a path to secure employment is an idea common in the rest of North America as well. I am aware that there is some disagreement between educators about the aim of further education; many, especially in the liberal arts tradition, espouse the idea that the aim of education is not to get a job or produce people with employable skills, but to enable mental, spiritual and physical growth (Whitehead & McNiff, 2010). In Pueblo, it appeared to me that those most skilled in human relations are more likely to succeed.

Though the students have English classes both in public school and in the supplementary extra classes now offered by the Education Foundation, I saw little interest in learning it. I found myself reflecting on how we define literacy, privileging the position English holds in the world, the written word, and reading—thereby sometimes dishonoring the richness of other languages, of oral tradition, and of activity-based learning. When I reluctantly inquired from the

students about their lack of interest and skill in English, the explanation they offered related entirely to how hard it is to learn the language. This was my experience with trying to learn other languages including Spanish, French and Indonesian.

As I struggled with encouraging the *becados* to learn English, I realized that I preferred the sound of Spanish and other Latin languages to English. Nonetheless, I compared my struggle and need for discipline in order to learn Spanish to their challenge to learn English, in the hopes that this might motivate them to accept the idea that, although learning can be a challenge, it can be done. I was also trying to give them the message that it is never too late to learn anything new and relevant to their lives, hoping that my value of learning might influence them.

I noticed that those youth in Pueblo who do speak English are more employable in the tourist-related services, namely restaurants. Unfortunately, many of the short term foreign tourists do not speak Spanish and make little effort to learn it, despite the existence of the local language school and other options to learn Spanish.

Surveys

Coincidentally, around the same time I was becoming involved with my inquiry, the Director of the Scholarship Program decided to create a survey to be completed by the current scholarship students to obtain more information about their ideas, desires and dreams. She contacted me at this time to collaborate on the questions and information she might focus on in the survey. Aware that action researchers suggest that student experiences should be at the centre of attention of the research that affects them (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2005), I was delighted to support this initiative. It appeared to me that asking students to complete a survey was a good start in making their education a collaborative process.

Questions were formulated about students' educational plans, their parents' educational background, their public school experience, what they would like to learn more about, their volunteer experience, maintaining their grade point average, suggestions for extra classes, their relationship with their donor, the scholarship payments, and general questions about the Education Foundation. After the students completed the survey, I met with the Director so I could interview her on the findings. What follows are the findings of two surveys, one done in 2012, the other 2013, both at the end of the school year

Findings of First Survey: July 2012

Fifteen out of 21 of the students completed the survey. All those who completed the survey identified as wanting to go to university, and most identified their career goals. Future careers mentioned were diverse and ranged from wanting to be an architect, teacher, psychologist, business professional, and chef, to working in tourism.

None of their parents had attended high school, some only primary school and some had not attended school at all.

In response to questions asking what they liked to do the most, many liked sports, and music was second. The students identified liking the social aspect of coming together and spoke of it as *convivio*, something that defies direct translation into English, but roughly translates usually to a gathering with food. They wrote about believing in themselves as a group, though some shared feeling bad for those other students not selected for the scholarship program. In terms of what they liked the most about the program, gatherings were most enjoyable for them.

Some of the students (especially the girls) mentioned feeling pressure to succeed and keep their grades up. Prior to this, some students had lost their scholarships due to their grades falling, so this may have contributed to the feeling of pressure. When asked about who inspired them to learn, students mentioned family members—often parents—and successful people they knew, like foreigners and donors. All students spoke about wanting to get good jobs in the future in order to give back to their families. Most of them had met their donors and expressed appreciation and gratitude for them. Another theme that showed up was the students' taking notice of the facilities at the Education Foundation, requesting air conditioning, more classrooms, a computer lab, and the completion of the bathrooms. They all emphasized wanting a computer lab, rather than a library, for themselves and the community, for homework purposes and business opportunities. The idea of a community lab was exciting to me, and I envisioned it as a learning centre for all members of Pueblo—and as another way to engage the community in education.

In response to what other courses of interest they would like to see, students mentioned dance of all kinds, cooking, drawing and art classes. They mentioned that they would like more games and dynamic teaching practices in their classes. I planned to follow up on these responses in my work with them. In response to questions pertaining to their volunteer work, they liked helping at the yearly fundraising auction and at the summer camp for kids. I saw this as yet another example of the collective lens the students carried with them, and their value of connectedness and collaborative activities.

Reflections on Findings of the First Survey

In reviewing the findings of this initial survey with the Director, a bilingual American woman, I noticed her enthusiasm when she shared the results with me, especially with regard to all of the students identifying their desire to go to university. I wondered how she might share this excitement with the students. At the same time I wondered about the cultural tendency to tell people what they want to hear.

We already had spoken about the need for me to begin to develop a trusting relationship—a cornerstone of action research—with the students for my inquiry, so we decided that sharing the results of the survey with the students was imperative. The Director was also excited by the students expressing a regard for the facilities and interpreted this as their taking greater ownership of the program, something we both saw as desirable. I imagined that if the students felt more invested in the education foundation, they would become more engaged in the learning process. Participation is also a process of consciousness-raising and thus an educational imperative in action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2006).

I was struck by the importance and influence of the donors on the students and thought it might be important to find ways to relay this back to the donors, especially newly enlisted ones. I had by then become a donor myself, and my natural inclination to be anonymous as a donor was challenged by this new information. Learning of the importance the students attached to their donors, I quickly decided it was better for me to be known to the student I was sponsoring and make use of my influence in this regard. Action research suggests that the researcher find ways to exercise educational influence in the hope that participants can learn how to deal with their own situations and lives.

Several issues arising for the survey concerned me. The director of the program and the results of the survey had told me that recently the community had become aware of the scholarship program, and of the *becados*. Though I understood the importance of local community support for education, I was concerned about competition arising among students and families and that these “chosen” students might begin to think of themselves as better than the others. I was left wondering how I might address this concern as I became more involved with the students. I also reflected on how to engage the other students in the community, those who were at great risk of dropping out.

I was also concerned about the pressure some of the girls identified with regard to keeping up their grades. I wondered to myself, how to understand that girls may feel this pressure more than boys? Was it related to the traditional gender expectations placed on them in their homes, leaving them less time to learn and study? I recalled the pressure young women in my culture expressed, struggling to be perfect at everything, which I had witnessed in the classes I taught in Vancouver.

I also continued to struggle with the academic criterion for acceptance in the Wings Program. After reflecting and becoming more informed through the literature about using grades as a measurement of learning through standardized testing, I placed less emphasis on this criterion, believing that educators need to teach students how to think, rather than teach facts.

I was very curious about the students’ response to the question about what else they wanted to learn and do more of, and I wondered how to create these opportunities for them. I

thought about Freire's idea to find out what people want to learn and then teach it to them (Freire, 1970).

I had mixed feelings about asking youth what career they want to pursue, as I think the belief that students should know their career goals at such a young age puts undue pressure on them and implies in this embedded question they should know this information at a young age. Nonetheless, I did view their responses as a sign of their ambition and a belief in the possibility of a different future for themselves. Through conversations with the education director, I came to understand that it was important to some donors to sponsor a student based on their career goals. Learning that this question might be useful for donors, I wondered if this question could be asked in a hypothetical way, something like, today, if you were to have any ideas about what career or what you would like to study more, what might that be?

I understood and was thrilled by students' requests for more games and more dynamic classes, suggesting more possibilities for collaborative learning. That most of the students mentioned their families as inspiring them was reassuring to me, given the research on the importance of family influence and involvement in education. Their goal of wanting most to give back to their families touched me deeply, reminded me of the cultural relational lens in which they perceived and experienced themselves. I wondered if they saw their parents as sacrificing for them in order to facilitate their continuing education.

Finding of Second Survey-July, 2013

In another meeting with the Director of the program, I learned about the results of the second survey. Again, we noted the students took time to answer the survey and were thoughtful about their responses. The results revealed that half of the students would continue

to go to school without scholarships, while half would not. This result further confirmed the documented importance of socioeconomic status to education. Students continued to assert their desire to want classes in the computer lab that was now taking shape. They reiterated that their favourite volunteer work was the annual fundraising auction. Much to my delight, this time they mentioned wanting more family involvement and some suggested that the Foundation specifically offer to teach English to their parents. Others suggested that the foundation could inform their parents of their achievements, and more about the program itself. Hosting an open house for the computer lab was suggested, an event which would provide an opportunity to invite their families to the education foundation facilities.

Further Reflections from Surveys

I was both saddened and pleased that half of the students' ongoing attendance was so influenced by securing a scholarship, and by how much of the decision to stay in school was connected to financial constraints. Clearly it made an enormous difference to offer them the finances to continue. Their insistence on wanting a computer lab reflected the importance of technology in the world today and I was delighted the lab was in process, allowing them to know we'd heard and responded to their wishes. Their mention of wanting more parental involvement was music to my ears. I knew from both my own experience and from the literature how important this was and was thrilled they, too, had recognized its importance. I was left wondering how I/ we might engage their families more and looked forward to meeting and greeting their parents whenever possible.

My Introduction to the Students

My initial aim in undertaking this study was to understand the minimal regard shown toward education in Pueblo, which I had witnessed during my previous visits. My question was, *how was it that although many in this community saw little value in education for the youth, the becados seemed to value it?* The Education Foundation colleague suggested that in order to explore this question, I interview/speak with the students directly.

I wanted to use appreciative inquiry influenced questions with groups of *becados* to explore who supported and encouraged them to attend school. In order to have this opportunity I would need to develop a trusting relationship with the students. I consulted with local colleagues who suggested that I attend the weekly extra classes of the *becados* to foster a relationship with them. This plan would allow me the access I needed to become familiar with the students and for them to know that I was interested in them and their education. Knowing my question was connected to community values, I was aware that much of my work was going to be community work, employing my networking skills acquired from my social work background. One of my mentors who had a long history in community work had reminded me of the usefulness of that background when I was describing to her what I was doing.

The information gained from the surveys was my introduction to both the ideas and wishes of the *becados*. My attendance at the meeting in which the survey results were shared with them provided an opportunity to meet them, 25 of them to be exact. The Director of the programs told students about the results of the survey and what we had taken from those results. I was introduced as someone who was interested in working with them and the program. I said a few things about myself in Spanish, finding it difficult to locate my words,

which I attributed to speaking spontaneously in a second language in a group. I wanted to allow my spoken words to be in response to the conversation, rather than rehearsed.

When I invited the students to ask me questions about myself and what they might want to know about me, a blank look appeared on their faces and silence prevailed. They call it *timido*, I have come to learn, and this experience invited me to reflect on the importance of finding ways to engage them in the future. I wondered how much of their shyness towards me was because I was new to them, an elder from the north, and that they were respecting the power and class differential. How much of this behavior could be understood as a humility that makes it possible for living together peacefully in small communities? How much was related to the lack of opportunities to participate in ways that developed more confidence to speak their opinions? I longed to create the kind of conversations and relationships with them that would allow them to access knowledge, create knowledge and develop understanding where none or little seemed to exist before (Gehart, Tarragona, & Bava, 2007). As different as it was, I began the process of connecting with the students—as a group and as individuals. There were two different classes to attend, one with the middle school *becados* and another with the high school *becados*. I found myself comparing my experience in the different classes, noticing both the similarities and differences—upon which I will comment later.

Inquiry Map

I have organized my inquiry process through the use of a timeline, both for myself, to create and organize my experience, and for the reader to follow along. Part one refers to the first year of my inquiry work; part two, the second year. Both periods lasted roughly five months each. I describe my actions in each part/year, linking them to my reflections, referring

back to previously mentioned components of action research, and showing how my learning led to new actions. I also summarize the five interviews/conversations I had with some of the *becados* and one of the local teachers in part one, all translated from Spanish. There are general reflections following each part that makes transparent my inner dialogue and learning.

My involvement with the *becados* in the Wings Scholarship Program was multifaceted and included fundraising, ongoing networking, establishing rapport and building relationships with the *becados*, ongoing reading of pertinent literature, and weaving my learning into my actions, hosting a gathering of *becados* and volunteers, interviewing/talking with *becados*, ongoing collaboration with the director and coordinator of the education foundation, networking with other key players in the community, collaborating on teaching practice, and maintaining regular contact with the program throughout the two year period and up to the present. My feminist-informed action research considered how gender arrangements were constructed, sustained, experienced and sometimes changed throughout this inquiry.

I employed the use of a journal to document and reflect on my experiences and actions, incorporating my learning into future action connecting change to learning as a result of experience, as recommended by Holly, Arhar, & Kasten (2005).

First Year

The initial survey results provided an impetus to begin my work with the *becados*. I was aware that already there were classes in cooking and art being offered to any of the youth in Pueblo. I began to network in the community, searching for foreigners and locals who could offer classes in art, dance, jewellery making and other areas in which the *becados* had expressed interest. Freire's idea-teach what they want to learn-stuck with me. Fortunately,

Pueblo is known for its artistic community of foreigners, and by then I had allies in the community, so within a short time we offered sign-up sheets for the students on various subjects of interest. I was operating from the premise that more options provide more opportunities, though I did notice at the time there was great confusion over scheduling.

I monitored the progress of these interest courses, only to find there was varying success with them. A few of the *becados* were committed to attending and enjoyed the classes, while others showed great interest at first, but did not sustain their participation. When trying out something for the first time, I knew from my reading of McNiff & Whitehead (2010), it was important to hold my ideas lightly and provisionally.

When I inquired of the students about dropping out of classes they spoke about how there was not enough free time for them to attend all the classes; due to seasonal employment many were helping work with their parent. They also reported that there were too many options which proved to be confusing. This was one of my first learnings from the students—that more choice is not always better.

When I asked groups of *becados* later in the interviews about a better format for the classes, they verified that one interest class per month was better suited for them. Learning from my own and others' experiences, I intended to apply this finding to future classes of interest. I witnessed firsthand the wisdom of Holly, Arhar, & Kasten (2005) who explain that critical reflexive practice involves questioning our assumptions and personal experiences and invites us to inquire into the perspective of the students.

While I was attending both classes with the scholarship students, one with the middle school *becados* and one with the high school group, I reflected on the difference between

them. The middle school *becados* seemed to have more trouble focusing and concentrating on the subject of the class and showed less interest in learning in general, whereas the older *becados* were able to focus more and showed more interest in learning. I wondered if younger students might not be as inclined to future-oriented thinking, largely living in the present day. Dewey suggests that not all students' progress at the same time in the same way.

I often found myself asking the students to focus in class (in Spanish) and I believe I became known and teased for this. I also noticed this lack of focus in everyday life in Pueblo in the adults. It was something I deliberately struggled to adjust to upon arrival in Mexico, and I coped by reframing it as multi-tasking, an asset and skill at times.

In my attempts to find optimal conditions for influencing student learning, I realized that respecting the students' right to speak and be heard encouraged the development of an atmosphere in which all students could learn. Part of my inquiry involved making judgments about when to be focused and directed and when to be open and receptive, knowing that being playful also opened up opportunities for learning (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). I noticed that in both classes there was a natural tendency for students to help each other and socialize which I admired and wanted to make better use of. However, at times socializing ran contrary to focusing. Learning how to incorporate the students' natural cooperative tendency was something I continued to reflect on, knowing that knowledge arises in the process of living, and from the voices of ordinary people in conversation (Reason & Bradbury, 2006).

I also became aware of how, with great regularity, many of the students were tardy. When they arrived late, I began to look at my watch and point at it, lightheartedly showing my disapproval, and I requested they make an effort to come on time next week. Of course the one

time I was a few minutes late, (networking on the way to class) the students made sure to let me know by mimicking my looking and pointing at my watch. I was then certain that my message about the importance of being on time for class had been understood as we all chuckled about it. I came to realize that exact schedules were not part of their lifestyle and time frames were flexible in their world view, so tardiness was not a sign of disrespect.

I was aware that, from a cultural lens, the students had adopted the Mexican *tiempo* (time) way of life, and I wanted to be respectful of this local practice. At the same time, the class was scheduled only for an hour so much of the class was missed due to tardiness. After some thought, I decided to address this issue by making some distinctions as to when it was important to be on time, in my mind—for instance, for school and work. Though difficult, I was trying to find the balance between open-mindedness and conviction while applying my own values.

In his book Beyond Culture (1976), Edward Hall applies the term “poly-chronic” to describe a cultural feature that is characteristic of Mexican behaviour, amongst others. It refers to a way of behaving where people do many things at a time. I found this way of being frustrating at times, being from a Western culture and a therapist taught to focus on one conversation at a time, while at the same time being in awe of Mexicans’ ability to multi-task. Hall classifies western culture as “mono-chronic”, doing one thing at a time. He goes to say that prior to industrialization all people were more poly-chronic and that mono-chronic is relatively new to humans. Because Mexico has been slow to industrialize, the poly-chronic way of behaving has survived.

In time, I began to learn the names of the *becados* and to develop relationships with all of them. I frequently saw them outside of class in Pueblo, and always made a point of greeting them, which was warmly received and helped me continue to build trust with them. I was struck by how publicly affectionate the people of Pueblo were and how much they touched, hugged and kissed, and found myself easily touching them when I talked with them. They seemed to respond well to this gesture and I reflected on how powerful touch is as a form of engagement.

I recalled that one of the tenets of action research is to declare your purpose and aim to all the participants to create a quality of engagement. As my inquiry question was related to the community, I knew it was important to meet the key players in Pueblo in order to introduce myself and tell them of my interest in promoting education. All of those I met with offered potential volunteer opportunities for the *becados*, so I knew it was important to at least inform them about the program, enlist their support, and find ways to collaborate with them in the near future.

My networking encounters included the *padre* (Catholic priest, literally “father”) in the community, the mayor, and the *Ejido*, a body consisting of approximately 12 locals, mostly men, constructed as part of the land reform in 1955 to represent local voices regarding land use in their vicinity. (the *Ejido* had previously given the land for the current Education Foundation site) The *Ejido* had four projects currently underway, two of which were environmental oriented projects; they noted that these projects would offer volunteer opportunities for the *becados*.

I attended my meetings with key players with a more fluent Spanish colleague, and regularly reported with the Education Foundation Director on the information gathered. I

began to reflect on the process of translation—as being another form of collaboration—and wondered how this process would influence the flow of the conversation, and who I directed my conversations to. I had wanted to ask the mayor what he would like Pueblo to be known for, but never got a chance to ask this, so I was left wondering what he would say? In these conversations, I learned that there was a population of 1500 people in Pueblo, with somewhere between 400-500 regular foreigners in addition.

Fortunately, most of the community leaders were aware of the Education Program, though not of all aspects of it. Some had family members who were *becados*, and all of them seemed to understand the importance of education, indicating their support for the program. Some spoke of how some of the *becados* were already volunteering with them. In the survey, although there was still some confusion as to how to qualify for the scholarships, the Mexican community in Pueblo was now aware of the program and of who received scholarships. Knowing the importance of both community and family involvement in education, these encounters were hopeful for me. The padre spoke of his concern that the youth of Pueblo would lose their family values and surrender to materialism, concerns I shared. I viewed materialism as promoting individualistic, capitalistic values.

Many opportunities presented themselves over time, and I shall describe them here by grouping them for the reader. By now, I had adjusted to the idea that moment to moment opportunities would continue to emerge that would allow me to work collaboratively with the *becados* and the community. I was aware that action research was an inquiry that invited a creative process, allowing me to explore my journey while not knowing the destination.

1. One such occasion involved a fundraising opportunity led by one of the local Mexican artists, who had passionately taught the *becados* classes on the history of Mexico, which I had attended. He suggested that the students make piñatas for Christmas time to sell at an upcoming flea market. Participating in the flea market allowed for more of a public presence, so I saw this as another opportunity to invite the community to become familiar with the scholarship program and quickly supported this initiative. A piñata is a papier-mâché figure, typically filled with candy for Christmas, birthdays and other celebrations. A game, involves blind-folded youth taking turns with a stick to hit the piñata. When it eventually breaks everyone frantically scrambles around to collect as many of the sweets as they can. Some of the students took interest in making piñatas and set to the task. I would regularly visit the piñata-making site, offering my encouragement and support.

2. At the same time, the idea emerged that students could sell at the flea market the earrings they had been making at the jewellery making class. I had initially offered the seed money for the materials, and the flea market provided a table and worked alongside the *becados* who had volunteered to sit there. Initially, most of the students appeared reserved, humble and shy with strangers, especially with the foreigners. The exception to this was one of the bilingual *becados*, who in the past had lived in the United States. I continued to be mindful about how much I participated in the selling process, wanting the students to practice engaging with foreigners. Aware of being in a position of power, I chose to step back, inviting students to take the lead. Though initially a price had been set with the *becados*, at times there was talk of lowering the price; fixed prices are rare in Mexico and bargaining provides a personalizing social exchange, so I was not surprised that this issue surfaced. When asked for my thoughts on the

matter, I took the position that it was their decision, inviting them to take more responsibility in this matter, allowing them to adhere to the traditional practice of negotiating a price with the buyer, and accepting the idea that the *becados* may be better informed in this matter.

3. Soon after the flea market, there was a group discussion—with those *becados* involved and the Foundation Director—as to where the money should be spent. This was another example of the endless opportunities to collaborate with the *becados*. Although suggestions were made by the Director, the boys seemed to want to spend it on more security for the Education Foundation site, while the girls expressed more interest in completing the bathrooms. Fortunately, both wishes were satisfied. Some *becados* also creatively offered ways to help with the work, and it appeared that those students involved in the flea market took pride in their achievement and contribution to the Education Foundation. I suggested to the Director of the Education Foundation that, to honour their contribution, we put a sign of some kind in the bathroom, making public their participation and allowing them to take more ownership.

4. As mentioned previously, I had become the scholarship sponsor of a student in Pueblo. The Education Director invited me to visit the family and the *becado* and though I was already familiar with this family, I was delighted to see them and officially meet their son. Of course, the family showed great gratitude towards me for sponsoring their son. Though this family had the financial means to keep all of their three children in school and clearly saw the value in education, this young boy was small and under-confident in his presentation, almost to the point of appearing invisible. I had the idea that being part of the *becado* program would increase his visibility, and in due course this did seem to happen. I was also aware that his

younger, yet bigger sister was an excellent student but because she was known to have problems with other youth and the teachers in the school, had not been recommended for the *becados* program. While visiting with the family I made sure to address her and to speak of the possibility of her becoming a *becado* in the near future. In future whenever I saw her, I always greeted her, showing my fondness toward her, in the hopes that this might motivate her to adjust her behaviour so she too could become a *becada*. I was appreciating the capacity to influence the future through acting intentionally in the now, remembering from my readings of McNiff & Whitehead (2010) that circles of influence are potentially infinite.

5. Shortly after my arrival the first year, in meeting with the Director, I became aware that many students who had been approved for a scholarship had yet to obtain sponsors. Though I had not experienced myself as a fundraiser in the past, the networker in me came to the forefront; I was determined to get all of those approved students a sponsor, and I proceeded to contact many of my generous friends. I also chose to be more vocal about my involvement with the Education Foundation Scholarship Program to locals who might be interested in becoming a sponsor, suggesting it was a great way to contribute to this community. An aim of action research involves “going public” throughout the process of inquiry, and this is what I did. Not long after various networking attempts, I was able to accomplish my goal of finding sponsors for all the newly approved *becados*, to my great satisfaction.

6. As a result of my accomplishment of obtaining sponsors, the Director asked me to accompany her on a home visit to inform a family that their daughter now had a sponsor. Upon arriving at their home, we were quickly informed that this young girl had not returned to school in order to stay home and help her mother. At this moment, I reflected on how gender roles

were sustained in Pueblo. Fortunately, both the mother and the daughter were present in this meeting, and when we told them that a donor had been located, both the mother and daughter seemed pleased. I knew that if the mother was supportive of her daughter's education, we might influence her to encourage the father to allow their daughter to return to school, now that the financial concerns were no longer present.

Apart from addressing the challenge of getting the parents' approval, the Education Foundation would need to re-enroll this student in school, if she agreed to return. We concluded our conversation with mother and daughter agreeing to convince the father of the merit of this plan, and of the Education Foundation taking the necessary steps to re-enroll the student in school which they did. After requesting help from another one of the Education Foundation Directors, adhering to the action research principles of working with others with specific intent, we were able to re-enrol the girl in school.

7. Shortly after, this quiet-spoken, creative student returned to school, to all of our great joy. Soon after, I had the fortuitous opportunity to see the girl's mother in Pueblo. I thanked her for sending her daughter back to school; she replied that she knew how important it was. Unfortunately, the following year, the mother passed away and her remaining family left Pueblo. However, this young student chose to stay with her god-mother and continued to attend school. Later, I learned she was contemplating whether to move to another nearby town with her sister or to move to where her father was living, where it was unclear whether she would attend school. When I talked with her about this difficult decision, I was not certain of her wishes, so I asked her what her mother would want her to do (using the influence of her mother to help her decide for herself, and what I previously referred to earlier as the

internalized other). In response, she smiled at me and quickly responded to attend school. She added that she was the only person in her family to stay in school. In the end, she chose to move to the nearby town, live with her sister, and continue to attend school, regularly telling other allies in Pueblo about her ongoing attendance. I imagined her mother would be pleased and proud of her. I knew I was.

8. As I became more vocal about the Education Foundation, and in particular the Scholarship Program, more foreigners began to offer donations of money and useful articles. Grateful, I accepted all offers, making sure that all offerings were given to the logical places and that the generous donors were thanked and informed of the use to which we'd put their donations. Though it is not natural for me to be public about my work, I continued this practice with specific intent throughout my inquiry.

Simultaneously, as I was becoming more informed on the criteria set for scholarship students, I was undertaking my comprehensive literature review on rural education and becoming aware of the issues which determined attendance- socioeconomic status, gender, family size, age, sibling order, and the education level of parents and their involvement. I discovered many parallels between my experience and my readings. Some of the *becados* certainly had parental support and encouragement. Financial support seemed to be a significant factor, and the idea that daughters were often kept home to help their mothers take care of the family, especially when the economics of education were factored in, was evident in Pueblo.

9. In response to the students' request in the survey for a computer lab, the Education Foundation Director proposed that we enlist a previous resident in a video project to garner

funds for the lab. I was asked to collaborate on this project and suggested that we involve the students. This idea fits well with action research principles of collaboration and involving participants. It was also supported by one of the active volunteer foreigners in the community, who not only taught English to many of the students in the community, but was also a donor and a major contributor to Pueblo.

I proposed that we ask those students who were willing to be interviewed on camera—being mindful of their humility and timidity—to speak about how a computer lab would be helpful to them in their lives, and offered some seed money for the project. In doing so I was aware that this invitation would offer another opportunity for students to take more personal responsibility for their learning endeavours. The results of this video can be seen at www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRA2vg5FBw4&feature=player_embedded.

10. The next issue that emerged related to the requirement that *becados* attend an additional weekly class at the Education Foundation. By now, the Education Foundation Director and Coordinator realized that not all students were attending, and an ongoing discussion ensued about how to handle this. It was decided that all instructors would be expected to take attendance and those *becados* missing more than two classes would be required to meet with the Foundation Director and/or Coordinator. This decision was based on the assumption that student absence may reflect a change in their lives that required investigation. Though I wanted to encourage the students to be more accountable, I reflected on the benefits of making school attendance obligatory and also on how valuable the additional classes were to the students. I wondered how the classes could become so interesting that attendance would not be a challenge?

One of the female *becadas*, Maria⁸, did not show any interest in attending the classes, yet was clearly a good learner. We learned that due to the recent separation of her parents and return of her mother and siblings to Pueblo, Maria was not connected to the other youth here. One of the Education Foundation board members arranged a meeting with her, and in this case, her aunt and uncle, as it was suggested that her mother was not supportive of her being in the program or in school. It happened that Maria's uncle, the current mayor, and his wife, a close ally of Lupita, were both very supportive of education. I was asked to attend this meeting with another Education Foundation board member to discuss the issue of class attendance, which I did. I was told there were family issues: her mother was not behaving in an acceptable way in the community and I chose not to participate in this part of the conversation. I imagined that the parameters for women living in Pueblo were very restricted and applied my practice from my counselling past of not criticizing or judging parents; in my past clinical experience, I found it was natural for children to show their loyalty to their parents, no matter what had happened.

Though I must confess that I did not understand a lot of what was said in this meeting, I later learned that somehow I was able to convey my caring through my actions and minimal words to Maria, and she agreed to attend classes. I reflected on the many ways caring can be expressed. As well, I was left thinking about whether it would be a good idea to create some kind of mentoring for new *becados*, so that they could feel included and welcomed at the beginning. I also pondered the value and relevance of the classes we offered them and

⁸ A pseudonym

wondered how we could improve those classes in some way to meet their already-existing needs and interests.

11. The next opportunity presented itself: a possible collaboration and participation in another community program with a local environmental organization (NGO). This organization had started a community garden in Pueblo, and had invited school children to participate. I was aware that some of the *becados* were doing volunteer work at this community garden and recognized there was an overlapping interest. Being a long-term gardener and long term mostly vegetarian myself, I saw great value in trying to teach the youth of this community about growing food, and eating fresh vegetables—not a local practice. I reflected on the process of how communities adapt to new practices, not being able to make sense of them at first, yet knowing something has happened. I offered to help with organizing and inviting people, and liaised with another (mostly foreigner-run) community garden in Pueblo, of which I was a part. I attended this opening, offered my help in various ways, did indeed know some of the youth there, and was pleased to support this community endeavour. I was applying the action research principle of collaboration and living in coherence with my values.

12. The next opportunity to be involved in local education that arose was an invitation from one of the Education Foundation Directors to meet with the other teachers informally, and I welcomed the chance to attend. Action research encourages flexibility and openness, acknowledging opportunities that arise spontaneously. Further, it requires inventiveness and creativity, all of which was in line with my way of being. At the meeting with the teachers, I also met one of the older *becados*, now living and attending university in Mexico City, who was visiting for a brief time. After meeting him, I asked if he would be willing to talk with me,

and he naturally obliged me, which indicated his willingness to help. This was my first interview/conversation with a *becado* to try and understand how it was that education was relevant to him and so, seizing the moment, I decided to do it solo, speak in Spanish, recording the interview to translate later for fear that I might miss something in the translation.

My questions were influenced by appreciative inquiry, which seeks to focus, explore and amplify the factors and forces involved in organizations that serve to nourish the human spirit (Cooperider & Srivastva, p.131, 1987). Some of the appreciative inquiry–influenced questions were prepared to initially guide the process, while others I posed in response to the conversation. Viewing the interview as an informal discussion allowed me to access the student’s perspective, inviting him to use his own words and language to describe his experience rather than respond to predetermined categories, thus providing richer data according to the writing of Gehart, Tarragona, & Bava (2007). I conceptualized these interviews as a dynamic and organic, generative process, clarifying the meaning of specific words or phrases, and working to negotiate new understandings.

My questions emerged from three domains: wanting to know how things work; a practical need to understand; and a critical sense of the social, cultural, political and economic realities (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2005). Trying to understand his perspective, I asked the following questions:

1. Who inspired you to pursue education?
2. What do you like to learn?
3. When did you become aware that you liked to learn?
4. Who encouraged and helped you to learn?

5. What makes a good teacher?
6. How does obtaining an education help in your life and your family?
7. What are your dreams?
8. What do you like about the scholarship program?
9. Do you think that the government wants its people more educated?
10. How do you communicate with your mother?
11. Who is proud of you?

During this conversation, I noticed this particular *becado*, whom I will call Juan as a pseudonym, took the time to reflect on the questions posed. This stood out for me, having not noticed much reflective thinking in my conversations with the younger *becados*. Juan⁹ began by talking about how he knew he wanted to be a lawyer in elementary school and had the idea that if he could study he could maybe become one. He held onto this idea through school, and his mother was the only one who supported the idea that he could do whatever he wanted. Juan then spoke about how he liked to learn about culture, geography, and environmental science, learning new things and new ways of doing things—in general, he described a love of learning.

Juan described his family as always having been poor, and stated that he was motivated to help them have a better life. He then mentioned that the one historical person that motivated and inspired him was Benito Juarez, a Mexican statesman and a past president of Mexico. Juarez was particularly inspiring to Juan as a role model because he, too, had grown up

⁹ A pseudonym.

poor, was of indigenous heritage (Zapotec) and yet became a four time president of Mexico. He is regarded by most Mexicans as the greatest statesman and known for his philosophy that respect for all people is the foundation of peace. At this moment, I experienced an epiphany, remembering how inspiration can come from historic figures, from others that we might not have had direct contact with, and from deceased family and friends. I was aware that I had been inspired throughout my life by my maternal grandmother, despite her absence for the last 40 years. This was one of those moments of forgetting the already *known*, when extraordinary revelations are made in what might start out as very ordinary moments (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2005). I was making my implicit knowledge explicit. I reflected on the benefit of remembering to ask this question to others in future interviews/discussions?

Juan went on to mention that his family and friends have encouraged him, are proud of him, and how this in turn has inspired him, clarifying the relational aspect of inspiration. He spoke of wanting to contribute something to better society, verifying his prior inclination to be helpful to me. I learned that his only friend/family member who has continued in education is a cousin currently studying architecture. Juan spoke of some of the barriers to being educated - the long distances he travelled to go to school, and that the one and only teacher he'd had through primary school was not very inspiring. I reflected and commented on Juan's strong will and determination that fed his persistence to become educated. Juan said he did have some good teachers, particularly one teacher later in high school who was full of knowledge of Mexico, which motivated him to think more about his country. Juan described this inspiring teacher as kind, with a good heart, adding that a good teacher was someone who was always trying to expand your knowledge, have human contact with you and someone you are able to

confide in and trust. I thought this was a comprehensive description and reflected on how the power of being a good teacher comes at the same time with enormous responsibility.

Juan then spoke about the importance of being a good student: to be curious, investigate and study. In response to the question about how education can help him, he said his family can have more esteem, be proud of him, which in turn can elevate his community. This response reminded me of the collective sense of self. He said, It's like creating a new and special space in relationships between people. What a great way of expressing relational being, I thought! Juan spoke of the influence that becoming more educated can have in his village, pointing out how infrequently this happens in rural areas in contrast to city life, where a lot more people study. Juan explained his belief that education is necessary to have a foundation to live and for socialization: Those who do not go to school don't have the same way of conversing and don't have a solid base to be able to communicate all the time.

Juan related how his friends in his Pueblo and his village now congratulate him and say they knew he could do it. He then went on to talk about how education makes it much easier to get work, with the principal benefit of being able to help his family. When asked about his dreams, he said this was a difficult question that he had thought about many times, again demonstrating his ability to reflect. He dreamed of becoming a lawyer one day, to have a nice office that is well known, and to run a business. He wants to improve his life, to be able to help his mother so she does not have to work anymore, to help his brothers, cousins and friends and to help others who are studying, which suggested a mentor-like role. He dreams of having a house in the future, to help whomever he can, and to make changes in society. Later, I wondered, *what changes would he like to make in society?* I wished I had asked.

When asked about learning, Juan spoke about how to become educated requires money, so that makes it difficult for everyone to study and for this reason, people are more likely to work than study. Aware of the added difficulty for girls, he stated “For girls, it is harder; due to chauvinistic attitudes, they do not let them study. You aren’t going to study, you are going to get married, so why would you need to study? You need to work.” I appreciated his ability to critically analyse the machismo attitude inherent in this thinking, and in his culture. This speaks to the influence of education regarding gender equality. Juan then spoke about how, whenever he returns home, he feels only responsible for himself, but when he is studying he feels more pressure to be responsible to his family, and his pueblo. I found this to be a poignant way to express the experience of living in two worlds and holding multiple perspectives on responsibility.

Juan went on to say that for some people, being far away from their families keeps them from being motivated to study. He spoke about the usefulness of the Scholarship Program and how, although there are other such programs throughout Mexico, it is important to have a local one because it makes it possible for locals to study. He suggested that the federal government should have a program like in the U.S., where they pay for the students’ expenses and then later you repay them. Recognizing the political nature of interviews, I asked him whether he thinks the government wants more education for its people. He said they are always trying to reach the pueblos through education and that the subject of education is ever-present in politics in Mexico, even though progress in education is happening very slowly in the pueblos.

Juan claimed that a majority of the children in the pueblos¹⁰ are not in school and that this has great effect on the country, noting his view that the government is responsible for all the children.

When asked about whether it is hard for people to leave their family, he replied that it is very difficult to leave for a place that is so much bigger. In sharing his personal experience he said that initially he went to a program in Puerto Vallarta (4 hours north), and to be in a big city scared him, not knowing where he was going, and what he would do if he got lost. The city was a completely different world for him he said, though in time he learned his way and the fear started to lessen.¹¹

When Juan later had to go to Mexico City to continue his studies, he said he panicked and fear set in. He spoke of the challenge of leaving familiar things— family, town, friends, customs and way of life—and though difficult, once you’ve done so, you have a broader knowledge of the world. He spoke of how his mom was always there for him, helping him with money and doing everything for him, and how he communicated regularly with her by telephone. Though she knows what is happening with him, she allows him to be independent and do what he wants. He spoke also of how his donor had helped him by really being there for him and assisting him with being able to get himself to leave. He also spoke of the Founder of the Education Foundation that had made it possible for him to study in Mexico City, offering him a scholarship for university.

¹⁰ In this case, it means small villages

¹¹ I had noticed that many locals in Pueblo were only familiar with their local streets/areas, and I was not sure whether many knew how to read maps.

Juan spoke of his influence on his family and cousins, how they would like the opportunity to do the same level of studying he's done and to know other parts of the country. He reported that they are more motivated to study now in order to live the same way he lives.

When asked how to motivate others to study, he said that motivation comes from the parents and the home and that someone must bring with them the desire to learn and to get educated: "Because a child does not know what he wants, the parents can help motivate the child to learn and tell them they can be what they want to be in life." He said that scholarships inspire people to learn and they are much more motivated when they get them. This is the premise of the Scholarship Program, and I could only hope this idea was alive and well with the other *becados*. Finally Juan spoke of the responsibility he feels to do something good for society. I appreciated that this young man now understood that helping others was not limited to his own circle of family and friends. After the lengthy conversation, I thanked this *becado* and gave him a gift of a battery-operated tea candle. It was a symbolic gift, offering a way to keep his dreams alive, which I explained to him. I should tell the reader that I met his proud mother and was sure to tell her she had reason to be proud, acknowledging her good mothering and great influence on her son. I also saw Juan the following year, and upon seeing me he told me his candle was almost out of light so I arranged through his mother for him to receive plenty more batteries.

13. At about the same time, the annual silent auction fundraiser planning began. This event had happened for the past eight years and the money raised funded the infrastructure of the Education Foundation, along with a 25% donation for the public schools. Prior to this inquiry, I had become extremely involved organizing the silent auction and had begun the

practice of bringing a bicycle from Canada to make use of for my time there, only then to auction it off before my departure. To my great pleasure, this gesture has succeeded in attracting attention, soliciting significant funds, and consequently more foreigners also offered their bicycles to the silent auction. My fundraising efforts for this event were now focused on gathering a group of English-speaking volunteers to work and collect items for auction, and I worked in close collaboration with the Education Foundation Director and another colleague. Many organizational meetings were held, countless items were collected and stored, then categorized and priced. I coordinated the bike section of the auction, which entailed making all the necessary arrangements for pick-up and delivery of bikes.

The scholarship students had traditionally been involved in volunteering their help towards the event as well, and so being a part of it again provided me with yet another opportunity to work collaboratively with them. According to the survey results, volunteering at this event proved to be well liked by the *becados*. This was a sign of their enlarging their circle of helping others and taking on more responsibility for their own education and for the entire community,

Having now become better acquainted with the *becados*, it was a pleasure to work with them on the auction this year. I decided to provide name tags for all of them, to identify them for the attendees and their donors, thereby giving them a more visible presence and making the *becado* program more public. It was then that I learned how many names the *becados* had, a minimum of three, always acknowledging both family ancestries. Mexicans use their paternal surname more like a middle name and their maternal name as a surname, though the paternal

name is used when addressing someone directly and in business. This tradition has its roots in the Spanish colonial history where it was a way to denote race and class distinctions.

I sensed an excitement in the *becados* anticipation of being a part of a community event that would benefit them. Initially, they helped with the set-up of the tables for items to be auctioned, doing whatever was asked of them. Some of them took part in the local entertainment while others helped out doing various tasks throughout the event. At the end of the night, they helped with the clean-up and take-down. This event would not have been possible without their contribution. Not only was there a sense of solidarity and collaborative teamwork, but a collective sense of pride during the event, culminating with a sense of success.

Now that the video created to obtain funds for the computer lab was completed, arrangements were made to preview it at the event. This proved to be an excellent way of letting the community know about this project and it did eventually, in fact, inspire an anonymous donor to give a large amount of money shortly thereafter, contributing to the creation of the computer lab. Though I realized the importance of collecting significant funds, another measure of success that I observed was increased local Mexican involvement and presence at the event both with bidding and in the audience when the entertainment was being presented. I had been continuously reflecting on the importance of involving the local Mexican community and wondering what we could do to increase it.

14. Shortly after the fundraising event, I wanted to host a gathering, something the *becados* had indicated liking in the survey. My reasons were numerous. I wanted to thank all the volunteers for their help, show the computer video to everyone, celebrate our success, and talk about the plan of what to do with the funds collected. I also wanted to use this gathering to

create a meaningful exchange between the foreigners who had volunteered or were donors and the *becados*. Finally, I wanted to ask some of the *becados* to volunteer to talk with me. I collaborated with the Director on planning this gathering. Knowing that food is a necessary part of any gathering, one of my biggest challenges in planning the gathering, was what to provide, being aware by then of how much sugar and junk food the youth in Pueblo consumed. After consulting with colleagues and some of the *becados*, I discovered pizza was liked by all and to drink I chose to offer juices and a local hibiscus beverage, *jamaica*.

Having already learned that most of the *becados* had been conditioned to behave in a way that could seem timid around authority figures and foreigners, I realized it would be important to prepare an exercise to invite the *becados* into direct conversation with the volunteers. I saw this as an opportunity for them to begin to understand why foreigners would want to contribute to their community, something that no doubt was hard for them to make sense of. I pondered how to do this and came up with the idea of creating two circles, one inner and one outer, the outer being the *becados*, seeing there were more of them. The circles would rotate to allow mutual engagement. After introducing ourselves, I proposed that the *becados* talk about what they liked about being a part of the Scholarship Program, how it helped them, and the volunteers would talk about the reasons they volunteered. The arrival of the *becados* was carefully coordinated so that they would all come together. This was a deliberate gesture to ensure they could locate the house and arrive in a timely manner. Once most of the participants arrived, and were welcomed, I made a point of making sure everyone had nametags so everyone could address each other by name and be more familiar with each other

in the future. I explained the proposed exercise, both in English and Spanish, and I asked everyone to be respectful of the local language and try to speak Spanish.

I became part of the inner circle of volunteer foreigners and the *becados* automatically formed groups, as there were more of them. I responded to the question as to why I volunteered by saying that I thought education would give them more opportunities in their lives that I wanted them to have. Within a short time, some foreigners arrived who had clearly adapted to Mexican *tiempo*. Being the host, I took a break from the circle to explain to the newcomers the exercise and it was at this precise moment that I looked around and saw the *becados* having direct conversations with the volunteers. The uniqueness and preciousness of this moment brought tears of joy to my eyes and deeply touched me. (photos on page 2, & 3)

When the circles had fully rotated, one of the education founders decided to take it upon himself to summarize the conversations he had both had and overheard. I was struck by the shift in energy coming from an interactive group exercise back to a didactic format and decided to interrupt him after a short time, knowing that I would need to talk with him about this matter later.

I also was aware that I, as a foreign woman, was publicly interrupting a Mexican man who was one of the founders of the Education Foundation and a close, well regarded friend. I viewed this as another teachable moment for the *becados*. After that, everyone was invited to feast and in short order all of the pizzas were consumed. Much to my chagrin, some volunteers had brought dessert, which was consumed with even more voraciousness. I again reflected on the amount of sugar consumption and wondered how it interfered with the students' ability to focus, concentrate and learn, not to mention the negative effects on their health. We then

viewed the video; everyone seemed pleased with the result and those on camera saw their contribution for the first time.

It was after the viewing of the video that the conversation ensued regarding the ways in which the money collected would be spent on the infrastructure of the Education Foundation. The Director asked if any of the students would be willing to be interviewed and talk with me. One of the students asked whether they would have to be on camera, and once it was clarified that this was not necessary, seven students volunteered. I organized a schedule with them and grouped them by gender, based on an intuition that it might be easier to keep them focused this way and to create a space for different gender perspectives to emerge. I had one group of three boys, and one group of four girls. Later on, another older *becado* agreed to meet with me alone. The advantage of group interviews over individual interviews is the potential it offers to encourage more conversation by offering more opportunities for all respondents to interact, and inviting the power of influencing each other to come forth. I had asked a bilingual foreigner recently familiar with the *becados* to attend these conversations, to allow for them to happen in Spanish, and having their responses translated on the spot, so I could engage in a more in depth conversation with them. I experienced working with this translator as another form of collaboration and reflected on the influence it would have on the direction and flow of the interviews.

Though many of the guided questions had been translated, the *becados* needed more clarification. I had noticed prior to this that their exposure to these type of reflective questions was limited, I had planned, therefore, allowing time for clarification. Though by now I was aware that reflective questions seemed strange to them and hard to answer, I was committed

to continuing to ask them to encourage them to develop the practice of reflective thinking, as I saw great value in it.

I began the interview/conversation process with the three male *becados*. The first question posed to them in Spanish was as follows: who inspired you to learn and go to school? All of them responded that it was their family (sometimes mother, father, grandparents, siblings), friends or teachers. When I asked, who helps or supports you to go to school?, they needed clarification after which they said their teachers help them in school by explaining things to them so they could understand, and this encouraged them to try on their own. In response to the question, what is good about education?, they talked about getting good work, helping their families, obtaining a house, doing the things they wanted to do, and being someone in life. In terms of their dreams, they expressed a desire to travel (e.g., to Canada) and to have more services in their pueblo, like hospitals, and universities, so they would not have to travel for those services.

I invited them to ask me questions, as a way to invite their curiosity to surface; they asked the following: How did you come to be here? Why I was working with the Education Foundation. Will you stay here longer now? What is your work? I responded that it was my fifth time here, that I want to encourage students to learn, and believe that education would give them more opportunities in their lives. I told them I taught counselling at a university, needed to return to work and had recently returned to school as a student because I still loved to learn. Intending to use my influence here, I wanted to demonstrate through my actions that I was committed to life-long learning. I was pleased they asked me questions this time and I attributed this to being in a small group and them feeling more familiar with me. I then gave

them a battery-operated tea candle—explaining it was symbolic, a way to keep their dreams alive—and thanked them for helping me.

The second interview was with the four female *becadas* who also said that it was their family who supported and encouraged them to learn as well as their teachers. They also spoke of how their parents had little education. I asked them what things do you like to learn, they responded by saying that they want to know more about things they do not know, and to understand things better. When asking, how will education help you in your lives, they said in the future it would help them with further studies, to give back to their parents who did not get a chance to go to school, and to find good work. They all spoke about how their mothers, in particular, were encouraging them to study and go to school.

Asked, what are your dreams, they all said to study, get work and help their families. I asked, what is the best format for extra classes, they said one at a time was enough because they were busy working on weekends, spending time with their family and doing homework. They spoke of how one of the teachers at the Education Foundation inspired them by passionately telling them stories of the history of Mexico, inviting them to imagine what it was like to live in another time and world.

I invited the girls to become curious and ask me questions, and was pleased that they too felt comfortable enough to do so. They asked why I came here, why I liked to teach, and what I do in my life and work. I told them I live alone in Canada (making it clear that this was possible as a woman), am a teacher of therapy and education at a private university (this too was possible), am interested in how we can engage students to learn more, and I am focusing on this area in my work with them. I also told them that the things I like to do (yoga, dance,

gardening, and being amongst friends) I could do in Pueblo, and mentioned how safe I felt in Pueblo. Feeling safe is a high priority in Mexico today, due to frequent reporting of violence related to the drug cartels. I gave them the tea candles, explaining the symbolism, and one of the students likened it to dream catchers. I then thanked them for their time.

The third interview/conversation I had was with one of the older *becadas*¹² with whom I had become more familiar because of my previous contact with her family. Juanita was currently studying to take the admission test to get into medical school and was working at her parents' store. In this individual conversation I did use a translator and even though she understood some English, she spoke only in Spanish. Juanita relayed that her father encouraged her to go to school so she could have a future. He was not able to go past secondary school himself and wanted something different for his children. Also, her mother, siblings, friends and previous teachers (one of whom I later interviewed) had encouraged her and influenced her to study further. Juanita described that she works in the store and helps clean the house when she is not studying, and that everyone in her family works hard. Though she liked the extra classes, especially dancing and cooking, she had little time to attend them. She spoke of a previous volunteer who had taught her in the past, whom she liked and thought was a good person. She was currently trying to get into medical school because she wanted to help people, especially children.

Juanita was very clear that her intention was going to study something in university; what she studied depended on her test scores. Like her older sisters, she did not want a boyfriend,

¹² I refer to this becado later in part two on page 157 and will use the pseudonym Juanita

and had no plans of having children. (Both of her older sisters had previously gone away to university, one becoming a lawyer and now teaching at the new highschool). I had been wondering about birth control education in Pueblo so decided to take the opportunity to talk with Juanita about it. She told me that they do get information on birth control methods in school and that free condoms were available at the health centre in town. I was delighted to learn this and made sure to mention it to others at the appropriate times.

When asked if she had any questions for me, she was curious as to why I was asking her these questions. I told her I had gone back to school for my doctorate, the topic of learning was very interesting for me, and I saw myself as a student of life. I said that I wanted to help the students in Pueblo to learn so they would have more opportunities in their life, and that I was concerned, especially for the girls. I told her I had spoken with other *becados* about the same things and that they too had said that their families encouraged them to study and that they wanted to help their families once they got good jobs.

I shared with Juanita about the *becados* possibly thinking that they might be better than other students, suggesting they were just different, not better. After she took a few moments to reflect on this, she agreed with this idea. I told her she could inspire other girls in Pueblo, as her sisters had inspired her. As with the others, I gave her a candle to keep her dreams alive, and she quickly understood the symbolism of it. We also spoke about the possibility of a high school in Pueblo, which she was equally excited about.

My last interview/conversation was with one of the middle school teachers. Because he was also on the board of the Education Foundation I had encountered him in the past. He spoke initially about how many of the students in Pueblo will not finish high school. I asked him for

the update on the new high school, and he said it could happen the following year and would start with the first grade in high school, that to begin with it would be located in the current middle school in the late afternoon, with the hope of building a separate high school in the future. The teacher claimed many people are waiting and hoping for the school to open this year. He agreed it would cost families significantly less for their children to attend a local high school, if it happens. Currently they repair everything themselves in the school, as there is no money from the government to do it. I told this teacher about the subject I was focusing on for my dissertation and some of the things the students had shared with me, including his good influence on them. I recognized that I could share this feedback with him in the hopes of further inspiring him.

The teacher spoke of his family and his 13 siblings, and explained that he was different from them in that he wanted to study more than the others. His mother wanted her children to study, he said, and his dad encouraged them to study as long as they wanted. He said that he has his master's degree at the present time, and would like to return to school to obtain his doctorate. Though it is difficult for him to support his nuclear family on the salary he earns as a teacher, he said he is nevertheless better off financially than his siblings.

I consulted with this teacher on the *becados* I sponsored, taking advantage of insider knowledge. He agreed that the girl I was privately sponsoring is a good learner and that the other student I was sponsoring needed more confidence. I thanked him for his time and for talking with me, and also gave him the symbolic gift to keep his dreams alive.

It was now time to prepare myself for my departure back to my life in Canada. I reflected on how to say goodbye to the *becados* and what message I wanted to leave with them, hoping

to use my influence wisely. I asked the Coordinator of the program to send a Facebook message (the way the students communicated with each other) to all the *becados* thanking them for all their help, wishing them and their families well, and declaring I would be returning this fall and would look forward to talking to them all to find out how they were keeping their dreams alive.

Reflections after Year One

At some point during this inquiry, it came to my awareness that the initial idea of interviewing the *becados*—to learn more about what sparked their interest in education—had only been a small portion of my work. By then, through *being* in the community in a more involved way, I had already come to understand what factors were at play regarding the minimal value attached to education in Pueblo. My original question as to why it was that education was not valued in Pueblo actually seemed like common sense to me now. What was once unknown before becomes assumed.

I was sad to leave Pueblo, having enjoyed rural community living, my involvement with the *becados*, and my colleagues. Clearly I had benefited from feeling a part of the community, had gained a sense of belonging and connection. The hospitality and warmth of the people I met was unsurpassed, and had added a special dimension to my life in Mexico. I remembered Meg Wheatly's premise that we are meant to live in community, that it is our natural state of being. I was aware as I was heading home of the differences of my Canadian culture and the big city where people suffer from the ill effects of isolation. I wondered how I could create more of a sense of community in my life there and was determined to find ways to bring home my experience of connection in Pueblo. Most foreigners that I had spoken to about this conundrum agreed that they had experienced and benefited from a sense of community in Pueblo that they

did not experience in their northern homes. I wondered how it was that although we preferred a strong sense of community we did not have or create it in our home lives. How to make sense of this? One way I found to keep my life in Pueblo alive at home was to converse about my experiences, sharing the highlights with anyone who even feigned an interest in it. This allowed me to stay connected to my enthusiasm and joy from my experience there.

Upon returning to teach in Vancouver, I was fortunate to have two Mexican students in my class, so I immediately began to practice and speak Spanish with them. I started to hear Spanish all around me now and felt a stronger Latino presence in Vancouver. I initiated more contact with friends nearby and hosted a potluck with neighbors. I was reminded of the importance of context and found it more difficult to sustain my momentum and interest in my inquiry, though I did find that writing and reading about it helped. I realized it had been the *doing* and *reflecting* that invited me to *be* so engaged in the inquiry. I was thrilled that I had deliberately planned to return to Pueblo in the next winter season, recognizing that research, like learning, was never ending.

I maintained contact with the Education Foundation Director and coordinator while absent from Pueblo, which helped me continue to feel connected to the students, the community and my inquiry. I learned that indeed the new high school had started, though late, and the first year was being offered in the middle school in the late afternoon.

Year Two

I arrived in Pueblo a little earlier the second year, eager to jump back into my inquiry. I now felt I understood how little education was valued in this pueblo, and was convinced that my efforts should move in the direction of offering more relevant practical knowledge in the

becado classes, and more engaging teaching, tapping into the students' natural way of learning together.

I enjoyed arriving earlier in Pueblo and immediately walked about town. I was delighted to be warmly greeted by many of the families and *becados* who welcomed me back. I felt better positioned to find ways to contribute to the youth and their families in Pueblo this time, feeling more familiar with them and more able to adopt an insider perspective. I could feel the enthusiasm about the start of tourist season beginning, offering a much-needed boost to the local economy, and I became aware how much Pueblo depended on tourism. I was uneasy about this dependency, knowing how fragile the tourist economy is in Mexico due to the widespread fear of violence, regularly reported by mainstream news. Back home it was rare to have a conversation about Mexico and not hear concern about travelling in Mexico. In Pueblo the suffering from the downturn of tourism and the economy in the past few years had already become apparent in Pueblo as in other parts of Mexico. I viewed this economic dependency on Northern tourists as another argument for the necessity of promoting education in Pueblo, hoping it would open up more opportunities to the youth.

1. My involvement and collaboration with the students began almost immediately. My first visit to Maria, whom I had been concerned about (mentioned in part one, p. 132), was troubling. To my dismay, I found that Maria was no longer attending school and was no longer eligible for a scholarship because she did not meet the grade criteria and had not attended the additional obligatory class at the Education Foundation. In speaking with Maria about this, I asked if I were to privately fund her if she would attend the local high school, now offering the first year. She responded favourably to this idea so I proposed she calculate the costs to show

me what she needed, thereby engaging her in a collaborative process allowing her to convince me of her motivation, and to show personal responsibility. We agreed to talk again the following day. Coincidentally, I was asking her uncle to assemble my bike for me, (something he had done in the past) and allowing my learning to lead my action, I asked him to support me in encouraging his niece to return to school.

When I returned the next day to this Maria's home, she had neatly listed and calculated the cost of her education. Seizing the moment and knowing that school had begun months earlier, I gave her the required money. In order to create a mentor-like relationship with this Maria where I could foster support, trust and a common commitment I wanted her to know where I lived. At this moment her uncle kindly offered a bike to enable Maria to ride with me to see where I lived, demonstrating his support. Upon arrival at my home, I invited her to come and visit me at any time in the future. The following day, I learned that Maria had returned to school. She did visit soon after with her aunt, who was someone I had met the previous year and clearly a big supporter of her niece and of education. Maria appeared happier and more engaged in life, and her aunt expressed appreciation for my gesture. Later, when I saw this Maria's mother in Pueblo, she also appeared happy and I made a point of thanking her for allowing her daughter to return to school, fully aware that she had relied on her daughter's help in the home in the past.

2. My second project involved my returning to an idea from the previous year about introducing a way for the older *becados* to mentor the new ones. I discovered that although *mentor* is also a word in Spanish, many students were not familiar with this word or the type of relationship it represented. I consulted with various Spanish speakers about this, and some

suggested the word *tia/tio* (aunt, uncle) fit this description, while others offered the idea of godmother/godfather, *padrino/madrina*. Understanding the virtue of insider knowledge, I then decided to consult with some of the older *becados*, who in the words of Vygotsky (2007) *more knowledgeable other*. Mentoring is something they do naturally in Pueblo, I was told, and I was reminded of the benefits of collective cultures in general and specifically of Pueblo life. I decided that the idea of mentoring was not worth pursuing further. Incorporating my learning from my work and reading the previous year, I had begun to understand how the locals viewed education and now found myself more focused on finding ways to encourage and inspire learning.

3. However, later, the idea of mentoring occurred to me again when talking to the Director about the low level of math, reading, writing and English skills in Pueblo, that one of the older female *becadas*, Juanita¹³ that I had interviewed/talked with last year, was currently attempting to gain acceptance into medical school, after previously not passing the admission test. I thought it might be helpful if Juanita were willing to talk about her experience what she had learned to the younger *becados*. This idea was based on believing in the power of influence among peers. I assumed that *becados* would not only find Juanita's experience helpful, and would listen attentively to her, but also might see her as a local resource. I also wanted to invite Juanita to take more responsibility for being helpful to others outside of her family and friends, and to reap the benefit of this experience. As recommended by Reason & Bradbury,(2006) I wanted to balance the hierarchical structures inherent in the educational system and create a

¹³ Mentioned on page 148 as Juanita, a pseudonym

more democratic structure for the benefit of all the students. I was committed to involving others in a respectful way and I was adhering to my values and beliefs that knowledge comes from many different sources. I met with Juanita and I presented my request, suggesting she had learned some important things that would be helpful for the other *becados* to hear and know about. Though she was agreeable, it seemed she needed support, so I made a note to myself to check in with her in the near future. As well, I suggested she bring her sister if she would like, applying previous learning that it was more likely to happen if she came with someone else, in this case her sister, as is often the practice in Pueblo.

In the end, after much encouragement, Juanita did arrive on her own and spoke with the older *becados* about her experience. She was able to overcome her shyness and presented herself with confidence. Juanita spoke of her experience and emphasized the importance of the *becados* taking their studies seriously if they wanted to attend university. I was in attendance for this and amazed by how focused and attentive the group was toward her, and impressed by their mostly pragmatic questions. Afterwards, I thanked Juanita profusely and told her how helpful she had been. She admitted to being nervous at the beginning also confessed that soon after she calmed down. I got the feeling she was proud of herself afterwards; I surely was.

4. I began attending classes with the older and younger *becados* again. Although I saw many new faces, I did not feel the same pressure to start from the beginning building trusting relationships with all them. Having now a core group from the previous year still present, I felt that there was enough of a sense of collective trust in the group.

I introduced myself and greeted the teacher when she arrived late, and was reminded about the Mexican approach to time. I decided to sit in on this class to observe both the

students' level of interest and the ways in which the teacher engaged the students in learning. Though I appreciated that this teacher, (an elementary teacher in the public system), was kind and soft-spoken, and I knew of her commitment to both the Education Foundation and education generally, I was not inspired by her way of engaging students. As I watched her engaging the students in a very traditional manner, I was reminded that teachers tend to follow the patterns learned from their own educational experience.

I consulted with the Education Foundation Director about my concerns and suggested that we might make better use of these classes if students were allowed to do homework and ask for help if needed. I had heard the students often talking about the amount of homework they had and knew that many parents did not have either the time or knowledge to help them with it. I wanted to offer students a place to work on homework together and engage *more knowledgeable others*. Coincidentally, I then heard that a recently arrived foreigner who was fluent in Spanish had offered to teach classes with this local teacher for the next few months. I began thinking of how to engage this generous woman, whom I had met in the past, in a collaborative relationship, and in the process to find ways to excite and invite the *becados* to be engaged in the learning process. After all, the circle of influence was potentially infinite. Inspired by Freire's ideas about education, I wanted to find out what it was that the students wanted to learn.

5. Around the same time, I was informed by the Education Foundation Director that there were still 10 students who had been approved for scholarships who did not yet have donors. Something about this I found to be terribly sad, so I set out to find donors for all the students who had been approved. I began to actively network in the community and became more

public about my inquiry and involvement with the Education Foundation. It was suggested to me by some foreigners to post information about the students who needed sponsorship on the local online message board. After obtaining the necessary information and consent from the education director, I did so. This action was very effective and in due time all the students obtained donors. In this process, many people became familiar with the work of the education foundation. I had decided now to openly declare within the *becado* program my bias of supporting the girls and those in the greatest financial need first. Additionally, I found myself taking more time to encourage the female *becadas* more regarding their ongoing education, and to engage with their families.

6. I became aware, while I was away in the north, that a new gym had been built, equipped, and opened. Further I became aware that this gym was being used both by the local Mexican community and the foreign community. When I spontaneously encountered one of the key players in the great achievement, I seized the moment to introduce myself, thank him for his contribution to the community, and talk about the Education Foundation. To my great delight, I learned that he, his wife and mother-in-law were already engaged in discussion with the Education Foundation about how they might collaborate. I also learned that the newly elected government was identifying obesity as a huge issue (pun intended) in Mexico now and was planning to apply a tax on junk food and pop. The gym could address health and fitness at the same time, as well as provide space and equipment for both the Mexican and foreigner community. I talked with him about whether they could offer a student rate to the gym and if we might suggest that some of the *becados* volunteer there.

7. At about the same time I learned that the government had also proposed an education reform, to come in to effect in January, 2014. Excited by the possibilities, I began to consult with locals about what changes were being proposed and how it would affect them, and to investigate this more on my own. Most of what I learned is previously mentioned in my literature review under Current Mexican Education (see p. 54). Essentially, it introduced standardized testing for all hiring and promotion of teachers, and set out to undermine the historically powerful teachers' union (SNTE).

8. I continued to attend the weekly classes with both age groups of *becados* and initiated a collaborative relationship with the foreign woman, Katy¹⁴ who had earlier volunteered. In our first class together, we only observed, and then spoke about what we could do differently together, while including the other local teacher. We agreed that any stories or lesson planned would attempt to engage the students in learning. We would offer relevant subjects/topics to insure interest. We would suggest they work in groups, thereby attempting to break through the traditional hierarchy which created barriers to learning and agreed to meet again before the next class to continue our strategizing.

We began initially with changing the physical environment; we organized the tables and chairs, in a way that was more conducive to group discussions, a political and strategic act, to be sure. Week to week, we would meet: Katy would start out suggesting some relevant topics and we would then discuss how to proceed so as to actively involve the students. She suggested the topic; for example, the benefits of volunteer work and how it made the *becados*

¹⁴ Another pseudonym

feel, and I suggested that we might begin by asking them to meet in pairs and talk about the first time they helped someone in their family, knowing by now that helping family was a common practice. We then thought we would ask them to stand up and share with everyone what they had said to their group. The day we facilitated this exercise was my first *real* lesson on the level and depth of the students' timidity and the severity of their indoctrination by an authoritarian structure. I witnessed their great reluctance to stand up and speak their ideas, having noticed that when they were in pairs there was lots of chatter and they appeared at ease. I wondered if it was because they did not have much opportunity to speak publically of their own experiences in school or in Pueblo, deciding now was the time and place to begin. I went around the circle, asking each student to stand and speak and many of them did so. I quickly offered appreciation by clapping my hands, each and every time.

One male *becado*, who was well liked and teased on a regular basis (in this context a sign of being well liked), was not willing to stand and speak, so his pair partner took what he had written and read it for him. Again, I learned that this organic process of helping was a creative way to deal with timidity and made a note to myself. Because I was fairly familiar with this *becado* and his family, I decided that I would talk with him alone in the near future about how important it was for him to learn to be able to speak his ideas, especially if he planned to attend university. I did follow up on this with him and he did, in fact, learn to speak up in class after that. I was aware that I was using the power I held as an outsider and person of influence to effect this change.

There was another *becado*, this time a girl who was new to me, who also refused to stand up and speak her ideas. Though she appeared confident, she refused to participate in this way.

However, the next time we met in class, I talked with her quietly, she did agree to stand and speak. Though I felt drained and frustrated at the amount of energy it took to *work* through the room to encourage all students to speak, I decided my efforts were worthwhile. Many stories were told and much was learned by the students about each other. I noticed all the students spoke about the times they had helped a sibling or other family member and how good it made them feel. We were making use of their natural practice to be helpful in their family to great effect. Interestingly, whenever I saw the young female *becado* that had initially refused to stand and speak up, she showed great delight at running out of the store where she worked to come and greet me with great enthusiasm. I came to look forward to these moments.

I found the same exercise of standing and speaking about themselves to be totally different. They were much less timid, and exhibited a greater level of confidence than their younger peers. The local teacher mostly observed these classes, jumping in to clarify things when needed. I made a point of speaking with her after one of these classes. She said she liked these classes and spoke of wanting to talk to the other teachers about using our ideas about how to teach, admitting that many of the teachers were bored. The circle of influence was indeed infinite.

After these two classes, Katy and I talked about and evaluated the experience. We agreed it was a lot of work to facilitate change, but we were encouraged because the students seemed engaged in the process, worked well in pairs and the topic chosen appeared relevant to them. Shortly after that, we met again to discuss the next subject she proposed for class: to identify problems in the community to promote more community concern and ownership. Katy suggested we then divide them into theme groups and ask them to generate ideas about how

to deal with these problems. Finally, one of them would be chosen to present their ideas to the class.

We set about our task, first with the younger *becado* group. Topics chosen by the students included the need for more economic development in Pueblo, and the overcrowding of Pueblo during Easter week. We, the teachers, each joined one group, offered our ideas, and sat alongside, observing their conversations. Again, we observed that most of the students were engaged in the discussion and listened respectfully to each other speak. Those chosen to present their findings spoke well about the depth of the problems identified and their ideas about how to respond to them. We had invited them to think for themselves and to collaborate with each other and they had done so. In order for learning communities to take root and continually renew themselves, people must be excited about what they are doing together and accomplishing (Reason & Pearson, 2006). I felt we were on the right track.

9. The next opportunity for collaboration and excitement to emerge was the long-overdue celebration of the computer lab which was to be used for both the *becados* and the community. I thought of the computer lab as a learning centre, an idea proposed by Ivan Illich, mentioned in my literature review. I was excited about this event, an open house to celebrate the successful completion of the lab, which was largely attributable to the video project the *becados* had been involved with the year prior. I also saw the event as an opportunity to encourage more local, particularly parental involvement, knowing now the importance of it. I had offered to take on the enjoyable task of introducing *becados* to their donors.

I was pleasantly surprised when I arrived and saw the enormous amount of work that had been orchestrated by the local teacher we had worked with in class, the Education

Foundation Director, the Coordinator and the *becados*. A party atmosphere had been created with balloons, music, and good and excitement ran high.

The *becados* presented as proud to show the Foundation to the community, offered tours of the grounds where bilingual signs explained when and how each building had been completed. For me, it was a sight to behold. Success was evident on many levels. I realized how much collaborative work it had taken to get to this point. The *becados* had now begun to take ownership of the program and site. I also knew this was an opportunity for the *becados* to invite their parents to the Education Foundation and involve them in what they were doing. I had a list of donors and students and various times throughout this opening some of the students would ask to see the list and asked if their donor was in attendance. Whenever a donor did appear, I was sure to introduce them to the *becado*. Though it seemed awkward, I came to realize how important this was to the *becados* and their donors, and I felt like I had the most joyful task of all. I was really proud of the *becados*. I saw the sponsorship relationship as an example of collective caring for others in action.

I noticed that there were some parents in attendance, mostly mothers, and I made a point of asking the *becados* to introduce me to them. Once introduced, I suggested they must be proud of their child, and then thanked them for sending their children, especially the girls, to school. I added that I was pleased that they understood the value of education for their children and thanked them for attending the opening. I did not realize it at the time, but learned later that some contact was also made between sponsors and the parents of the *becados*.

10. Another fundraising event presented itself, and though initially I became involved, I later chose to shift my energy elsewhere, recognizing I would rather spend my time with the *becados*, as this is where my inspiration and energy lay. As well, I needed time for my inquiry, now that I had begun to write. Other determining factors in this decision were related to the nature of the idea of this newly proposed fundraiser. The previous year a local business had used the same idea for fundraising and some locals and foreigners had said that they did not want to support this event. Though I do not believe that ideas can be owned, I was concerned about community relations and shared this with the Education Foundation Directors. I was also aware of the possibility of *donor fatigue* in Pueblo, and noted there was not much time between this fundraiser and the annual Education Foundation fundraiser. Though the event did happen and was deemed successful, I was happy with my decision to focus elsewhere and it was a lesson on learning how to listen to others concerns and to relinquish my involvement when necessary.

11. Another community event inviting collaboration presented itself, this one from the new gym where a walk/run was being organized. I wanted to show my support especially to the youth in the community for promoting fitness and health, so I offered to help out serving fruit and water to those who had completed. The day of the event I participated in the run/walk and helped as planned. Awards were distributed and I noticed there were fewer high school-age children (especially fewer girls) participating, though younger children did so. Though delighted to see the younger ones participating, I was saddened that more of the teenagers, in particular girls, were noticeably absent. I reminded myself this was the first walk/run for this community, an important small step.

12. Another potential collaborative opportunity arose when the Founder of the Education Foundation approached me and asked if I would like to accompany her and the Director to attend a meeting with another non-profit organization north of Pueblo. I agreed, not really knowing much about this other non-profit organization, but willing to search for ways we might be able to collaborate with them. Unfortunately, I was not well prepared for this meeting as I had not had the time to research the non-profit organization. Nonetheless, I became more informed about their work and we did find areas of overlapping goals. After several meetings and phone conversations with the directors of both organizations, it was determined that an English curriculum for primary school students was needed. Aware that the Education Foundation Director in Pueblo had been involved in developing a Spanish curriculum for English speakers through the language school, I suggested that she might be able to use her skills to create an English curriculum for all the public schools in our vicinity, which we could then also use for the Education Foundation. I was also aware that the other organization had access to more funds so was able to see how the collaboration could work.

I was aware that few of the youth in Pueblo spoke or understood much English and though I struggled with English being identified as the language of privilege, I also knew that it would provide more opportunity for youth if they were more fluent in English. After all, this in fact had been the initial goal of the Founder of the Education Foundation and the government was also encouraging public schools to teach English. Recently, however I had the experience of studying Spanish with the local language school and appreciated their methods of teaching by now having become a critic of teaching in general and teaching language specifically.

I have had my own share of trying to learn language by rote memory, which was almost enough to invite me to feel hopeless about learning a second language, even though I have been an active traveller throughout my life and exposed to many different languages. Using the natural language method, they taught grammar in context, not separate from, language. They emphasized first learning to hear the language, the way a child learns naturally. They engaged both of the senses to teach it - visual and auditory- and refrained from employing any rote memory practices. They also encouraged speaking more through engaging students in conversation in the classes. All of these practices I found to be very helpful in acquiring more of the Spanish language, and when I returned to Pueblo in 2014, the *becados* told me that my Spanish had improved, much to my joy. Being able to communicate better with the *becados* was a goal I had set for myself. Learning the language helped me to think differently and to understand and explain the attitudes and behaviors of the students. I was learning about theoretical issues in education in order to write my inquiry and learning to speak Spanish at the same time, often finding myself reflecting on the learning process and drawing parallels between my own experience and that of the *becados*.

At the same time I was thinking about how the Foundation in Pueblo in the future might work with the sister non-profit in the north. I wondered how a joint project could invite the teachers in both communities to collaborate; something I deemed would be very useful, given what I had learned about the local education system. Currently the development of a joint project is underway.

The scholarship program was growing and had 43 students under its wings now. I was informed that approximately 7 of the *becados* were not managing to hold their grades above the required criteria. I was not convinced that their way of measuring learning was ideal.

Nonetheless, a conversation among some of the teachers, the Directors, and the Coordinator was required about how to handle the situation of using grades as a criterion for scholarships. I was invited to attend the meeting about this issue, but was unable to do so. I did share with the Director however, that I preferred to offer tutoring for those students to help them meet the grade criterion rather than disqualify them. I was told that the Education Foundation did not have the resources to arrange and manage tutoring.

At the meeting to discuss student grades, it was decided to withhold the students' monthly payments until they met the grade criterion. I experienced this decision as punitive and did not feel it addressed the issue. However, there was consensus among the attending group that it was important to uphold the grade criterion, and that this sanction may improve student grades. I reflected on this way of thinking and that it must have somehow reflected the local way of thinking. I was aware that it was not in line with my values of finding ways to encourage learning and offering the students a chance to learn from a *more knowledgeable other*. I was also concerned that the donors, including myself, would not appreciate a decision to withhold their money, and cautioned the education directors about this possible response. In the end, some other donors spoke up about this decision, the education directors reassessed it, and they creatively and collaboratively put together a tutoring program for those seven students. Admittedly, I was pleased.

13. Recently, I became aware that the seven students with the problem grades did not attend all of their tutoring classes, though they should have known that their final grades would be checked to see whether or not they met the grade criterion to continue their scholarships into the next year. Though I still think that offering tutoring was an appropriate response, I am curious to why these students failed to attend their tutoring classes. I am reminded by Pearson & Bradbury, (2006) that in many ways the process of inquiry is as important as the specific outcomes. I remain curious about this response from the *becados* and will pursue this matter further upon my return to Pueblo in 2014. I also became aware that seven other students did not continue in the program, some due to not making the grade criteria and others were due to not completing the required volunteer hours. I was again reminded that research, or inquiry, is never over. However, twenty four new students did apply for scholarships in 2014, so the Wings Program continues to grow.

There had been times prior to this, when the Director approached me to meet individually with her and some of the *becados* who were not attending classes or not living up to their grade criteria. She was aware of my counselling background and thought I could engage appropriately, and I agreed to attend these conversations with her. We discovered that some of the students were bored and not engaged in learning, both in the public school and in the Foundation classes. I asked how we could make the classes more interesting, and what they might do to help, trying to invite them out of their conditioned passive way of being in this regard. Unfortunately, they rarely offered their ideas and I wondered if they thought it might be more practical to find work and earn money rather than attend school. I was attempting to invite a more collaborative, relational approach to learning and education, and committed to

involving and including the *becados* in a democratic way by stepping back and inviting students to take the lead. At the same time I was aware how challenging this was for them, seeing that it ran contrary to the traditional hierarchical education system with the teachers holding the power of knowledge, and the students only passive receivers.

Nevertheless, I continued to encourage all efforts by the Director to engage the *becados* in collaborative ways about decisions regarding the Education Foundation. She continues, to this day, to involve the students in decision making. After I left in the spring, there was a meeting held regarding some of the *becados* not attending the volunteer work they had agreed upon. After consulting with the *becados*, who took a position on this, a solution was agreed upon. I do believe that when involved parties are consulted finding a solution to problems using a collaborative approach still holds more learning and merit, regardless of the outcome.

14. When invited by the Director to visit a local private school I agreed. I was curious about this private school and wanted to explore how learning and education was being approached there. After a few conversations with the Director, I learned that it was a small school, with some local Mexican children on scholarship and the others, children of foreigners. At the school I was greeted openly, encouraged to walk around to visit all the classes and invited to eat with them. After the day of teaching was complete, five teachers and I started conversing about teaching, how to engage students and what was happening in the public education system. They spoke of the corruption throughout the public education system and the difficulties of working there, as compared to their teaching experience in the private school. It was here that I learned that Pueblo had a reputation for being a difficult place to teach and that the teachers and school were generally not well thought of, compared to the other local

public schools in the area. This was news to me and I wondered what might make it difficult.

Throughout the day,

I thanked the teachers for their openness, which I interpreted as a good sign of a healthy organization. Though I was delighted to see the work they were doing there, I reflected on the great disparity between the haves and have-nots. For a short time, I fell *under the spell of hopelessness*, with regards to the current state of the public education system. I was taken aback by the amount of work there was to do to make any significant changes knowing that relying on the government was surrendering to passivity.

15. Not long after this visit, I became engaged in a conversation with a young mother who was not from Mexico, but was living in Pueblo, about her struggles with education for her young daughter. She had tried private school in the past but found the driving and cost not manageable so had elected to enrol her daughter in the local school. She reported that unfortunately, her daughter was not being challenged to learn in the local public school and was changing her attitude towards learning, complaining of being bored. She was concerned about this change and was considering what to do about it. She was aware that I had recently visited a private school and we spoke about my experience there. I suggested that there were other women in Pueblo in her situation (power in numbers), and that they might meet to find ways to become more involved and supportive of the local school. I believed if there were enough of them offering to get more involved things could change locally because transferring her daughter back to a private school was not a good solution. Reminded of how important parental involvement was in the education of children, I felt less hopeless. I since learned that one of the other concerned mothers initiated an outside activity with the public school teachers

that was deemed successful. Another exciting upcoming opportunity for change is a training workshop in mindful education which will be attended by some of the influential teachers who have expressed an interest in this. I hope for more of these opportunities.

16. It was time again for the annual auction fundraiser, and I had decided to take more of a back seat this year in the organization of the auction, allowing other interested volunteers to take charge-passing the torch, so to speak. I did attend meetings and shared my previous experience when I thought it would be useful and donated my bike as in the past. I had asked a friend of mine the previous year to write an article about the benefits of bringing a bike to give to the auction to post it on the local message board which was closely monitored by the foreigners. I had also continued to talk with many people in the foreigner community about the idea so was happy others saw the sense in it. The result was that in addition to myself, six other foreigners brought bikes and donated to the auction. The bikes attracted a lot of attention, and in the end raised significant funds. However, for me, what was most significant about the fundraiser was the large number of people who attended, especially from the local community, as I had continuously maintained that local involvement was an important measure of our success. I also appreciated working with the *becados* on this event and was pleased to see how excited and proud they were to be a part of it, and how naturally and well they worked together.

17. It was now getting to be the time to prepare for my departure and say my goodbyes. I asked a bilingual local Mexican woman who was also a *becado* mother, if she would join me in attending the last class of the older *becados* to help me say goodbye to them. Willingly she

agreed. I was excited to have her presence so she could learn more about the program in which her daughter was enrolled.

By now the *becados* were taking computer classes in the computer lab, so it was easy to arrange for them to sit in circle, which has come to be my preferred way of engaging with students because it lends itself well to conversation. I wanted to let the students know again that my dissertation work was based on my time with them and, trying to determine how to encourage them to learn. Then I told them I had two problems, first that I loved to learn and second that I loved to help. At first they looked puzzled, no doubt because I had defined learning and helping as problems, but soon after they seemed to understand my message. They had learned that I had a sense of humour and liked to tease them. I could be serious when need be, especially about of being on time for class and playful at other times. I then wished them to have the same problems in their lives as I did, at which point I became very moved. Though this surprised me, I realized I had grown fond of them, was saying goodbye and was not sure when I would return. At this moment a student arrived late and, spontaneously, I decided instead of repeating my message, I would ask one of them to repeat what I had just said. It was a way not only of engaging them all in the process, but also of finding out if they understood my message. This happened several more times, as others also arrived late and it turned out to be a fun way of relaying an important message to them.

I am happy to say that I did not need my woman who accompanied me to translate, but was still pleased she attended to witness this encounter. On a side note, I received an email from her recently, telling me that I had been an inspiration to her and that she had decided to go back to school. I was deeply touched by this note, responded accordingly and pondered the

infiniteness of influence. With her permission, I have attached part of her note at the end of the final chapter. I was not able to meet with the younger *becados* to say goodbye, so requested that the Coordinator send out a Facebook message to them relaying the same information as mentioned above.

18. My final task was to go and visit Maria, the student I was sponsoring privately, to say goodbye privately and come up with a plan for her next year in school. I was aware that she had not attended all her classes but she claimed she did want to continue if I could support her. I asked that she attend classes as much as she could and I would leave the necessary funds she required with the Education Foundation Director for the following year. Interestingly, she offered that she wanted to become a teacher.

By chance I encountered another of the older *becados* where she was working just before I left and she wanted to thank me for my help. I was curious as to how I had helped her so I asked her. She replied, you helped us to be on time more and to take more responsibility. I interpreted her answer to mean that she and possibly others had learned school was a place to honour punctuality. As for taking more responsibility, I understood that working more collaboratively with the students had invited them to take more responsibility for their learning and future than they had previously. It is only now that I realize the importance of her message- that I had been able to offer her, and hopefully others, different perspective about time and personal responsibility than they had been previously indoctrinated with. I thanked her for her message, hugged her goodbye, and wished her and her family good health for the coming year. I did make a point of going around Pueblo to say my goodbyes to the various families that I had

come to feel connected to. This significant ritual had become important to me and I was deeply moved at these exchanges.

Reflections after Year Two

Leaving Pueblo this time was even more difficult, as I was unsure of when I could return, though I knew I would. I had begun to understand in the process of this inquiry, that the ending was arbitrary and my work there could go on indefinitely. I imagine that others involved in an inquiry such as mine have had similar thoughts. Action research aligned well with my energy, tapped into my inspiration and creativeness, and *doing, reflecting, and simultaneously writing* fit well with my way of *being*. Learning and reflecting inspired informed action, again and again and again.

In the final chapter, I will summarize my learning, both about myself and the *becados* in Pueblo- how it has influenced my own teaching, and how my learning might be applied to other educational contexts.

Chapter Five

I do not separate my scientific inquiry from my life. For me it is really a quest for life, to understand life and to create what I call living knowledge—knowledge which is valid for the people with whom I work and for myself (Marja-Llisa-Swantz, p.1, 2006)

Benefits of Education

Establishing safe, universal access to education is recognized as a basic human right (United Nations). It is a critical factor in breaking the cycle of poverty, achieving gender equality, combating disease, and ensuring maternal and child health (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). It opens the door to challenge the power differentials related to ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, and indigenous issues throughout the world (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). The expansion of education opportunities is linked to achieving larger goals for humankind, such as peace, prosperity, health, universal human rights and a sustainable environment (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009).

Summary of Inquiry

This inquiry has been an exploration into education from a relational approach. I have focused on examining and understanding the lack of regard shown towards formal education in Pueblo. In order to do this, I found I needed to broaden my perspective, and inform myself on education in rural communities throughout the world in order to gain some understanding about what might be happening in Pueblo. I was already aware that rural education lagged behind education offered in urban communities throughout the world.

Reviewing the literature, specifically regarding rural education, opened my eyes to both the complex challenges and multiple barriers involved. The predominant themes in the literature included disharmony between rural lifestyles and the predominant education system, along with outdated and irrelevant curriculum. The intersection between gender inequality and poverty outlines how limited economic resources, traditional gender roles and patriarchal attitudes present further challenges to improving rural education. Common among many rural communities is the lack of parental, and community involvement, and participation in education, and the offering of minimal support to their children in school.

Through this exploration I came to understand the multiple layers of challenges at play when it came to promoting education and learning. Many of the literature findings seem to have broader implications, and my experience in Pueblo verified this. For example, the youth of Pueblo are extremely influenced by the introduction and lure of technology, reflecting the global movement influencing youth around the world. As well, its tourist economy has been deeply affected by the recent world economic crisis. Further, values, norms, and lifestyles are all in flux, as a result of access to information through global media from worlds outside. Some of the uniqueness of Pueblo is its seasonal economic employment which is dependent on services related to tourism and development, which far outweighs fishing and agriculture for livelihood. The presence of foreigners, many of whom are part time residents, results in constant interaction between the foreigners and the local community allowing for numerous possibilities of mutual influence.

To clarify my own thinking on education and learning, I reviewed the literature on historic and current influential ideas regarding learning and education. Dewey (1938) and

Vygotsky (2007) both advocated learning through doing, and in addition, Vygotsky stressed the importance of culture and familial factors (context). Vygotsky claimed that people adapt to their environment based on their interpretation, and that knowledge is obtained through the interplay of past experiences, social situations and the general-environment (Farris, 2008). He offered another way of thinking about teachers—as “*more knowledgeable others*,” rather than as experts—and put forth ideas about collaborative learning: learning from and with each other in the process of creating knowledge. Freire (1970), like Dewey and Vygotsky, advocated a unity between theory and practice, claiming that dialogue presented itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing. Freire’s philosophy views education as a practice for freedom and liberation, recognizing the power of knowledge. He professed that the deficit-based view of the *have nots* was perpetuated by the current system, demonstrating his commitment to democracy and the powerful political influence of education.

Offering ideas similar to Freire’s about educating for freedom, critical pedagogy writings and views gave me the language and insight to clarify my own experiences of education, and to critique education today. Central to the definition of critical pedagogy is the task of educating students to become critical agents who actively question and negotiate the relationships between theory and practice, critical analysis, common sense, learning and social change. Critical pedagogy holds a commitment to the future, to ensure a way to a more socially just society. Those who espouse a critical pedagogy must constantly be alert and attuned to the context in which politics, power and pedagogy intersect (Giroux, 2007). Many other current influential educators talk about educating the heart and mind, and question the aim of

education today: is it to maintain the status quo or is to create innovative thinkers who can work collaboratively to deal with the future problems?

After gathering historic and local information on the education system in Mexico, I narrowed my focus to rural education. As recently as last year, I became informed on an educational reform that has influenced the current status of education throughout Mexico. One of its principal features was requiring yearly standardized testing for all teachers, with the goal of creating more accountability. Though a worthy goal, I question the strategy of addressing accountability issues.

The history of education has its roots intertwined with colonization. Pre-conquest education was offered informally through elders and contained a writing system, language, art and culture. After colonization, the Catholic Church took responsibility for controlling education to promote nationalism and the Spanish identity and to convert and assimilate the local indigenous population. Thus the education system was forged in a culture of physical, intellectual and spiritual oppression and abuse over many centuries.

After the independence of Mexico in 1810, an event still actively celebrated today, the Mexican government established secular education. After the Mexican revolution of 1910–1917 Benito Juarez, the first *mestizo* (part indigenous and part Hispanic) president made primary education compulsory and free. The goal was to provide educational access to all and raise the literacy rate. Early 20th century education became state-run with complete separation between religion and education and based on nationalism, and was governed by the federal government. Mexico saw considerable expansion of public education, with the 1920's

becoming the most significant decade in all of Mexico's history for promoting education. The government policies as well aimed to strengthen nationalism and construct a nation-state.

Today, the economic downturn, coupled with abundant press about drug cartel violence, has greatly affected tourism all over Mexico. At the same time, government spending on education is not keeping pace with the need to invest more in improving education throughout Mexico. Funds allocated to public education are funnelled through urban centers first, leaving minimal financial resources for rural areas, with rampant corruption permeating the system. The values, norms and practices that underpin the predominant education system in Pueblo are in disharmony with rural lifestyle, being more compatible with urban life and western culture. Rural children experience a clash of values, and lifestyles in school curriculum. The necessity to leave home for further education is yet another impediment to achievement in the collective culture and lifestyle of Pueblo. In the classroom, tacit knowledge, untapped, is marginalized, as is local, historic cultural customs and practices.

The intersection between gender inequity and poverty, what I refer to as a *poverty of opportunity*, creates additional significant barriers to school attendance and completion for girls. There is a disparity between the genders regarding the pursuit of education, evident by girls often dropping out in their teenage-hood, frequently becoming young mothers, and/or staying at home to help take care of younger siblings. Patriarchal and *machismo* attitudes are still largely predominant in Pueblo, with women expected to fulfill traditional gender roles of caretaking the family. Machismo requires Mexican men to put on a fearless air, to flaunt their masculinity, to be conspicuously passionate in their relations with women, to be sexually aggressive, to drink, to be strict with their wives and children and to take revenge when they

are wronged (De Mente, 1976). Mothers further privilege boys by showing more regard for their sons, going to greater lengths to take care of them. Men in Pueblo are expected to provide for their families, but when they are not able to, women end up working outside of the home as housekeepers for foreigners while still being responsible for the household. Men feel free to visit with friends in their “free” time, while women are confined close to home with strict codes of behaviour. While in Pueblo, I became aware of interpersonal violence in the home, typically from men towards women, often while under the influence of alcohol.

Boys who show any tendency toward a non-heterosexual orientation are susceptible to being teased, judged by their fathers and families, and at times, the community. This came to my attention when some of the *becados* were showing their *differentness and*, were harshly judged by their parents (mostly fathers) and others in the community.

Girls are often not encouraged to pursue education, reinforcing traditional gender roles. Though public education is free, additional costs are involved in order to attend school. Economic conditions are an important factor determining whether a family will support a child’s education; and for those with low income, the additional costs associated with education (uniforms, fees, etc.) are often seen as prohibitive for girls. Additional transportation costs required to attend high school create another barrier. Seasonal employment lifestyles, though unavoidable, create further challenges, giving less free time during high tourist season for the *becados* to do necessary school work because they are employed in stores or restaurants. Additionally, girls are often expected to help their mothers in the household, whereas boys were normally under no such obligation.

Curriculum reform offering more flexibility, more local decision-making, and the incorporating of local knowledge to ensure education has relevance could improve the situation. However, rural settings present unique challenges to making school relevant. Teachers from urban areas who are required to teach in rural settings to pay off their student loans are not in touch with local lifestyles and practices. They are expected to follow largely irrelevant curricula using outdated resources, and have minimal access and opportunity for further training. This places stress on teachers, who are left feeling disengaged from their teaching as well as from the community. Furthermore, the teaching profession itself is not considered desirable, especially in rural areas, due to low wages, large class sizes, high levels of disparity among students in ability, combined with disrespectful attitudes from students. These factors contribute to the large turn-over of teachers, which further impedes the ongoing development of relationships between teachers and students in Pueblo. Relationships between teachers and the families are often not developed. As a result, families often do not see the value or relevance of education, minimally participate in the school, and show little support and encouragement towards the education of their children.

Further alienation of students from the learning process arises from hierarchical-based teaching practices which do not engage students in the learning process or use issues relevant to their lives and culture. Collective values of sharing and taking care of friends and family are not incorporated into the school culture and rather students are taught and expected to be “out for themselves” in the formal education system. Homework is liberally handed out, with no consideration given to whom students can request help from. Learning is assessed by

applying rote memory tests, which does not promote independent thinking, critical thinking or innovative thinking. Consequently, youth are poorly prepared for future challenges.

After coming to an understanding of the complexity of the barriers to formal education in Pueblo, I was inspired to find ways to influence and encourage learning, by working with a group of scholarship students, the *becados*, while investigating the factors that invited the *becados* to pursue formal education?

In order to further my inquiry, I embraced a social constructionist stance, which provides a language for understanding the creation of knowledge and the learning/educational process. This philosophical stance holds the view that knowledge is constructed and created through ongoing conversations and dialogue, that relationship is key and central, and that it is through our collaborative activities that we create meaning. I found that this view of learning fit with my experience and was very compatible with rural collective values, practices and norms. It is with relational knowledge that people come to feel that they are part of a larger whole that sustains us and connects human beings, amplifying our strength and the power of solidarity (Park & Bradbury, 2006). In education, collaborative skills are nourished and students are prepared for democratic participation in the world.

The social constructionist stance is compatible with action research, which invites a continual inquiry and growth process, guided by curiosity, and it is committed to improving learning in all subjects including the researcher. It has an intentional desire to make life better by creating a just, empowering community. Action research emphasizes the importance of interpretation and negotiation of events, adopting an insider, self-study perspective, and appreciating how values influence what is learned. This orientation provided me with an

opportunity to declare my values and biases. My purpose was to develop my own thinking and practice, and draw on my tacit knowledge.

Influencing others and mutual engagement were key practices throughout my inquiry, and I was committed to involving others in more democratic ways through ongoing, collaborative efforts.

I gathered information from the education foundation director and from previous surveys completed by *becados* whose involvement in learning was my focus. Knowing it was pivotal to develop a trusting relationship with the *becados*, I chose to attend their weekly classes regularly. Initially I just observed, providing structures to enhance learning, and later co-participated in collaborative activities. Joint fundraising activities, and interviews with *becados*—with individuals and groups—were other ways I developed my relationships with the *becados* and learned about them. During interviews with the *becados*, I explored who supported and encouraged them regarding their education.

Through these activities, and through my ongoing spontaneous interactions, I wanted to try to understand the *becados'* perspectives, believing that students are key informants about education, and that their experiences need to be at the center of attention. I worked collaboratively with colleagues involved in the scholarship program and made connections with other key players in Pueblo. I established working relationships with other colleagues who were willing to provide critical and supportive friendships, which would invite me to question and speak to my actions.

I was trying to help students find a connection between their own personal interests and the subject matter, and make the classes more democratic, and change their attitudes

towards school. I made efforts to arrange optimal conditions and structures for influencing learning, respecting and encouraging the students' right to speak and to be heard. I tried to consistently walk with the awareness of the influence and power I held, taking full advantage of any potential *teachable moments*.

Recently, I have begun the task of finding and inviting Vancouver colleagues, friends, and previous students to read my inquiry. I requested that my colleague, the Education Foundation Director, with whom I worked collaboratively throughout my inquiry, check that my findings are accurate, fair, and reasonable; through this process, she both learned about and understood my actions, intentions, and the accompanying thinking.

Once completed (in written form), I hope to share this thesis more widely, by posting it on the website of the Foundation that supports the *becados*. I hope that my work helps others learn about the *becados* program and its importance, and understand the current education system through my experiences. Additionally I hope my work might encourage other regular foreigner visitors to become scholarship donors so the program can continue to grow, at the same time offering them a way to participate in community life. I hope also to have first sections and eventually of this inquiry translated into Spanish, for the website so that other Spanish-speaking colleagues, and the *becados* themselves might read it.

What did I learn about Education in Pueblo?

This inquiry has been a very personal journey for me. I learned about and came to understand the various reasons why education is not highly valued in Pueblo. I was inspired by *becados* who seemed interested in learning, regardless of how boring and irrelevant the topics seemed to their lives. I learned they had family members and friends who encouraged them,

confirming the importance of family involvement and support. The question remains as to how engage more parents and families and the community as a whole to support local education.

I learned that the *becados* had been influenced by foreigners who came to Pueblo yearly, and I better understand the notion of the infinite circles of influence and the power that influence holds. I remembered the power of the collective, and I continue to believe in the strength of cooperation and collaboration, intuitively knowing that it offers a path to deal with our present and future challenges.

I deeply understand how the significance of education, and the old adage, knowledge is power, not only in Pueblo, but worldwide, especially for girls. Without gender equality, we are only working at half of our strength. Though it appears that some inroads have been made towards achieving a gender balance in education for girls in Pueblo, *we still have a long way to go* to envision a world of gender equality. The presentation of the Nobel Prize to Malala and the fundraising for girls' education that she has inspired, tell me that I am not alone with my concern.

I came to understand an inherent difficulty with the education system in Pueblo: whereas Pueblo operates from a collective lens, the system aligns itself with the individualistic, Western, mainstream perspective. It saddened me that the value of cooperation and collaboration from this collective culture, which offers a wealth of experience and carries great wisdom, is removed from children's learning. I certainly benefited from a sense of belonging and connection while living in Pueblo, and I wish this inherent benefit could be mobilized to engage the children in their formal learning. Though the heavily bureaucratic structure of the educational system in Mexico lends itself too well to corruption, I remain hopeful that changes

will continue to occur and show my enthusiasm for learning to the *becados* and their allies at every opportunity. There was no question that the scholarship program was finding its place and usefulness in Pueblo, though I continued to wonder how to reach those students not engaged at all in school or learning and how to increase parental, familial, and community involvement in the education system. What criteria other than academic standing could we use for sponsorship to include students at risk of not completing school? I was certain that gender and economic status were worthy criteria.

Generalizability of My Findings

My experience in Pueblo led me to understand that engaging the natural tendency of people to care for and help others would be well served in learning centres throughout rural communities. Adapting curricula to locally relevant topics and incorporating local funds of knowledge would offer more possibilities for students to become engaged in the process and offer a greater chance of local buy-in. Finding creative ways to engage parents, families and the community as a whole in education would benefit everyone in rural communities throughout the world.

My experiences in Pueblo affirm that a central theme arising in the literature is the need to recognize teaching practices and knowledge that is respectful of local rural cultures, and to utilize the strengths cultivated in rural life. Specifically, honouring oral and indigenous funds of knowledge and the social skills pertaining to the complex web of relationships in rural life would be more respectful and would go far to making educational meaningful and engaging. Teaching to and through students' personal and cultural strengths and intellectual capabilities would require knowing students so they might be encouraged to speak out.

Large classes present challenges to engaging all students, with their different learning styles and areas of knowledge. Smaller class sizes would allow teachers to develop their learning relationship with each student, increase teacher satisfaction and decrease turnover. Students could be grouped together by interest rather than age, offering mutual learning between students and more chances to inspire learning. Teaching in the local indigenous language would allow more access to formal education for small rural communities. Curriculum and course options offered could be more suitable to the locality.

Many studies emphasized the importance of the connection of the school with the community, and collaborative relationships within the community were identified as critical to school success (Sheridan & Semke, 2012). Others suggest that teachers could begin to integrate school and home life by cultivating closer relationships with children's families in ways that are harmonious with the values of the families they serve. My inquiry determined that there is minimal interaction between parents and that teachers may feel threatened by the active participation of parents in the classroom. The central and positive role of the Latina family is a strength that could be harnessed, utilizing collaboration. Engaging parents in the school and education of their children and finding ways to invite their participation would help shift attitudes and values towards education. Assisting and encouraging parents to provide more suitable reading climates in the home and ways to read together would facilitate more learning. The community computer lab might facilitate this.

Community learning is practiced in many collective cultures, and is more in harmony with rural life. Offering students learning activities outside of school hours, such as after school reading programs and computer labs, would allow for more access to learning.

The development of instructional materials could be adapted to different regions, without lowering the quality of education. Ingenuity and flexibility to deliver suitable educational opportunities in classrooms would be more successful in providing participatory, interactive teaching environments. Reflecting on how students respond to the activities and adapting the teaching format would facilitate the various learning styles in the classroom.

Though much of the responsibility for education is now with each state, the central government continues to hold power and influence over the direction of education in Mexico. The central government needs to take effective measures to strengthen and cultivate rural teacher resources, hiring those from rural areas when possible and making rural teaching more attractive by increasing salaries and providing relevant resources. Supporting ongoing professional development and coordinating contacts between rural educators could address professional isolation. I am hoping that the development of the English language curriculum project currently underway (mentioned in chapter four) could promote such collaboration.

Establishing community mentorship programs for new teachers within rural settings and providing them with time and opportunity to learn about the dynamics of the community culture would be beneficial to everyone. Teachers could visit students' homes and interview family members about their backgrounds and interests. Teachers could invite students' experiences into the classroom thereby allowing them to begin to take more ownership of their education, and creating bridges between their personal backgrounds and classroom learning. Helping students learn from one another could encourage them to experience each other and themselves as resources, having unique experiences and knowledge to offer. A weekly drop-in homework time located at the Education Foundation could be offered to students benefiting

from a place to do homework, to help each other, and to get assistance from a teacher when required.

Government initiatives could encourage parents to be actively involved in their children's education; such a change would require a larger budget being allocated to education. Coordinated efforts to increase the political focus on education, provide outreach and education to parents and communities, provide targeted resources and take more creative approaches to teaching and learning would better equip students for a rapidly changing world. Culturally relevant pedagogy needs to find ways to incorporate sociocultural knowledge of the lives and experiences of the students.

Establishing financial incentives for allowing their children to attend school, such as scholarship programs, bursaries and the program, *Oportunidades* would be a strong message to parents that education is important. Providing literacy programs for parents would decrease the gulf between literate children and their illiterate parents.

The depth and breadth of close relationships in rural communities are a source of strength and a path to a positive future. Maintaining a healthy and growing school district would sustain healthy and vital rural communities. The challenge is how to raise the standard of living to a significant level without sacrificing traditional living practices.

Follow-up Ideas to Pursue

Returning to Pueblo, I am determined to explore various ways to further involve families, parents, and the community as a whole in the education of their children. I would like to ask the *becados* how we could engage their parents and families more in their educational process as soon as they become accepted into the program and throughout it. For those less

likely to receive parental/familial support, how can we (the foundation, teachers, fellow *becados* and sponsors), offer them support through the program? In this regard, I would like to also ask the *becados* how to respond to those who do not meet the grade criteria while in the program. I want to talk with the one *becado* who did attend tutoring classes to find out what we could do to support the others in future, as well as whether and how tutoring would be useful to them, believing that these answers lie with the students. I would also like to explore with the *becados* other criteria for acceptance in the Wings Program, as I am interested in their ideas on this. I believe that the *becados* input as to how we can improve in these ways holds great promise. As Gergen (2009) has explained, we must inspire students to participate more in their educational experience, enriching the experience for the teacher and all learners. Learning occurs most effectively through the interested participation of learners together (Gergen, 2009).

We must also work to engage the local public schools to find ways to develop in the students and teachers a love of learning and teaching. Further collaboration between the public education system and the Education Foundation could involve teacher training. It is clear that teachers lack support, resources and professional development opportunities. The Education Foundation Director is proposing a new initiative to offer Mindful Education training to interested local teachers. Funds for this have come from generous sponsors. I look forward to promoting this workshop for the local teachers and am excited about the possibilities that can arise from it. My experience pursuing this inquiry has further convinced me that improving teacher education is imperative in order to engage students in their learning and teachers in their profession.

The issues facing educators are immense and complex. Gergen (2009) reminds us that educators face an unprecedented task of supporting people to become creative, collaborative problem-solvers and critical thinkers, cultivating their capacities to see the world from profoundly different perspectives, nourishing their capacity for connection and caring in a fragmented and divisive world.

What Did I Learn about Myself?

First and foremost, I learned more about the process of learning, about my values, and about how to apply my values to my work. In the past, I believed in the wisdom and often taught the practice of focusing on small steps when negotiating a change, and I got the chance to apply this (walk the talk) often in Pueblo. To my great pleasure taking small steps kept me engaged in this inquiry, and prevented me from becoming overwhelmed. I learned more about my own learning process—that I learn best through doing, and by reflecting on my learning by engaging in conversation about it. At times while writing up this inquiry, I deliberately sought out allies who showed an interest in talking with me about it. Though writing is mostly solitary, I felt engaged with writing my inquiry, balanced by a connection to the outdoors, where I tended to take time away to reflect on my ideas, before coming back to clarify and expand on them. I was reminded of the power and benefit of reflecting, as well as the benefit of asking questions that provoke reflection, both of myself, and of others around me. My Canadian students have often claimed that my greatest strength lies in my reflective questions and I reaffirmed that asking questions is at the heart of inquiry.

My relationship to learning shifted, and I noticed I was more likely to take on learning how to do something new than I had been in the past. I felt encouraged to learn new things,

and more hopeful that I could learn anything, if I took the time and practiced patience. I learned how to find my natural rhythm and use it to help me tap into my discipline. I had moments when *I knew more than I thought I did*, and other moments when *I did not know what I thought before I said it*, something Harry Goolishian speaks about (Anderson, 2007, pg.89). I remembered I am a lifelong learner, and that this inquiry process invited my deep commitment to learning to really come to the forefront. Continuing to learn Spanish allowed me to experience parallel learning with the students and reinforced the idea that belief systems, values and way of thinking are inherently conveyed in language. I found myself speaking English differently, using reflective language more often. When I spoke in Spanish, I found myself rarely conjugating verbs, which in part I attributed to the *present* focus in Pueblo in daily life. On the other hand, I found myself when writing English falling prey to expressing myself in a less descriptive, more individualistic style.

I experienced this journey as a powerful process whereby I learned to *love the journey within the destination*. My actions inspired my writing, and I learned the joy of engaging in my own natural process. I found myself doing things without apparent conscious intent and noticed how the inquiry process unfolded of its own volition, taking on a life of its own. I felt energized and empowered by the cause and by being fully engaged. I got back in touch with my ability to network; when I believe in a cause, I can naturally raise awareness and funds. I was fully involved to the core of my being, and experienced liberation when payment came in the form of finding meaning in contributing.

I appreciated my relationship to the *becados* and the community, which inspired me to continue.

I came to experience writing as a relational process and struggled to keep the reader alive and alongside me. Though I did, in the process, enjoy the reading, doing, and reflecting, writing was a practice that I have not been drawn to in the past. While writing up this inquiry, I experienced being “in the zone”. I discovered writing as a valuable way of outlining my thinking process, clarifying it throughout. In my own teaching, I have always encouraged students to share their reflections in class and in their written assignments, and I have found great value in these aspects of the learning process.

Although in theory, I believed in being able to hold multiple perspectives, I found it challenging to hold this position. When I reflect on this, I realize that I hold multiple perspectives on education, one that is critical of the predominant education system and the other, that sees great value in learning. I found that I also hold multiple perspectives on collective living: honouring and valuing it, at times longing for a sense of connection and belonging, yet seeking solitude at other times. I find I have a well-developed critical lens, yet can hold a positive, encouraging perspective in life. I realized through my work that holding multiple perspectives does not have to imply conflict, but can offer a balance.

Sharing this journey—telling/writing stories about my lived experience and inner dialogue with the reader—is highly personal, something of which I became aware while engaged in this process. I will carry these enriching experiences with me in my life. I learned that research/inquiry is never ending and a life process. Writing my experiences, thoughts, and actions has provoked my desire to return to Pueblo again, to follow up on events that have happened after my departure and on remaining ideas to pursue.

This inquiry affirmed for me the importance of context, something I have been keenly aware of, both from my own life experiences and also from my work as a therapist and teacher. If I try to leave students in Vancouver with anything, it is the importance of exploring and understanding the context of peoples' lives. I found that, once I left Pueblo, trying to write was more challenging for this reason—I felt disconnected from my experience and the context. It was only when I relocated myself to a rural setting that I was able to reconnect with my experience in Pueblo, and with my desire to return.

I was aware that my path of inquiry had influenced my teaching in Vancouver, and I now had a strong urge to teach teachers, rather than counsellors (as in the past), recognizing the enormous circle of influence teachers have. I deeply understand the power of influence, try to hold it responsibly, and I regularly remind my student teachers of their power. I was thrilled to find a way out of the *expert trap* and started to think of teachers and students as more knowledgeable others. I was reminded to value learning outside of the classroom in all environments.

Back home in Canada, I became more committed to collaborative practices in the classroom and began to declare this stance early on to students that I teach, and to *sit in circle*, to give them a sense of what to expect in the classroom from me and with their peers. I introduced ideas of collaborative learning in the classroom, offering more creative ways for students to gain the necessary information in each course. I practiced offering time in the classroom for homework, readings, and assignments, suggesting they watch pertinent videos at home and bring their learning to the classroom to share. I regularly asked for their participation, reminding them that they had great influence on their learning. I requested they

reflect on their participation throughout, and offered a self-grade incorporating their own participation reflections. I hold the view that much learning comes from doing and searched for ways to invite students to actively practice new learning in the classroom. I bring other perspectives forward on certain ideas that are expressed as truths, claiming the benefit of holding multiple views. I regularly reviewed what I learned from each course, determined what I would do differently next time after inviting feedback, and then put that learning into practice.

In closing, I wish to share that I have become a strong advocate of education as a practice of freedom and equality. I believe that terrorism and war are triggered by global poverty and inequality, the experience of poverty of opportunity limits options in life and that the disparity between the haves and have-nots must change. I believe that we must work together; sharing our unique funds of knowledge to address the present and future challenges and that education holds the key to our liberation. We need a system change, a new relationship to the planet and to each other based on our shared humanity and what we collectively value.

On a personal note, shortly after I returned to Vancouver I received an email from a *becada* mother who attended the class when I said goodbye to the *becados*. In the past I had thought about these teenage mothers who had had to drop out of school and I had hoped they would have an opportunity to pursue further education when their children have grown up. Her note reminded me of this possibility. With her permission, I share an excerpt of her message with a translation, as it deeply touched me and was yet another great example of the infinite circle of influence at work.

En La Manzanilla hace mucho calor y el agua del mar es muy cálida. Mis hijas están creciendo muy rápido, hoy la mediana cumple 9 años!!!

Ahora estoy pensando en continuar con mis estudios y quiero llegar a ser una trabajadora social para poder ayudar a otras personas de bajos recursos, esto va a ser muy difícil se necesita mucho tiempo y dinero pero estoy dispuesta a hacer ese sacrificio para así darles una vida mejor a mis hijas.

Tu eres un gran ejemplo para mi y gracias a ti he decidido seguir estudiando, tu me has demostrado que nunca debemos detenernos ante nada.

Para mi es un poco mas difícil porque como tu sabes yo tuve a mi hija cuando era muy chiquita y eso detuvo mis estudios y ahora ya tengo 3 hijas a las cuales voy a tener que dejar un tiempo si es que tengo que salir fuera a continuar con la escuela.

Deseame suerte

Te mando un abrazo!

Here it is very hot and the sea is very warm. My daughters are growing very fast; today the youngest is 9 years!

Now I'm thinking about continuing my studies and want to become a social worker to help other low-income people. This will be very difficult time and money is necessary, but I'm willing to make that sacrifice in order to give my daughters a better life.

You are a great example for me and thanks to you I decided to continue studying, you have shown me that we must never stop at anything.

For me it is a little more difficult because, as you know, I had my daughter when I was very little and it stopped my studies and now I have three daughters whom I may have to leave for a time if I have to go outside to continue school.

Wish me luck

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