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UNDERSTANDING THE EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PUBLIC, ALTERNATIVE, AND MONTESSORI MODELS

Elizabeth Dykens
Southeastern University - Lakeland

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Elizabeth Dykens

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Dedication

For those who have trekked and travailed alongside me,

For those whose words and actions have rippled into my endeavors,

For those who have lent their ears to my half-baked ramblings,

Who have been passionate analysts and advisors,

Who have offered the hope a human spirit requires,

This thesis exists because of you.

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Abstract

This thesis intends to demonstrate the relevance and significance of alternative education within today's educational climate. First, the literature review traces the historical backdrop of the American public school system and the founding fathers' original purposes for education. It explores the shifts in policy and pedagogy that have led to current models and methods of education. Then, the literature review focuses on alternative educational philosophies, with an emphasis on the Montessori Method, and why they not only address the critiques of the public system but also better align with a child's nature and development. The study backing this thesis lays out qualitative data comparing teachers' perspectives on the systems in which they work. Interviews of public school teachers, Montessori teachers, and teachers of other alternative models illuminate trends in thought and give authentic voice to the importance of alternative education.

KEY WORDS: alternative education, Montessori method, educational reform, nontraditional education, learning theory, public school, standardized testing

Contents

Introduction

Nearly anyone could agree that the current state of education begs for reform. The complaints abound: students graduate from high school without skills for the real world, lack the capacity for critical thinking, pass standardized tests while neglecting genuine learning, and feel existentially lost in an industrialized, globalized society driven by technology and pervading materialism (Miller, 2004, p. 4). Amidst cultural confusion, how are the public schools shaping morality and the human experience? Are they producing citizens who will uphold the ideals of democracy? Are they furthering free thought and innovation? Without listing off extensive, hopeless woes, this thesis intends to offer up the voices within education that cry out for a paradigm shift. On the fringes of a monolithic, streamlined system, nonconventional schools of thought present methods of learning that deserve renewed attention. Mere tweaks to policy and adjustments in funding and curriculum will not suffice — society must humbly consider the perspectives and philosophies of alternative education if truly vested in the diversity it praises and in positive change.

The literature review will first explore the development of the American public school system and will describe the trends that present the need for alternative education. Then, as a representative of alternative models, the Montessori method will be analyzed in further depth, with emphasis on its key features. The data analysis compares the perspectives of teachers who work within various models of education, touching on human nature, how to best meet the needs of students, and what factors have contributed to the current state of education. It is the hope that this research will prompt educators, parents, and students to reevaluate the underlying assumptions that define their experiences in education, and will empower them to seek educational structures that best reflect their convictions.

Review of Literature

Definition of Terms

Before reviewing a sampling of existing literature, I find it necessary to clarify the definitions of a few key terms. Firstly, when speaking of education, we must realize that it is largely determined by what we find socially and politically desirable. Suissa holds that education provides the means by which we acquire the goods we value, and yet, within educational debates, what is valued, or desirable, is often presupposed (2016). Here, alternative education often challenges the aim of education and wonders what type of individual is being produced through the process. The phrase *alternative education* admittedly encompasses a wide range of meanings; oftentimes it refers to a prescribed education for "at risk" youth and targets a particular demographic of students (Martin, 2002, p. 4). Thus, for the purposes of this review, alternative education will refer to philosophical alternatives that may oppose conventional educational theories of publicly funded schools. *New Education* is another term, first used at the end of the nineteenth century, similarly describing that which opposes the traditional education existing alongside it (Potts, 2007, p. 4). These philosophical alternatives vary in approach and pedagogy, but all seem to agree on a holistic relationship between life and learning. They are grounded in the premise that our knowledge of human nature can directly influence educational design (Colgan, 2016, p. 3).

Additionally, many alternatives take on varying shades of constructivist approaches, as opposed to objectivist ones. Researchers consider constructivism to be one way of bringing transformation to traditional, more objectivist-oriented approaches (Miranda, 2011, p. 2). Both constructivism and objectivism lie within the realm of epistemology; they are theories that attempt to explain how humans arrive at knowledge. Essentially, epistemology asks, "How do

we know what we know?" Is reality unchanging and objective, waiting to be discovered and transmuted into human brains, or is reality constructed within? Constructivists would argue the latter (Krahenbuhl, 2016, p. 3). Wrestling with questions like these, advocates of educational alternatives have often structured their theories around constructivist epistemologies of knowledge, which will thus warrant further discussion throughout the following pages, with emphasis on the Montessori method.

A History and Critique of the American Public School System

Early Beginnings

In 1642, the colonies that would later constitute the United States of America passed the very first law regarding education. The Massachusetts General Court determined that children must be able to "read and understand the principles of religion and the capital laws of the country" (as cited in Maranto, 2015, p. 1). If parents were not providing such skill sets to their children, then local officials would coordinate apprenticeships for those individuals who were not receiving an adequate education from their parents. The aim of this first law reveals a theme that many of the founding fathers, including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, harped upon: children must come to understand their civic duty within the United States. Indeed, this newly formed republic required that citizens were unified by common virtue and knowledge. Education that taught good citizenship, then, guaranteed the survival of the United States. This was the hope, to transform the identity of people who had once been subjects of a king into citizens of a state (Labaree, 2018).

Early efforts in education not only centered on civic responsibilities but also on the impartation of "the principles of religion." The Europeans who settled in the colonies were Puritans, proponents of the Protestant Reformation who believed that the individual could

directly access God. Instead of relying on a pope or priest to relay truth, the Puritan held that through reading the Bible, one could form a personal relationship with his Creator. Obviously, this religious position necessitates the ability to read. Thus, while still stressing the role of the Church and family in a child's upbringing, Puritans also instituted schools for the purpose of cultivating authentic faith. By the time of the American Revolution, New England was "one of the most literate parts of the world" (Reese, 2007, p. 220). Certainly, religious and political motivations for American public education underscore any conversation on the history and progression of education.

The Shift to Standardization

By the end of the 1800's, the United States no longer doubted its own survival as a republic; instead, it boasted prominence as a world power. Thus, the focus in education came to be strengthening the nation's labor force and increasing productivity. Essentially, policy makers were now more concerned with outputting industrial workers than citizens with American values. One school board president in the 1920's voiced this shift: "For a long time, all boys were trained to be President… Now we are training them to get jobs" (Lynd & Lynd, 1929, as cited in Labaree, 2018, p. 10).

Not only did instruction experience an upheaval of purpose, but also the structure and paradigm of what a school ought to look like morphed into a new form — namely, education was recast into the business and factory model of the early 20th century (Cassell & Nelson, 2010). This model operates as a hierarchical bureaucracy. Using a factory model, one begins with floor workers who are then overseen by higher-ups: foremen, middle management, upper management, and the factory owner. The chain of command starts with the factory owner and ends with the floor workers — this structure resembles education in that superintendents, and

even the federal government, can issue orders upon teachers, who, as the floor workers, are removed from authority (Mulcahy & Irwin, 2008, p. 204).

Further exploring the implications of a factory model, one could compare children to products of the teacher, the floor worker. Indeed, in the early 1900's, the new science of educational psychology emphasized E.L. Thorndike's operant conditioning, which espoused memorization, repetition, and teacher-centric strategies. Students adopted the stance of "passive receptors of information batches" (Cassell & Nelson, 2010, p. 180).

Standardized and High-Stakes Testing

One of the most defining characters in the history of public education, Horace Mann, administered the first written exam, i.e., the standardized test, to public school students in 1845. Before this time, educators depended on oral recitation to assess student learning, but this became a tedious task when compulsory education laws caused a significant increase in school enrollment. Besides prompting a need for efficiency, the massive increase in enrollment also meant that educators had to find a way to manage the masses; thus, they used standardized tests to sort students by ability (Huddleson & Rockwell, 2015, p. 39). In the years following 1845, people like Alfred Binet, Theodore Simon, Henry Goddard, Edmund Huey, and Lewis Terman developed standardized IQ tests, while Edward Thorndike and others fashioned achievement tests in various content areas.

During World War I, military personnel needed a way to efficiently categorize thousands of recruits by their abilities, leading Arthur Otis to create a version of Stanford-Binet IQ test that did not require individual administration. Instead, his test utilized multiple-choice questions and could be completed silently and simultaneously by large groups, with pieces of paper and pens. The multiple-choice format captured the attention of educators, incited a trend toward objective

and impersonal assessment methods, and almost immediately took public schools by storm (Huddleson & Rockwell, 2015). Due to endorsement by the National Education Association (NEA), the amount of standardized tests available to schools rose between 1918 and 1932, from 100 to more than 1,300 assessments (Maranto, 2015, p. 2). Then, the invention of the scoring machine in 1935 lessened costs and increased efficiency, further accelerating the popularity of standardized tests.

Beginning with the Reagan administration, which capitalized on the fear that the United States was falling behind the Soviet Union in technological advancement and jeopardizing national security, politicians would champion standardized testing as a surefire way to improve educational outcomes. These forms of assessment were claimed to be critical in diagnosing and evaluating students' progress. Subsequently, presidents following Reagan offered their own takes on school reform: Clinton implemented GOALS 2000, G.W. Bush passed No Child Left Behind, and Obama devised Race to the Top. Every legislature depended on standardized testing, presupposing its legitimacy, to track success in reading and math. Indeed, these assessments did not measure intelligence, but learning accomplishments in specific areas (Cassell & Nelson, 2010).

Researchers observed: "the national test frameworks and the released test items… become the actual local curriculum due to the stakes attached to the test results (as cited in Maranto, 2015, p. 2). In a study of 360 teachers who worked within districts that implemented high-stakes testing, educators reported that they focused on basic skills instruction and felt that the content that was not tested on suffered. Further, test preparation consumed instructional time. Many teachers believed that the drawbacks of standardized testing outweighed the benefits (Shepard & Dougherty, 1991).

Not only does standardized testing continue to greatly limit curriculum and instruction, but it also plays a substantial role in determining allocation of funds. If inner city and low-income schools needed funding, for instance, they would have to amass high scores in reading and math to qualify for aid. When the survival of a school depends on test scores, it makes sense why social studies fade as a worthwhile, justifiable endeavor; logistically, only reading and math instruction matters. Ultimately, the political economy of education has turned test scores into a commodity and a currency. According to Cassell and Nelson (2010), public education has lost its original vision — creating empowered citizens — in its efforts to quantify and measure outcomes.

Increase of Federal Influence

In October of 1957, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik satellite, and not only would this instigate the Space Race, but would also have a huge effect on standardized testing, as mentioned, and on public education as a whole. In 1958, the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) provided federal funding for science, mathematics, foreign language, and such educational pursuits deemed important for promoting national safety and security. According to Brand, NDEA prompted a new era of accelerated federal funding, which "led to greater centralized influence over local schools" (2001, p. 33). In a survey assessing 112 leaders on what they would consider hallmark movements in education, respondents claimed that American education has been most drastically impacted by the implementation of federal legislation (Rand, 2001, p. 35).

The No Child Left Behind legislature is just one example of federal encroachment on education — it mandated that all schools test children in grades 3 through 8 (Kornhaber, 2004). Interestingly, the principal author of NCLB, Margaret Spellings, had no formal training in

education nor had worked in a classroom, and a secondary author, David Dunn, worked as a finance lobbyist for the Texas Association of the School Boards (Mulcahy & Irwin, 2008). In retrospection, Borkowski & Sneed posed the fundamental question: Who should guide school improvement, Congress or educators (2006, p. 507)? They mention that while NCLB requires schools to employ scientifically and research based measures, the actual remedies NCLB mandates for schools that are not making adequate yearly progress (AYP) are not based on clear scientific or educational research, and are politically and ideologically controversial (2006, p. 507). In this particular instance, the federal government ventured too far from its expertise — wouldn't professional educators, local school boards, or even state officials have more contextual understanding and knowledge to be able to remedy failing schools?

Many predict that federal influence will continue to seep into school governance, which used to be regulated to the judgment of the states ((Rand, 2001, p. 37). Considering this dilemma, Mulcahy & Irwin (2008) explained:

> Some people say that the system is broken. We would simply say we have the wrong system, for a system premised on the detachment of both student and teacher from the curriculum assumes *a removed authority* [emphasis added]. For schools to serve the needs of a democracy and offer a critical pedagogy, we need an alternative approach to schooling. (p. 207)

Core Values of Public Education

The Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses of the First Amendment protect against the establishment of religion in a government-sponsored institution while also safeguarding an individual's right to free speech. Outside of these clauses, much of the litigation involving value systems and public school holds to three premises: the right of the parents to direct the education

of their children, public school control over curriculum, and student free expression are major considerations (Mawdsley, p. 78). Concerning the control over curriculum, a paradox presents itself when public schools espouse a number of values in their curriculum, while simultaneously shunning religious values (Mawdsley, p. 81). Indeed, most of the battles with education have been about gaining control of the values that are disseminated in the public schools (Raver, p. 209).

Critiques of Public Education

One critique of public education is that corporations are corrupting the profession. If a pluralistic amalgamation of businesses, industries, important figures, etc. provides political and financial support, essentially spoon-feeding mobility into the mouth of education, then it would not be surprising if the institution of education began to mirror the ideologies of those holding and providing the power. Indeed, even the rise of standardized testing may be linked with corporate influence. Former chairman of IBM Lou Gerstner has actively promoted test-based systems, and the National Alliance of Business and the Business-Higher Education Forum have also pushed for test-based accountability systems (Kornhaber, 2004, p. 47). Additionally, the origins of the testing and accountability model adopted by NCLB may be traced back to H. Ross Perot, a billionaire who introduced the model in Texas before it was nationally embraced. Raver notes that the effects of ideological struggles between invested groups may be observed today through the renewed interest in alternative means of education (1989).

A second critique is that public schools do not offer the equality of opportunity or the economic benefits it has been claimed to provide, (Raver, 1989) leading some to call for a re-definition of education, specifically a re-definition of what it should be expected to accomplish.

If public schools cannot promise social mobility and employment, then what should they promise?

The Montessori Method

One prevalent alternative model that has been effectively implemented for decades is known as the Montessori method. Initially theorized by Dr. Maria Montessori in the late 1800's and developed through the early 1900's, this method has been applied in over 110 countries for students up to the age of eighteen (Lillard, 2019). Drawing from the insights of many philosophers and thinkers like Locke, Dewey, Rousseau, and Frobel, the method permeates with developmental psychology and boasts relevance amidst today's educational research (Colgan, 2016; Potts, 2007).

As one of Italy's first women to receive a medical degree, and as a professor at the University of Rome, Montessori strove to apply the scientific method to her research on child development and education (Potts, 2007, p. 4). Working with underprivileged and dispossessed children in Italy, in her "Children's Home," she quickly noted common tendencies of children.

The Emphasis of Environment

One of the first, and most important trends Montessori traced was that children responded positively to freedom of choice within a fixed environment. Within her schools, she would systematically provide intentionally designed, hands-on learning materials. First, she would give a teacher demonstration, modeling a mini-lesson that explained the purpose of a material. Then the students were enabled to work independently. Each material would have a "self-correcting" element or mechanism (Colgan, 2016). Children could, without teacher interference, strive to complete a task until it had been perfected. These materials followed a natural, hierarchical progression; after conquering one, the student could rise to the next lesson (or material) on which

the new activity built off the previous (Lillard & McHugh, 2019). This structure of learning provided order for students while simultaneously allowing them to move at their own pace and practice the skill of self-regulation. The environment was both fluid and fixed, and as noted, suited children quite well. Notably, being able to exercise such self-direction and inner discipline within alternative educational models has been correlated to stronger self-efficacy later in life (Shankland, n.d.).

Advocates of the Montessori method often refer to the "Prepared Environment" as one of the three critical components to the "Montessori Trinity," the other elements being the roles of the teacher and child (Lillard & McHugh, 2019). Montessori viewed environment as a secondary ingredient to the phenomenon of life in that while it can never "create" human conditions, environment can either hinder or further them (Potts, 2007, p. 5). In addition to containing the organized and concretely oriented materials, the environment Montessori fostered was also uniquely social. Classrooms were grouped according to specific age ranges rather than grades; this implementation drew from Vygotsky and Dewey's ideas about the importance of social learning. Oftentimes students found themselves waiting to use a material, sharing utensils and space, and working harmoniously throughout periods of focused concentration. Interestingly, Dewey drew a strong connection between social, collective education and upholding democracy (Miranda, 2011, p. 4), and, as exemplified in the Montessori environment, children construct knowledge both independently and collectively as each one is granted a voice. Saltofte (2013) asks the very relevant question of what happens when structured teaching is removed from the classroom environment. Montessori and Dewey would most likely affirm the social, political, philosophical, and psychological developmental benefits.

Construction of Knowledge

As previously mentioned, the Montessori method, along with many other educational alternatives, adheres more closely to a constructivist epistemology than an objectivist one. 90% of our knowledge is constructed through everyday events, meaning that the vast majority of schemata arise outside of formal instructional environments (Paige, 2010). How should educators take this into account and what does this imply for the classroom?

The roots of constructivism may be traced back to the 18th century, in which the philosopher Giambattista Vico postulated that thinking proves nothing, as only God can answer why and how he created the universe. Consequently, thinking is merely the writer's metaphysical imposed on the reader; for instance, when one argues that the sky is blue, all he can really argue is that the sky appears blue to him. In essence, knowing is less a product, or verifiable commodity, as it is a process (Ultanir, 2012, p. 3).

If constructivism were to be considered on a literal basis, then the theory holds that knowledge is relative to an individual or community. If this were the case, would education have any value? If reality is completely dependent on the perceiver, why introduce another's perception of reality? However, Montessori does not advocate a full-fledged constructivist pedagogy. Even the radical constructivist von Glaserfeld admits that individuals cannot construct a reality that is "too far off" from some sort of baseline, or general consensus (Krahenbuhl, 2016). What Montessori and others do extract from this philosophy is the inadequacy of rote teaching and the necessity of student engagement in constructing, or recreating, knowledge which the students may integrate into their own life experiences (Paige, 2010). Indeed, affective and experiential learning is emphasized throughout the major educational alternative models. In defense of a student-centered, problem-solving environment, Johnson (2009, p. 11) muses that what students learn has more to do with them than with the teacher.

Practical application of constructivism may be observed in the interconnectedness and spiral organization of curriculum. The Montessori method begins with senses, the concrete, and systematically moves into higher-order thinking (Lillard & McHugh, 2019). Children directly process information that accumulates into "general notions" which eventually compounds into abstract thought (Potts, 2007). Thinkers and reformers like Alexander Neill, Carl Rogers, John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Jerome Bruner have all supported experiential learning in which knowledge is constructed by integrating new input with existing and related schemata (Miranda, 2011, Potts, 2007). One alternative model, known as the Waldorf experience, explicitly calls for a metaphorically spiral curriculum that recognizes the developmental stages of a child and the evolution of knowledge that correlates to and moves along with each one of these stages (Easton, 1997). Through such educational experience, students learn where they fit into a reality and how they conceive of themselves inside it, more than finding and documenting a purely objective reality (Ultanir, 2012, p. 5). Constructivism also explains the need for self-direction and the decentering of the teacher through this process.

Human Nature

The two main concepts emphasized throughout this literature review, namely the qualities of constructivism and a proper educational environment, both trace back to a particular understanding of human nature. Montessori crafted an environment that revered the movements of free will agents; she sought to see God in children and respect the laws of creation within them (Miller, 2004, p. 1). Likewise, Waldorf schools are theistically oriented and recognize children as threefold beings — body, soul, and sprit (Easton, 1997). Montessori, however, did not support anarchy and directionless action within the classroom but sought to help children realize their potentials by setting them free within the bounds of a prepared environment

(Colgan, 2016, p. 9, Lillard & McHugh, 2019). A truly free-willed child does not equate to a "wild child," enslaved by emotion and instinct; instead, he or she is one whose human potential is unlocked and encouraged (Colgan, 2016, p. 10).

By feeding information to students via mass instruction, some educators fashion a passive consciousness (Colgan, 2016, p. 11). Placing a premium on ideas of quick success, these educators end up harming students' capacities for self-construction by exerting a singular narrative upon them (Johnson, 2009). Conversely, constructivism makes room for creative, diverse, and free expressions of humanity. Indeed, the human will requires space to move and think. Alternative educational models and their corresponding philosophies attempt to address free will within the context of education.

By exploring various characteristics and philosophical backings of the Montessori model and other alternative modes of thought, this literature review has attempted to offer up another voice that cries for educational reform, for a reevaluation of what constitutes authentic learning and furthers the creative gifts of individuals.

Methodology

The literature review has charted distinctions between public and alternative models of education, like the former's over-emphasis on standardized testing and the latter's emphasis on experiential, student-centered learning. Differences in educational psychology and practice have also been noted, and the need for alternative modes of education has been advocated for on a mostly philosophical basis. All theoretical disparities aside, how do public, alternative, and Montessori teachers work within their corresponding systems? What are the real effects of the constructs and abstract ideals that drive our systems? Perhaps, if one gathered real experiences and interactions from each educational system, one could determine if a practical need for alternative education exists. Indeed, the following study hinges upon the idea that the insight of teachers holds validity and weight in discussing the need for educational alternatives.

In the process of research, data was collected from a sampling of teachers with diverse backgrounds. Teachers from both public and alternative schools were interviewed; all have taught or teach within the state of Florida. Their students ranged from elementary grade levels to high school grade levels. Likewise, content areas ranged broadly, from English to science — there were no targeted subjects or ages in this study. Ten teachers in total were interviewed: three public school teachers, three Montessori teachers, and four alternative school teachers. One alternative teacher works within a school that she has co-founded, and which may be described as "a learn and play studio." Another alternative teacher works within a classical school, and two alternative teachers work in a homeschool extension program. This program offers core and supplementary courses to homeschooled students who meet in classrooms twice a week.

All of the participants were contacted through email and each interview was scheduled by email after the initial correspondence. To protect their confidentialities, the teachers will be

referred to as Public Teacher #1, Public Teacher #2, Public Teacher #3, Montessori Teacher #1, Montessori Teacher #2, Montessori Teacher #3, Alternative Teacher #1, Alternative Teacher #2, Alternative Teacher #3, and Alternative Teacher #4. Additional measures were taken to safeguard participants' confidentialities; any printed data was stored behind locked doors in the researchers' offices and electronic data was stored on a password-protected computer.

These semi-structured interviews were conducted to reveal teachers' perspectives on the purposes of education, the effectiveness of the systems in which they work, how children learn, and the implicit philosophies that back their pedagogy. Created by the co-investigator, the interview questions were formatted to address the failings and critiques of the public school system that are discussed in the literature review of this thesis.

The questions encouraged the participants to express their concerns and praises for the educational systems in which they operate and adhere to. Additionally, the questions attempted to assess the various epistemologies at play in various environments and how these correspond with a child's nature. The questions were divided into five different categories: Setting the Stage, The Teacher's Methods and Influence, The Learning Environment, The Curriculum, and The Students. Although the researcher's structured the study as mixed-methods research, a greater emphasis was placed on qualitative data.

The interviews were conducted in person, one-on-one. Most interviews occurred at the teachers' schools; two occurred at off-campus locations. Each teacher signed a paper consent form and gave permission for the interviews to be recorded in order to ensure accurate transcription. A copy of the consent form, the initial contact email, interview questions, and complete transcripts of the interviews are included in the Appendices. Data from the interviews and responses are discussed in the following chapter.

Analysis of Data

Multiple overarching themes reveal themselves through careful inspection and comparison of the interviews. Many themes, like the lack of differentiation offered in public schools, are interdependent upon others, like the over-emphasis on standardized testing. Other topics include education as career preparation, the influence of politics, and the common characteristics of alternative educational philosophies. The perspectives of alternative and Montessori schoolteachers are not solely pitted against the opinions of public school teachers; the responses of alternative and Montessori teachers are also considered in relation to each other. The research highlights systemic and structural elements of educational models in order to draw out the strengths and weaknesses of various systems and to identify how each system serves and affects its constituents. Finally, the study does not intend to evaluate the effectiveness of the individual teachers who contributed to the investigation.

Career vs. Learner-Oriented Education

Out of all the questions one could pose to an educator, perhaps the most pervasive and foundational question rests upon the singular query: *Why?* Why does society deem it necessary to educate children, why do parents pursue the *best* education for their children, and why is an entire realm of thought and work dedicated to the task of *educating*? Indeed, the decided purpose of education shapes everything else that follows — from the structure of a school system to a teacher's pedagogy, from curricular design to student outcomes. Thus, in an effort to compare the differences between public, alternative, and Montessori schools, one must first and foremost ask — *Why?*

Participants of this study provided similar, yet slightly divergent answers to this all-important question. They shared an overarching conviction that education extends beyond the

arena of academics, i.e., an education is more than meeting academic criteria or possessing a certain breadth of knowledge. All ten of the interviewed teachers expressed the highest of intentions and conveyed a respect for education, upholding it as a worthwhile pursuit. They desire that their students learn how to think for themselves in order to make sound decisions and continue learning throughout their lives. Additionally, respondents shared the idea that there is a social and communal aspect to education; it helps one understand his or her place in the world.

Alternative and Montessori teachers detailed the purpose of education with more relational, emotional, and spiritual terminology than the public school teachers. They used phrases like "kindling the fire," "passion to learn," "continue their curiosity," "functioning adults who are kind and generous," "learning how to get along," "learning how to be with someone in the present," "training them to be decent, loving, compassionate human beings," and "to nourish the whole child… mentally, spiritually, physically." These descriptors suggest slight differences in the perception of the purpose of education compared to that of public educators, who, in general, were more career-oriented than learner-oriented in their approach to education. As Public School Teacher #3 stated, "Today, education is about obtaining information that is relevant, valid, and useful in the workforce." This quote illuminates one contention that many alternative education advocates have with the public school system. Montessori Teacher #2 explained, "There used to be a time when liberal education was valued just for that. It's now more specific in terms of career."

Further, Alternative Teacher #2 pointed out that the majority of people today presuppose education to be a means to an end. As a teacher at a homeschool extension site which offers twice-a-week classes, and as a professor at a local university, this teacher relayed that many of her college students viewed their pursuits as "stepping stones" to a job and then career. While

Alternative Teacher #2 agreed that the purpose of education includes preparation for a career. She stated that people often "don't see the bigger picture," and expanded her vision to include relational and spiritual elements which are often missing from the public perception. Alternative Teacher #3 also noted this nuance — that there are simultaneously practical and sacred aspects to education — when he said that education produces good citizens, but that this is only a byproduct of and not the purpose of education. Additionally, he said that he appreciates the classical educational model because it targets the education of the whole person, recognizing the human as a body, a mind, and as a soul. He suggests that within public schools, there is a lack of cohesiveness between educating every part of the person.

In sum, the alternative and Montessori teachers all seemed to imply that public education, at some point, became more career-oriented and less oriented toward the learner as a multi-dimensional being. This will further be addressed in the next section.

Governmental Influences and the Standardization of Education

"Formalized education is rather new in terms of modern history," pronounced Alternative Teacher #1. Two teachers noted that education used to heavily rely on oral traditions, story telling, and families passing down knowledge to their children. Then, during the time of the Greek philosophers, education consisted of sharing and debating ideas within a community. Fast forwarding to the Industrial Revolution, two of the alternative teachers claimed that during this historical period, education experienced a shift toward standardization. Alternative Teacher #1 claimed that today's grading system resulted from the application of the factory model to education: "We grade our children the same way we grade our meat and our eggs." Along with procedural changes, the goal of education also morphed during the Industrial Revolution. According to Alternative Teacher #2: "We started moving away from religion, toward more

science-based everything… For many people, I think that's when the goal of education came to be equipping people to do their jobs." She also said that within these last few decades, the realm of humanities has been marginalized as people are being pushed toward STEM-related fields. Public School Teacher #2 voiced this opinion as well: "They're really pushing STEM right now in the state." This statement begs the question: Who is "they?"

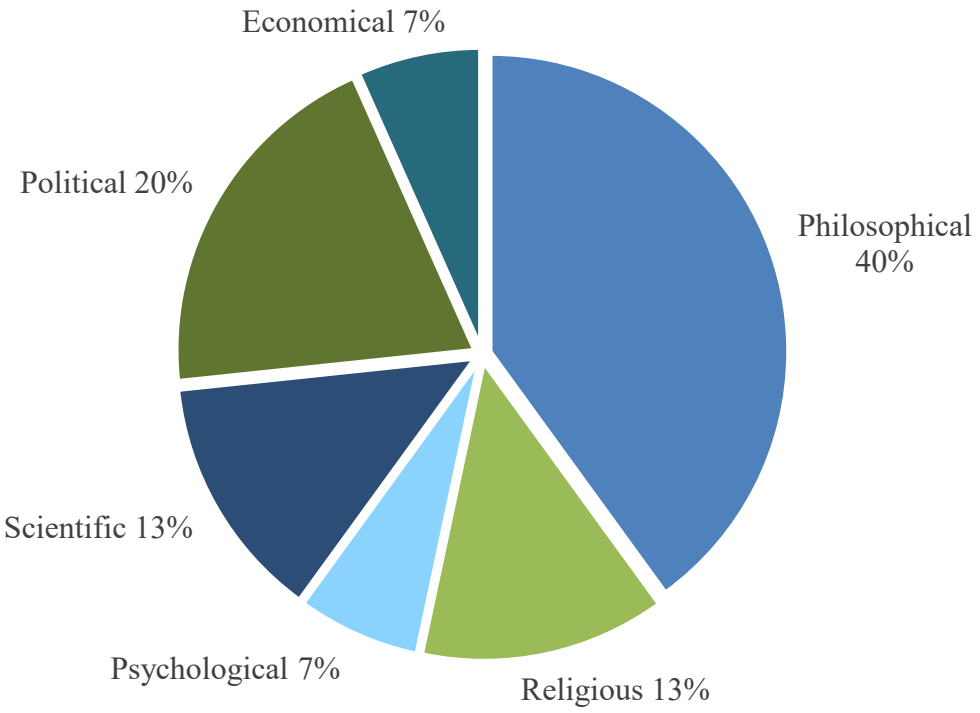
As noted in the literature review, the formalization, standardization, and career-minded focus of public education seems to closely align with the increasing influence of government. All of the public school teachers interviewed in the study referred to the exercise of control that politicians exert upon education. Public School Teacher #3 lamented, "Education is treated as a business in all the ways it shouldn't be and none of the ways it should be. Lawmakers and individuals who have the greatest impact often have never spent a day in the classroom." Similarly, Public School Teacher #2 commented, "Anytime politics get involved, that's always an issue because politicians are no longer keeping the best interest of the child or the parent in mind." Also, having taught in public schools before turning to the Montessori method, Montessori Teacher #3 affirmed that legislators with no experience in the classroom largely dictate what is taught. These three teachers voice an unfortunate upheaval of authority. Stakeholders directly influenced by the public school system, like the teachers, parents, and students themselves, often do not have a direct say on how the system should operate. Alternative Teacher #1 specifically called the implications of the No Child Left Behind Act "detrimental," and, as already mentioned, Alternative Teacher #2 noted that the push toward STEM creates deficits within humanities departments. Students, she feared, will lack an understanding of humanity's origins and a comprehension of "why we are the way we are." Further, she postulated that the idea of funneling everyone into the same modes of thought

sounded eerily similar to the ideals of Marxism. Public School Teacher #2 criticized culturally responsive teaching as a politically-driven agenda.

The responses to question #14 clearly illustrate another way in which politics influences public education. 100% of the public school teachers cited politics as a contributing factor to the curricular design of their system. Conversely, none of the alternative or Montessori schoolteachers mentioned politics in discussion of curricular design; more than anything else, they detailed philosophical factors as the underpinnings of their curriculum.

Figure 1

What factors most strongly influence curricular design?



This chart depicts the underlying influences upon curricular design within all models of education: Montessori, alternative, and public school systems. Philosophical factors were most commonly referenced, with political factors following second.

Public Teacher #1 relayed that although she must use the curriculum and content given to her by the state, she still has some freedom to determine how she teaches the content. Having an already prepared and compiled curriculum, then, allows her more time to understand her students and adjust instructional methods to their needs. Public School Teacher #2 pinpointed particular teacher guides that were placed in his hands for purely political reasons. He explained that other teaching guides, however, outlined teaching philosophy and pedagogy. Finally, Public School Teacher #3 revealed a more negative outlook of governmental intervention: "Money and lobbyists grease the right hands to put their materials into the hands of educators." Although the benefits and detriments of governmental influence in curriculum may be debated, the responses within the study show that even though public education is impacted by politics, namely in its standardization, alternative education is not.

An Overemphasis on Testing

While all teachers agreed on the necessity of assessment, ideas on the importance of standardized testing split alternative and public education into two divergent factions. Montessori Teacher #1 states that, in the public sphere, testing is thought to be all-important; this assumption leads to a stressful learning environment which places a lot of pressure on receiving high scores. Alternative Teacher #2, who is also a professor, said that she has heard from her college-age students and from other teachers that in public schools, the focus is on testing. Educators teach to the test, and students learn what is relevant for passing the test. Public School Teacher #1 said that her school utilizes pull-out groups, "especially around testing times," underscoring the fact that tests are a driving force behind instruction and even instructional methods. Alternative Teacher #2 concluded, "Because of that, there are so many other things they're not learning or focusing on."

What happens when testing becomes the main catalyst for learning? First, as mentioned, the teaching and content presented will be limited to what students will be tested on. Learning for the sake of learning, and learning for the sake of exploring interests and expressing creativity, takes a secondary position. Secondly, testing becomes the primary means of assessing the competence of students and the effectiveness of teachers. However, as Alternative Teacher #1 explained, expecting all students to perform the same way is unrealistic. When students with differing needs, abilities, and backgrounds are evaluated with a standardized test that fails to take their unique dispositions into account, using such a test as an accountability measure for teachers is, consequently, an unrealistic indicator of teachers' effectiveness. Public School Teacher #3 highlighted various problem spots associated with standardized testing: "Handcuffing teachers and their pay to standardized testing has created an environment where creativity and deep thinking no longer exists."

The Struggle to Implement Differentiation

Because test scores affect teachers' effectiveness and even their pay, standardized testing brings about another complication: do teachers differentiate instruction to meet the diverse needs of students, or do they focus instruction on students who will make the most gains on tests? When pinpointing three deficiencies in education today, Alternative Teacher #1cited high-stakes testing, homogeneous grouping, and the inequality of focusing on the students who will more quickly demonstrate academic progress. She recalled a situation she once encountered as a public school teacher: "We were literally told, 'Do not even teach to the red column. They're not going to make enough gains for it to count towards testing. You need to focus on the yellow kids because they're the ones who can bump up a grade level which would help our school scoring.'" Differentiation is a high ideal in education, and yet, Alternative Teacher #1 was met with the

impracticality of it: “You think, ‘Yes, I can meet all of these children’s needs...,’ but the reality is that that’s not happening, and that’s from experience.”

Similarly, Public School Teacher #3 said that when one can have upwards of 30 students in a classroom, “to create 30 different self-paced trajectories is unrealistic for that teacher.” She admitted that while new curriculums with digital platforms are aiding teachers in differentiation, “the breadth of standards that must be covered prior to testing makes a self-paced learning environment impossible.” Public School Teacher #2 used the analogy of a train to describe how the public system handles instructional delivery — he has to assume that students are on the “same track,” going in the “same direction.” Some students are in the caboose (struggling learners) while others are in the front (gifted and high-performing students). The teacher, necessarily, must fall “somewhere in the middle” of the train, in an attempt to pull all students along the same track. With this method of delivery, the teacher is limited in how much differentiation he can offer, as all students must remain on the same track and cannot deviate too far from the standard pace.

This predicament — the systemic limitation on the teacher’s ability to differentiate — is perhaps the largest reason why alternative education exists. 100% of the teachers interviewed agreed that there is a need for alternative models of education, and many said this was because everyone learns differently. Alternative Teacher #4 said that because the public system moves students along on a predetermined, standardized timeline, some will be bored while others can barely keep up. She plainly stated, “You can't put them all in the same box.” Montessori Teacher #2 discovered that during her time as a public school teacher, the curriculum worked for about 50% of the children. It failed those who struggled and abandoned those with intellectual faculties. She grieved, “We’re wasting all kinds of capabilities.” In regards to alternative

educational models, Public School Teacher #1 said, " I think students deserve it." Further, she maintained, "The more diversity we have in the way information is presented, the better chance we have of more students being successful in school."

Key Attributes of Alternative Educational Models

Instilling Confidence

Throughout the study, similarities arose between the philosophy and practice of Montessori and alternative school teachers. For example, teachers from both models aimed to instill confidence in students through an emphasis on strengths and potential. Alternative Teacher #4 said that a Biblical worldview informed her philosophy of education, and that the inclusion of a Biblical worldview in instruction "helps to build confidence in oneself and the ability to engage the world in a loving manner." When asked about her philosophy of education, Montessori Teacher #2 said, "It's all about development of human potential." Additionally, Montessori Teacher #1 explained that Maria Montessori, the founder of the Montessori method, was one of the first advocates for students and honored them as equals with potentiality.

Alternative Teacher #1 described how she has witnessed children who had been failing, stressed, and disengaged in the public system begin to thrive in her school. In critique of the mental and emotional effects that public schools can have on students, Alternative Teacher #1 expressed, "The only thing we teach kids when we tell them that they're falling behind in their learning is that they're not good enough." She also maintained that a focus on a student's deficits, which came with the No Child Left Behind legislature, is detrimental: "We look at children and automatically see the deficit instead of the strength." Alternative Teacher #1 advocated for "strengths-based teaching, building up confidence," and helping students to

recognize that their ideas and backgrounds are important. In contrast, Public School Teacher #1 said, “You can make the biggest impact when you know where your students are struggling.”

Freedom of Choice, Self-Regulation, and Independence

Another similarity between the two models is that students in alternative settings possess more control than public school students in determining the pace and content of their learning, which in turn fosters self-regulation and independence. Montessori teachers maintained student choice more so than alternative school teachers; however, both groups advocated for the student’s freedom of choice. While admitting that her system does not allow for total self-direction and arguing that children need mentorship and guidance, Alternative Teacher #1 still used the words “peacefully paced” and “personalized” to summarize the pedagogy within her school. She disclosed that in public schools, students lack the opportunity to flex their “creativity muscle.” Because their schedules are pre-ordained and rigid, there is no time for boredom, the precursor to creative invention. Public School Teacher #1 voiced that her students “are extremely dependent” and have “very few choices.” She expressed, “You want them to drive their own learning because you want them to take ownership of it, but it does not happen.” Conversely, Alternative Teacher #1 said that her school provided time for the brain to wander, giving students the freedom to engage themselves in play, creativity, and invention. She held that while her system does have a framework of structure, ultimately, the child’s abilities and interests determine what they learn.

Alternative Teacher #2 stated, that although the curriculum is set, students within her system still have the flexibility to decide when and how they will work. Because students meet twice a week in a classroom setting, they choose how to allocate their time throughout the rest of the week. According to the teacher, they are “learning how to manage their time and be

independent." Alternative Teacher #2 mentioned that she also has flexibility to spend more time, as necessary, on specific concepts. The curriculum, then, does not completely dictate students' pace.

Similarly, Alternative Teacher #4 explained that while her system involves pacing guides and deadlines, students have the freedom to manage their own time throughout the week. She also said that a student's freedom of choice, appearing in the form of class choice, increases as children age. For instance, those within elementary grade levels have to learn basics, such as reading, writing, and mathematics. At the same time, Alternative Teacher #4 said that if they wanted to learn about astronomy or Greek philosophy, she would "try to grab that because if that was something they were interested in, they would bite and then they would engage." Further, she said that high school students can choose to focus on electives that interest them and can take courses in the order they want. Alternative Teacher #4 concluded, "Learning can be more student driven where we are."

Likewise, all of the Montessori teachers stressed the autonomy and freedom of the student while providing certain conditions for freedom. They jointly expressed that there is "freedom within boundaries" (Montessori Teacher #3), "freedom within choice and limits" (Montessori Teacher #1), and freedom "by setting boundaries" (Montessori Teacher #2). Montessori Teacher #3 dispelled the misconception about the Montessori method that students get to do whatever they want; rather, students are free to choose lessons within their abilities. Montessori Teacher #1 reiterated, "The child is given the independence based on readiness." Montessori Teacher #2 made a distinction between the process and pace of learning — the process is structured in that there is a sequential order to everything and students cannot use materials for which they are not developmentally ready. The pace, however, depends entirely on

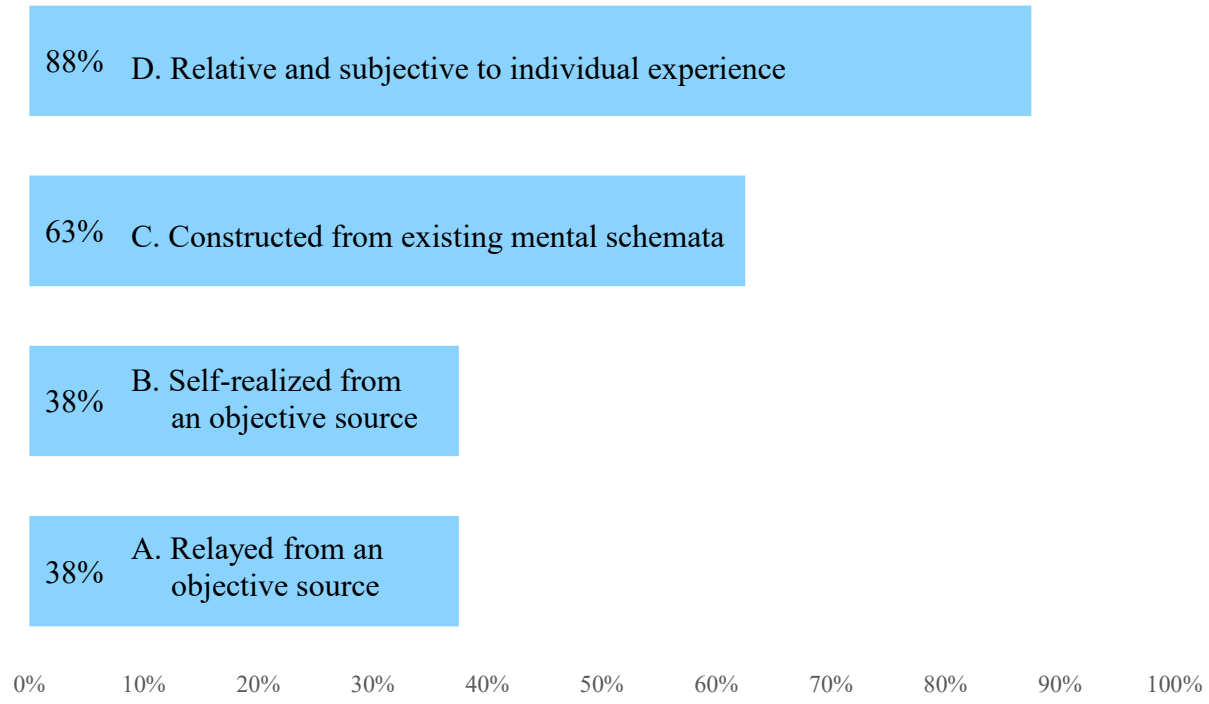
the child. Montessori Teacher #3 illustrated how a Montessori classroom could house one student adding four digit numbers and another student who could not count. Montessori Teacher #1 expounded, “The class should be functioning on its own, like a living ecosystem… the teacher is a guide on the side and we just gracefully come in and deliver lessons when needed.”

Montessori Teacher #3 said that teachers “guide them [students] to self-regulate,” and that the Montessori method “wires their brains to be independent.” Indeed, classroom experiences within this system mold students to be “independent” and “self-starters” (Montessori Teacher #1). When asked if students interact with knowledge in a dependent or independent way, Montessori Teacher #1 affirmed the latter, and Montessori Teacher #2 answered that students interact in both ways. She clarified that they are dependent on the teacher for some instruction, but then the students independently explore and work with concepts, personally maintaining repeated exposures to the concepts. Montessori Teacher #2 provided an example of this position. One of her students would appear ready for the introduction of a new math lesson; however, once receiving the instruction, the student would go back and practice previous lessons on his own, before choosing to interact with the new content days after being introduced to it. Essentially, this student was holding himself personally accountable for knowledge acquisition by independently reinforcing foundational concepts. Finally, Montessori Teacher #3 answered that Montessori teachers never “dump and fill” knowledge — teachers facilitate rather than dictate, and tend to draw from students’ interests. When teachers assume this position, taking a backseat in the learning environment and allowing interests and knowledge to be individually explored, students have more freedom to determine their learning pace and content. Simultaneously, students are self-regulating and practicing independence. These practices also

align with the most commonly held belief that knowledge is relative and subjective to individual experience, as illustrated below.

Figure 2

How is Knowledge Acquired?



This chart reveals that the majority of teachers interviewed believed that knowledge is relative and subjective to individual experience. The next most popular opinion was that knowledge is constructed from existing mental schemata.

Cross-Curricular Instruction

In describing her philosophy of teaching, Alternative Teacher #1 emphasized cross-curricular learning, citing the Finnish model of education as the inspiration backing her school system. Within this nine-year comprehensive system, the Finnish system, compulsory education does not begin for students until the age of seven; thus, children learn through play and indirect experiences during the most formative years of life. Students also are not assigned homework,

and teachers enjoy the flexibility to plan their own instruction with limited governmental inference. Additionally, Alternative Teacher #2 described her system as being structured in such a way that content areas intentionally correlate with each other. For example, at her school, history is not viewed as an isolated realm of academia. Instead, whatever students are studying in history directly corresponds with what is being learned in English and rhetoric. Alternative Teacher #2 explained how, on one instance, her 11th grade students started reading *A Tale of Two Cities* a week after she had begun a unit on the French Revolution. She then relayed the effect that this interrelated content had on students' learning: "One of the students came in and was like, 'Oh my gosh, it makes sense now. I understand why this happened in the book and where all this came from,' because I had already laid the foundation. I think that's important." Alternative Teacher #4 posited that the inclusion of a Biblical worldview in instruction helps students understand the world "from what's really happening underneath;" essentially, cross-curricular instruction that involves questions of morality, ethics, and faith provides students with a more comprehensive learning experience.

Montessori Teacher #1 provided an example of cross-curricular instruction that occurred within a "Save the Ocean" unit. First, students studied biology and endangered species. Then, they toured a facility where they learned from marine biologists about conservation and environmental efforts. Montessori Teacher #1 concluded that students came away with a "deep understanding," not only because content had been related within fields of study, but also because the content had been related to their own lives. Students witnessed practical applications of their learning, dealt with real-word problems, and engaged in hands-on experiences and face-to-face conversations.

Project and Discussion Based Learning

Both alternative and Montessori teachers cited the importance of projects and discussion in learning. Alternative Teacher #1 stated, “Every child should be able to receive a wonder-based learning with play and project time.” Alternative Teacher #2 said that information is presented in different formats so students can interact in ways that best suit them; in other words, differentiation is a reality at this school. Alternative Teacher #4 expanded her vision of instruction to include lasting, deep discussions, debates, and speeches, through which students are encouraged to develop their own voices. Montessori Teacher #3 remarked that as children progress through a Montessori school, students participate in group projects on an increasing basis, and by the time a student is in middle school, “all they do… is group projects.” She explained, “We need a more collaborative form of education where children learn to collaborate very early on with other people and work with them.”

When providing a rating on a scale from 1 to 10 to assess how effective their schools were at fostering impactful educational experiences, four alternative and Montessori teachers provided ratings at or above an 8. The average score amongst these teachers was a 9. Conversely, the average rating provided by public school teachers was a 7.5. This average rating implies that public schools are not devoid of project and discussion-driven learning and impactful educational experiences. Public School Teacher #1 highlighted one of her co-workers who designed escape rooms for her students, while Public School Teacher #2 explained how he attempted to set up learning that occurred outside of a textbook by creating a business model simulation. However, Public School Teacher #3 asserted, “Until every teacher is crafting a classroom that has authentic and creative opportunities for learning and education, we are still short and missing the target.”

Developmental Stages

While both alternative and Montessori teachers shared a common respect for the developmental stages of learners, allowing a student's developmental stages to guide the learning process is a distinctive hallmark of the Montessori method.

Alternative Teacher #1 expressed that in many public schools, young students — even in kindergarten — are asked to perform tasks for which "their brains are just not ready." She explained that many of them are concrete learners, and yet, "We're asking them to do abstract things." Alternative Teacher #1 clarified that her system utilizes developmentally appropriate activities and practices, without strictly relegating students to one mode of thinking due to their ages. Rather, the instruction is "more interwoven." More specifically, she stated, "Our curriculum provides experiences that are more concrete, like in our invitations to play and in our invitations to create. Then, they [students] get to do more abstract things through their projects; they get to research and formulate ideas about things. So, it's more symbiotic than, 'You can only do this because you're this age.'"

All of the Montessori teachers dedicated conversation to developmental stages in their interviews. Montessori Teacher #1 explained that the Montessori method sprang from a scientific and observational standpoint and how it has "a definite psychological background." Montessori Teacher #3 echoed this history: "That's the best thing about what Maria Montessori did… she literally took her observations and made it into an educational philosophy." She further explicated how Maria Montessori correlated certain learning modes and concepts with ages. Because students are sensitive to specific capacities within general age ranges — this phenomenon is known as "planes of development" — the teacher must use awareness to introduce concepts and ideas that students are developmentally prepared to process. The Montessori method systematically moves between concrete and abstract learning; for example,

students learn through utilizing a plethora of sensory materials before they learn about the history of the world. Montessori Teacher #3 also touched on sensitive periods, explaining that in her classroom of two to five year olds, the children are highly sensitive to order: "They need to know exactly where things are" and thus, she keeps the room, furniture, and materials always organized.

Montessori Teacher #2 could not stress developmental stages enough: "The materials, the teaching, the organization — everything has to do with developmental stages." She also described how these stages influence how she treats her students. For instance, she could desire to teach a lesson to a certain student, and she could very well require that the student learn the lesson, but if "they're not ready in that moment… you're just wasting your time and theirs."

The Role of Community and Family

Public School Teacher #1 voiced concern for a lack of parental involvement in their children's education, holding that the perception of education in society has changed. For parents, education has become more a "babysitting opportunity" than anything else; she also said, "I've been teaching my eighth year and even since my first year of teaching it's unbelievable… Even at an elementary level, where you would think parent involvement is typically at its height, it is not anymore." Further, she stated, "Schools who have high involvement typically have better (not smarter) students who just learn better because there's somebody holding them accountable to it. I think a lot of that can be impacted by the community and the way that our communities are set up." Public School Teacher #3 mentioned that strong parental support indicates success. Public School Teacher #2 commented that in private schools, overbearing parents sometimes get "too involved," and may attempt to fire teachers if they feel their children are being slighted. He then said the opposite case may be true in public schools.

Whether there is a lack of, or a negative influence stemming from parental involvement, all of the public school teachers highlighted the importance of a finely-tuned balance between home and school and teachers and parents. Two of the public school teachers, however, also cited deficiencies concerning family and community roles within schools.

A healthy collaboration between home and school seems to be a defining quality within alternative and Montessori schools. Montessori Teacher #3 mused, "I think the parents really appreciate that [a teacher's observational standpoint] because we know the children so well. When we do parent conferences, most of the time I never get pushbacks from parents." Alternative Teacher #2 asserted, "We are a homeschool program... At home, parents can work with the students who need more help... The younger ones, they need that parental involvement." Alternative Teacher #4 said:

> If you've got a parent that's engaged, you've got the love of the parent engaged with the love of learning… So it really sets up this perfect storm of a good space within which learning can happen. I think you just have better opportunities in a homeschooling environment to make that happen.

She also explained that her school consists of passionate tutors and engaged families who want to be there — and that this combination leads to effective learning.

Predicted Learning and Student Outcomes

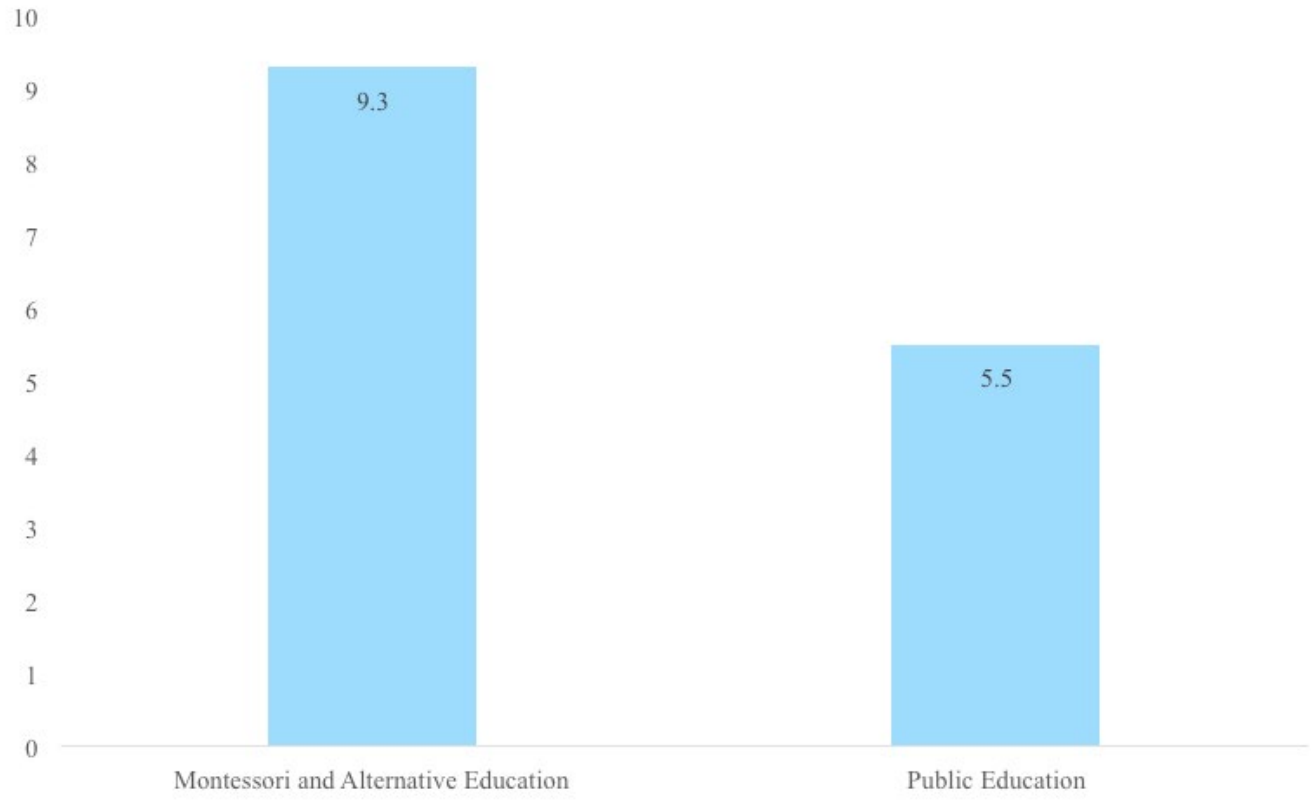
When asked how well their schools were fostering affective, experiential, and lasting learning on a scale from 1 to 10, three alternative and Montessori teachers supplied ratings at or above a 6. The one public school teacher who provided a rating for this answer gave a 5, and stated that "exploring social and emotional learning and delving into mental health in general is a touchy subject." Conversely, Montessori Teacher #2 stated, "I would say that's what we do."

When asked how well their learning environments cultivated self-efficacy on a scale from 1 to 10, alternative and Montessori teachers provided an average rating of 8.7. Public school teachers provided an average rating of 5.8. Believing that her system does not support self-efficacy, Public School Teacher #3 explained her reasoning behind a score of 3.5: "There is no internal need for a student to strive for his or her best as they know they will be given a safety net should they fail or fall."

Finally, teachers were asked to provide a rating on a scale 1 one to 10, indicating how well they believed students leaving their systems were able to devise original and rational solutions to issues. Public School Teacher #1 provided a 3.5, the lowest score of any teacher, stating, "I don't think they can do it well at all. I think there's so much of the system right now that just teaches students what to think and not how to think." This statement reveals a drastic difference between intentions and realities: Public School Teacher #1 was the same teacher that believed the purpose of education was to teach students to think for themselves. Similarly, Public School Teacher #3, who provided a low rating of 4, stated that the misuse of standardized tests has created an environment where creativity and deep thinking no longer exists. Paradoxically, she also held that the purpose of education was to craft minds that "think outside of the box and push the boundaries of convention."

Figure 3

How well are students able to devise original and rational solutions to issues (on a scale from 1 to 10)?



This bar graph illustrates that students who attend Montessori and alternative schools are better equipped to devise original and rational solutions to issues. According to the teachers, students within these systems outperform public school students. The two scores represent the average of ratings provided by the two groups of teachers.

Conclusion

Findings

The study undoubtedly established that there is a need for alternative education; all ten teachers agreed on this point. This does not mean that public schools should be abolished, but that, at a minimum, alternative schools should be regarded as more than small homeschool groups gathering on the fringes of society. Alternative systems offer fresh approaches to education, readdressing the student's needs and how to best meet those, as opposed to focusing on funding, meeting standards, and improving test scores. They have the flexibility to center their curriculums, instructional methods, and learning environments around philosophy, science, and developmental psychology, unhindered by political interference. As mentioned in the literature review, federal mandates for public education, such as No Child Left Behind, often have no grounding in research-based practices.

Interestingly, the Montessori teachers seemed the most uniform in their statements and convictions, closely paralleling each other. They held that in public schools, students can slip through the cracks because there is not as much individual attention given to those who require it the most. The question arises: What happens to the 50% of students for whom the curriculum is not working? They described the Montessori method as one that adheres to the developmental stages of learning, fosters holistic growth, and instills lasting curiosity and creativity. They all believed that the Montessori method fosters independence and self-regulation, and that students who leave their schools possess strong self-efficacy.

Likewise, the alternative school teachers strongly advocated the systems they worked in and cited similar student outcomes. While both Montessori and alternative teachers emphasized the development of self-confidence through a strengths-based approach, Public School Teacher #1 mentioned that a teacher can make the biggest impact when he knows where a student is struggling. While certainly not indicative of malicious intent, this statement reveals that both alternative and Montessori schools have a distinct aim — they strive to reverse, or prevent, the destruction of self-confidence through affirmation of potential and of students' unique talents and strengths.

Both groups of Montessori and alternative school teachers emphasized that education is not solely career preparation, and while the public school teachers also reflected this idea, Public School Teacher #3 simultaneously presented a contradiction, explaining that education is about obtaining relevant knowledge for the workforce. When the shift toward industrialization occurred in the early 1900's, public schools adopted a career-orientated mindset, and perhaps subconsciously, are currently still much more committed to preparing workers than free-thinking American citizens. Although public education in America was originally founded to instill the principles of religion and laws of the country in students, none of the public school teachers mentioned either of these aims.

What did the public school teachers mention? Standardized testing and expectations stemming from the district, state, and federal government were topics addressed multiple times. Public School Teacher #1 indicated that tests influence instruction, and Public School Teacher #3 asserted that standardized tests stunt deep thinking and creativity. Further, she said that policy makers have often never spent a day in the classroom, and Public School Teacher #2 stated that the involvement of politicians in education is always an issue. In addition, Alternative and

Montessori teachers expressed dismay at the public system due to encroaching political agendas and standardized testing. These are areas that will likely need to be addressed and reconfigured in upcoming years if the public system wishes to defend student-centered education. Otherwise, it is likely that alternative schools will continue to gain traction as they cultivate educational experiences that meet the diverse needs of learners.

Weaknesses

The weaknesses of the research lie in the fact that only ten teachers participated. Additionally, all of the teachers interviewed work in Florida, rendering the study geographically and numerically limited. The resulting research is confined firstly, to the United States, and, secondly, to a few counties within a singular state. In no way does the study yield an accurate portrayal of the national, or general, consensus of teachers' opinions on the educational systems in which they work. For instance, although Public School Teacher #3 expressed concern about her job and pay being handcuffed to standardized testing, it cannot be said that every public school teacher feels this way, since the study represents such a small sampling of teachers.

Furthermore, although the study attempted to gather quantitative data, teachers were hesitant to generalize their sentiments and rate their systems' effectiveness and their students' outcomes on a scale. Consequently, the feedback from the teachers is unabashedly subjective and qualitative. The researchers were left to compare opinions, discover parallels between ideas, note differences of thought, and identify gaps between belief and practice. They would be amiss to claim objectivity in their observations.

Strengths

A strength of the study is that the teachers interviewed daily dwell on the frontlines of education, on the real consequences of state and federal policies. They are the implementers of

curriculum, the faces that children are looking up to, and the personable forces that are driving future generations. If any one of these teachers has something to say about the way education is and ought to be, his or her statements and perspectives deserve respect and consideration from others. The study, while extremely limited, offers what businessmen, doctors, politicians, and reporters cannot — ideas grounded in experience. The interviews engaged passionate professionals who have dedicated their lives to educating countless children.

Therefore, what can be said about the study is that if more than one, and especially if all three, of the public school teachers mentioned some of the same realities and issues facing education, then there might be trending topics worth exploring. They may have been hinting toward some larger problem that only a nationwide assessment could actually prove to be ubiquitous. For example, since all of them alluded to large governmental influences in their curriculum and/or in testing, one may wonder if political involvement in education should not be evaluated for its efficacy. Similarly, two of the public school teachers worried that due to systemic deficiencies, students were not truly learning to think for themselves, and were not capable of engaging in original, creative thought; thus, one might need to consider the structure of public education and how it may hinder critical thinking skills. The adherence to a factory model of education, the federal imposition upon local schools, and the eminence of standardized testing are legitimate aspects of the public system that ought to be investigated. All three public school teachers cited similar purposes for education and all paid homage to shifting needs and cultural perceptions of education; again, this does not truthfully prove, but rather implies, that there might be a common understanding amongst public school teachers which differs from that of alternative school teachers.

Future Study

Future study could expand the number of teachers interviewed and encompass a broader range of teachers from across the country. This would provide a more comprehensive picture of the educational landscape, reveal what issues are on the forefront of education, and more clearly distinguish what characteristics are unique to alternative schools and what nuances exist between them. Conducting the study on a larger scale would also give rise to quantitative data that would more accurately represent popular opinions. Additionally, future research could gather teachers from a more diverse pool of alternative education models — schools represented in the current study consist of a self-starter, a classical school, and two homeschool programs — and these are certainly not the only types of alternatives. Teachers from Waldorf schools, play-based schools, Sudbury schools, free schools, and open classroom schools could be included in a more expansive study.

The current study has suggested that political influence, along with standardized testing, may be corrupting educational experiences in public school classrooms. It would be of interest to delve more deeply into these two topics if another study were to be undertaken. Adding to the interview questions already asked in the current study, researchers could pose the following questions to public school teachers concerning political influence and standardized testing: In your opinion, which pieces of legislature have most impacted your career and your instruction? In general, have political efforts been more beneficial than detrimental, or more detrimental than beneficial? Which stakeholders do you think are most responsible for educational reform: the federal government, the state, local boards, or parents? Has standardized testing inhibited the diversity of content you teach? How does standardized testing affect the attitudes of the teacher and of the students? If you could implement one change in the use of standardized testing, what would it be?

As hoped, the research did reveal practical need for alternative education — the various structures and conceptual frameworks that guide public and alternative models do, indeed, have real consequences on the day-to-day realities of education. While the literature review offered an argument drawing from history and educational theories, the research further expounded upon the *why* for alternative education. Undoubtedly, alternative models deserve attention and space upon the landscape of education. As advocates continue to champion diverse modes of learning, as parents strive to meet the intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical needs of their children, and as educators look to change the aspects of their environments that suppress authentic learning, reform will shake the very foundations of the traditional public school system, and alternative education will prove its effectiveness and relevancy in today's word.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Consent Form

PROJECT TITLE: Understanding the Educational Landscape: A Comparative Study of Public, Alternative, and Montessori Models

INVESTIGATORS:

James Anderson, Ph.D.
Dean | College of Education | Southeastern University

Elizabeth Dykens
Student | Southeastern University

PURPOSE: This research aims to assess the importance of alternative educational models to determine whether they may address the criticisms of the public school system and improve a child's educational outcomes.

PROCEDURES: Each participant will be asked open-ended questions regarding their educational experiences and convictions. The semi-structured interviews, which will take roughly 45 minutes each, will gather teachers' perspectives on the purposes of education, the effectiveness of the systems in which they work, how children learn, and the implicit philosophies that back their pedagogy. The interviews will be audio recorded. The sampling population will be teachers who have been working in the profession for at least five years and who work in either public schools, Montessori schools, or in other alternative schools. Teachers will be selected from the Polk, Duval, and St. John's counties.

RISKS OF PARTICIPATIONS: There are no known risks associated with this project which are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION: There is no personal benefit to participation in this study; however, the resulting research and analysis may benefit society by offering up new voices within the sphere of education.

CONFIDENTIALITY: The records of this study will be kept private. Any written results will not include information that will identify you. Printed research records will be safeguarded in the researchers' offices, behind locked doors. Electronic research records will be stored on a password-protected computer in a locked office and only researchers and individuals responsible for research oversight will have access to the records. Audio recordings will be transcribed and destroyed within one week of the interview. All data will be destroyed five years after the study has been completed.

COMPENSATION: There is no compensation associated with this study.

CONTACTS: You may contact any of the researchers at the following phone numbers, should you desire to discuss your participation in the study and/or request information about the results of the study:

James Anderson, Ph.D.	Elizabeth Dykens
863-667-5366	904-347-3906

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS:

I understand that my participation is voluntary, that there is no penalty for refusal to participate, and that I am free to withdraw my consent and participation in this project at any time, without penalty.

CONSENT DOCUMENTATION:

I have been fully informed about the procedures listed here. I am aware of what I will be asked to do and of the benefits of my participation. I also understand the following statements:

I affirm that I am 18 years of age or older.

I have read and fully understand this consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy of this form will be given to me. I hereby give permission for my participation in this study

Appendix B: Initial Contact Email

Subject: Research Interview Request

Good afternoon,

My name is Elizabeth Dykens and I am a student at Southeastern University pursuing a degree in secondary English education. As a member of the School of Honors, I am writing a thesis and gathering research on alternative education. Having witnessed and participated in various educational models throughout the years, I am passionate about this topic and hope to demonstrate the relevance and significance of educational alternatives in the public sphere. How might they address the criticisms of the public school system? How might they reshape teaching pedagogy and the purposes of education? How do alternative learning environments and philosophies align with a child's nature?

As part of this research, I am conducting semi-structured interviews of public school teachers, Montessori teachers, and teachers of other alternative models. I would love to hear about your experience and ask a few questions about the school system in which you work or have worked. If you decide to participate in this study, your name and any personal identifiers will be kept confidential.

I will work around your schedule to find a time to meet in person, and if that is not possible, we can always speak over Zoom or a phone call. Additionally, I have attached a consent form which participants will have to sign.

Please let me know if you are interested!

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Elizabeth Dykens

904-347-3906

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Setting the Stage

1. What is the purpose of education?
2. Do you think that there are ambiguities and/or presuppositions surrounding the purpose of education? If so, what are these?
3. Do you think that the purposes of education have changed over time in our society? What shifts do you perceive?
4. Do you perceive deficiencies within your system or other current systems of education? If so, what are the three most pervasive issues you have encountered or currently encounter? Where do these issues stem from?
5. Do you think there is a need for alternative models of education? If yes, why?

The Teacher's Methods and Influence

6. Do you consciously hold to a particular pedagogy or philosophy of teaching? If so, please describe it.
7. Does your educational system and pedagogy reflect a view of human nature? If so, how does your system/teaching correlate with human nature?
8. In your educational system, how much freedom does the child have to drive his/her own learning? On a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate the level of the student's freedom of choice? (Do you perceive this as a pitfall? Deviate if it leads to a "no freedom" answer.)
9. How much self-efficacy, or personal control, do you have in determining the learning process? If you feel like you lack control, or vice versa, provide examples. On a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate the level of your control?

The Learning Environment

10. On a scale from 1 to 10, how effective is your school at providing impactful educational experiences and fostering learning? Explain your reasoning behind this score. Additionally, please share specific examples of effective educational experiences.
11. On a scale from 1 to 10, how well does your school foster holistic learning that is affective, experiential, and lasting? Please explain your position.
12. Does your learning environment allow students to learn at an individualized pace? How structured is the process and pace of learning?

The Curriculum

13. How do you perceive knowledge? Choose all that apply.
    a. Relayed/imparted from an objective source
    b. Self-realized from an objective source
    c. Constructed from existing mental schemata
    d. Relative and subjective to individual experience
    e. Other (Please explain.)
14. What factors — political, philosophical, economical, etc. — most strongly influence the curricular design of your system?
15. Considering the idea of "decentering the teacher," and "the teacher as facilitator," how much room does your curriculum give for the students? Do students interact with knowledge in a dependent or independent way?

The Students

16. What markers would indicate a student's success (in classroom, in future educational endeavors, and life)? How well does your school prepare students for life, and why?
17. Do you think that students who leave your system of education come out with strong self-

efficacy (referring to a student's confidence in his ability to control his behavior, actions, and the corresponding outcomes)? On a scale from 1 to 10, how well does your learning environment foster self-efficacy?

18. Do you think that students who leave your system of education come out as deep, creative thinkers? On a scale from 1 to 10, how well are they able to devise original and rational solutions to issues?

Appendix D: Public School Teacher Interview Transcripts

Public School Teacher #1 Interview

Dykens: What do you think the purpose of education is?

Public School Teacher #1: I think the purpose of education is to teach students to think for themselves. We're giving them content, but at the end of the day, I think the purpose is not to teach them content, but to get them to think about things, to be able to take what they're learning, the content that they're learning, and apply it.

Dykens: Do you think that there are ambiguities and/or presuppositions surrounding the purpose of education? If so, what would these be?

Public School Teacher #1: I think there's a lot of ambiguity in the sense that everyone is going to have their own perception of the purpose of education, depending on their background, maybe even their specific content that they teach.

Dykens: Do you think that the purposes of education have changed over time in our society? What shifts have you perceived?

Public School Teacher #1: I definitely think it's changed, but I think the foundation, or the purpose is still the same — to teach the kids, to get them to think on their own, to prepare them for their future. But I think that perception of it has changed, due to a lack of parent involvement. Parents don't see school as an opportunity for their child to learn and get prepared for a certain life. It feels like it’s a babysitting opportunity. It’s like this thing that they don't have to do. I think the purpose of education has not shifted that much, but the perception has.

Dykens: And so you would say that parental involvement has decreased?

Public School Teacher #1: Oh, I've been teaching my eighth year and even since my first year of teaching it’s unbelievable. I'm in an elementary school now; I previously taught high school.

And even at an elementary level, where you would think parent involvement is typically at its height, it is not anymore.

Dykens: Do you perceive deficiencies within your system or other current systems of education? What are the three most pervasive issues you have encountered or currently encounter, and then where do these issues stem from?

Public School Teacher #1: I think parent involvement is the biggest deficiency in schools. I think schools who have high involvement typically have better (not smarter) students who just learn better because there's somebody holding them accountable to it. I think a lot of that can be impacted by the community and the way that our communities are set up. The school I'm at now, ----------, even if our school didn't qualify for 100% free and reduced lunch, 99% of our kids already qualify for it. So naturally, low income schools typically go hand-in-hand with lack of parent involvement. But if you look at the placement of our school, it's systemic. It's somewhat deeper than just the lack of parent involvement. I also think that public perception of teachers has become extremely deficient because the public perception is a lot more negative. It's not like a teacher is like honored and respected like they once were. And I think that impacts the type of money that gets spent on education. But then again, I also think that decision-makers aren't being held accountable for how they're spending the money that they're given.

Dykens: Do you think there is a need for alternative models of education?

Public School Teacher #1: Yes. I think students deserve it. Not all students learn in the same model. The more diversity we have in the way that the information presented, the better chance we have of more students being successful in school and then, in turn, being able to become a productive adult in society. And so whether it's the Montessori method or online learning, even other models… [inaudible]

Dykens: Do you consciously hold to a particular pedagogy or philosophy of teaching? If so, please describe it.

Public School Teacher #1: Hmm, probably collaborative, like getting students to work together. More often I think students benefit from (especially this year) the social aspects of collaborative learning and getting them up and out of their seats and forcing them to use each other, than using their teacher. I think it's really valuable and it can be really beneficial for them when they learn how to solve issues together, as opposed to always having to go to who's in charge.

Dykens: Does your educational system and pedagogy reflect a view of human nature? And if so, how does your system or teaching correlate with human nature?

Public School Teacher #1: Yeah, I think human nature is to group together with like-people. And for me, I would use ability grouping, so it wasn't that the lower kids were always relying on the one person in their group who always had the answers. The kids who have a higher ability, they're being pushed by others who also have a high ability. And so rather than, “They're getting held back and this other person isn't learning,” they're able to grow, they're able to grow from one another. I think it's human nature to get together with people who are similar to you.

Dykens: In your educational system, how much freedom does the child have to drive his or her own learning? On a scale from one to 10, how would you rate the level of the students' freedom of choice?

Public School Teacher #1: In our school, they have very few choices. As far as them driving their own learning, the idea would be you want them to drive their own learning because you want them to take ownership of it, but it does not happen. Like their freedom of choice, they don't have any. They get to do what's in front of them. Some teachers may use a menu — you could do “this task” before “this task,” but you're still going to end up doing those tasks.

Dykens: How much self-efficacy or personal control do you have in determining the learning process? If you feel like you lack control, or vice versa, provide an example.

Public School Teacher #1: In Polk County, they send out learning maps that we are expected to use. They give us our curriculum; they give us the content. My freedom comes in how I teach it. I'm still going to teach it in the way that reflects my personality, but I'm going to have to use what the county gives me, even if I don't like it. Every school I've ever worked at, they've given me what I'm expected to use. Like at our school here, we use Reading Wonders, and next year they just adopted a new curriculum and it's called Florida Wonders. Same company, new curriculum. And our teachers, they don't have a choice. That's what they will use.

Dykens: Have you ever felt constrained by that?

Public School Teacher #1: No, because I think that it's beneficial. I don't have to create all of these things, so I can focus on figuring out where my kids' real deficiencies are. If I was having to create their assignments and create their content and pull their content, I would have no time to figure out where my kids are actually at. All of my time would be spent in creating the things as opposed to using what's given to me and being able to use them the best way that I can. So, not everybody shares that opinion. But the truth is, you can make the biggest impact when you know where your students are struggling.

Dykens: On a scale from one to 10, how effective is your school at providing impactful educational experiences and fostering learning? Explain the reasoning behind your score.

Public School Teacher #1: We're in an interesting situation because we are at a failing school; we're a turnaround school. I would like to think that we're fostering great learning, but at this point we're just trying to make sure we're open next year.

Dykens: Would you have an example of an effective educational experience that you've witnessed or facilitated?

Public School Teacher #1: We have really awesome teachers who try to fit in project-based learning. Our ESE resource teacher… has done many escape rooms with her kids and they just create really fun opportunities for them to learn things that they need to learn. Our third grade team just did a huge science project, but they wove it into their reading time. We have fantastic teachers. At the end of the day we still have to be open next year.

Dykens: Does your learning environment allow students to learn at an individualized pace? How structured is the process and pace of learning?

Public School Teacher #1: We use pull-out groups a lot, especially getting ready for testing. We've pulled their progress monitoring scores and looked at their individual standards that they need. And so we're working through that before and after testing.

Dykens: How would you perceive knowledge?

Public School Teacher #1: I think it's relative and subjective to individual experience. You can have a student who's brilliant and who has the capability of doing and learning anything, and they just choose not to do it. And you could have a student who wants it so bad and just can't, because of their deficiencies, or because of other factors in their life, in their makeup as a student or maybe some deficiencies that they had as a baby or whatever.

Dykens: What factors — political, philosophical, economical, etc. — most strongly influence the curricular design of your system?

Public School Teacher #1: I guess it would be political. The district chooses what curriculum they're going to use and it has to be approved by the state, and then it gets sent out. That's the thing here for math and for ELA.

Dykens: Considering the idea of de-centering the teacher, or the teacher as facilitator, how much room does your curriculum give for the students? And then do students interact with knowledge in a dependent or independent way?

Public School Teacher #1: Our students are extremely dependent. I think this year more than other years, because they missed basically an entire nine weeks. Where the typical student coming into the fifth grade was like a true fifth grader, our teachers really got a fourth and a half grader... And so where the first semester may be a little more teacher-centered, or even like the first nine weeks, by Christmas, the student should be responsible for their learning at that point. And the teacher is more of a facilitator than rather a teacher, but that didn't happen this year. And I think it's because they missed so much school last year, and even this year with students getting quarantined. Those are things that you can't prevent.

Dykens: What markers would indicate a student's success, either in the classroom, in future educational endeavors, and in life?

Public School Teacher #1: Successful students can critically think and make decisions, being able to pull information from several places and then make a decision. If a student, a person, can do that, then I would consider their education successful. Even if they might not know all the content, and they can do those things, they'll be able to make sound decisions.

Dykens: How well would you say your school prepares students for life?

Public School Teacher #1: In elementary school, I don't think it's there yet. We're getting them ready to go to middle school where they slowly, slowly get those things.

Dykens: Do you think that students who leave your system of education come out with strong self-efficacy (referring to the student's confidence in his ability to control his behavior, actions, and corresponding outcomes)?

Public School Teacher #1: I would like to think that the majority of students do, but not all students. It's going to depend on the individual student. What are they willing to put into it?

Dykens: Do you think that students who leave your system of education come out as deep, creative thinkers? On a scale from one to 10, how well are they able to devise original and rational solutions to issues?

Public School Teacher #1: I don't think they can do it well at all. I think there's so much of the system right now that just teaches students what to think and not how to think. So I think it's pretty low, probably like a three, four maybe.

Dykens: What grade in English did you teach?

Public School Teacher #1: Most recently I did ninth grade, but I've done 6th and 12th.

Dykens: How long have you been teaching?

Public School Teacher #1: Really, this is like my ninth year, because I started halfway through Christmas because of when I graduated.

Dykens: Wow. Well, I respect all of your work and what you do.

Public School Teacher #1: I appreciate that. It’s rewarding and I wouldn't want to do anything else, but it's exhausting. And sometimes I cry on my way home, but I still believe in what I do.

Public School Teacher #2 Interview

Dykens: What is the purpose of education?

Public Teacher #2: The underlining purpose hasn't changed and that is to touch the lives of the young in ways beyond just what you learn in a classroom. I'm there [at a school] now, and I don't have to be there. I'm retired, but I feel the calling and that is to make a difference, to be there where the kids nowadays (probably more so now than back in my days), many of them are fatherless and they need that male figure for stabilization. That's the role I try to play the most in that regard.

Dykens: Do you think that there are ambiguities and or presuppositions surrounding the purpose of education? And if so, what are these?

Public Teacher #2: Probably more so now than back then, because culture and the atmosphere, it's less black and white. Whole lot of gray out there nowadays. Sometimes it's like hitting a moving target.

Dykens: Do you think that the purposes of education have changed over time in our society? If so, what shifts have you perceived?

Public Teacher #2: I think so. The purpose in the past, the way I saw it, was “straight-on” education. You need to learn your ABCs, reading, writing, that kind of thing. Nowadays, it goes well beyond that, to touch on all the social aspects, multicultural aspects. All those kinds of things are taken into consideration now.

Dykens: Do you perceive deficiencies within your system or other current systems of education? If so, what are the three most pervasive issues you've encountered or currently encounter?

Public Teacher #2: The answer is yes. And anytime politics gets involved, that's always an issue because at that point they're no longer looking to the best interest of the child or the parent, or even the teacher for that matter. So that's always number one. Anytime they push a particular agenda, in this case, [shows a teaching guide] culturally responsive teaching. Obviously they have their experts who tell you how you should do things and how you shouldn't do things. And in reality, it never works that way, really. If there was a third one [deficiency]… and I saw this in private school more than public school, the third problem would probably be the parent involvement in the private school. They get too involved, they show up and they'll try to get a teacher fired if they don't like them. Their kids can do no wrong: "They're perfect. We're paying good money. And my son or my daughter says, if you did this or said that, then it must be true." I've seen good teachers actually be shown the door because of stuff like that. Whereas in the public school, on the other hand, it might be the opposite. There's less involvement unless you're in a good school.

Dykens: Do you think there is a need for alternative models of education? And then if so, why?

Public Teacher #2: There is because of the wave of multiculturalism for one, and also all the different tests that they have now that can categorize good or bad students, as to why some are the way they are, for example, gifted versus those who might have some other issues going on, emotional type of things. Orange County does have alternate methods to focus on all these different groups to give them, to get them to what it is. They need more than just a general education. They do focus on the specific need. There are a lot of programs out there for that.

Dykens: Do you consciously hold to a particular pedagogy or philosophy of teaching? If so, please describe it.

Public School Teacher #2: I would say yes, everybody does. So, I would look at it from the human perspective first, the connection you have. You have to be somebody that students can trust. You lead by example, not just what you say.

Dykens: Does your educational system and pedagogy reflect a view of human nature? If so, how does your system or teaching correlate with human nature?

Public School Teacher #2: Yeah. So I pretty much answered the first part already. Yes, definitely. And you give them a little space. I don't push them too much on, "You need to be doing this, and you need to be doing that." I have them doing things that are like… I'm teaching a computer business class and I have them all doing their own business. We've been doing that since the beginning of the year, but in these next three or four weeks, they have to get their business ready and prepared to present before the shark tank.

Dykens: In your educational system, how much freedom does the child have to drive his or her own learning? On a scale from one to 10, how would you rate the rate the level of the student's freedom of choice?

Public School Teacher #2: I think there's, there's both some standard and a little freedom there. There are standard classes they all have to take, through the state mandate. And then as far as electives go, I think Orange County is pretty good about getting some things that are interesting for the age level group. They're really pushing STEM right now in the state. So they're leading the way in that regard, in STEM, especially.

Dykens: How much control do you have in the learning process?

Public School Teacher #2: Well, we pretty much have a hundred percent control of our days. It may depend on the school and who your leader is. With my assistant principal, everything's pretty much hands off… we don't have a computer applications and business curriculum, so you

make up your own and teach whatever you want to teach and how you want, you just make sure that these objectives get taught. The only thing that disrupts that at all is a test day when they all have to do certain state testing or any other mandates that come down from the state, that's necessary. Other than that, we're pretty much in complete control of our classroom.

Dykens: On a scale from one to 10, how effective is your school at providing impactful educational experiences and fostering learning, and then explain the reasoning behind your score.

Public Teacher #2: I don't know that anything's ever perfect. So I'll give it a nine.

Dykens: And then what would be an example of an effective educational experience?

Public Teacher #2: From the school perspective, it's all the extracurricular activities that they have going… And it goes back to the human interaction and trying to reach him and reach her soul more than just her mind, and the things I do with the Mr. ------ Show or, the shark tank, and all that kind of stuff. Those are all above and beyond, just get out of the book type of learning.

Dykens: How well does your school foster holistic learning that is affective, experiential, and lasting?

Public School Teacher #2: I've found it to be a hundred percent supportive. And it also depends on the school and the principal.

Dykens: That's awesome. Does your learning environment allow students to learn at an individualized pace and then how structured is the process and pace of learning?

Public School Teacher #2: Yeah, it does. It does allow for it. And a lot of that will depend on the teacher. So there will be a fast track…if you think of it like a train, there's some up there in the front, in the locomotive, and there's some back here in the caboose, you know, but they're all

connected. They're all in the same track. They're in the same direction. And, for me as a teacher, I have to be somewhere in the middle.

Dykens: How do you perceive knowledge?

Public School Teacher #2: My personal favorite's D.

Dykens: Yeah… And I don't think any teacher has a desire to like negatively impact a student's learning experience.

Public School Teacher #2: I might argue with that. It's not so much that they don't want the student to not learn, it's what they want the student to learn. Like I said, they might push this agenda or they might push that agenda, and in their mind they're teaching the student something very useful and knowledgeable, whether it is or not. It makes the student more biased.

Dykens: What factors — political, philosophical, economical, etc. — most strongly influence the curricular design of your system?

Public School Teacher #2: Probably a little bit of everything. I did mention there is politics involved. So, for example, they gave me a stack of books, right? Several different ones. This book [pointing to one] would be politically motivated. This one [pointing to another] would be more of where you're coming from, your methodology and philosophy of where you're coming from as an educator.

Dykens: Considering the idea of decentering the teacher, or the teacher as facilitator, how much room does your curriculum give for the students? Do students interact with knowledge in a dependent or independent way?

Public School Teacher #2: That'll depend on the course and the teacher. For me, there's no curriculum. I had to start it, so there's a lot of leeway. It was my idea, for example, to come up

with, “You each have to have your own business.” So it depends on the class, whether or not students can interact in a more dependent or independent way, and on the teacher, how much they give them. Like I give them total independence when it comes to their business project.

Dykens: What markers would indicate a student’s success in the classroom and future educational endeavors, and in life?

Public School Teacher #2: There’s a marker for each. With the educational marker, obviously, they're steady and consistent with their work. Their grades are slowly growing up. That's an indicator. As far as emotional and interactive socially, if they're learning anything on respect, or if they better behave throughout the year…

Dykens: How well would you say that your school prepares students for life?

Public School Teacher #2: So are they prepared? Good question. They do have representatives from the high school come in and try to give them [middle school students] a sense of what they're in for. That’s really all that’s on their minds now.

Dykens: Do you think that students who leave your system of education come out with strong self-efficacy (referring to a student's confidence in his ability to control his behavior, actions, and the corresponding outcomes)? On a scale from one to 10, how well does your learning environment foster self-efficacy?

Public School Teacher #2: So, probably a good solid eight.

Dykens: Do you think students who leave your system of education come out as deep, creative thinkers? On a scale from one to 10, how well are they able to devise original and rational solutions to issues?

Public School Teacher #2: Well I'd like to pick a nine.

Public School Teacher #3 Interview

Dykens: What is the purpose of education?

Public school teacher #3: [To] mold and craft young minds so they are willing to think outside of the box and push the boundaries of conventions, making their mark on the world in amazing and innovative ways.

Dykens: Do you think that there are ambiguities and/or presuppositions surrounding the purpose of education? If so, what are these?

Public school teacher #3: I do believe there are ambiguities and presuppositions surrounding the purpose of education. I think these are derived from a changing and evolving society. Society, business, and the workforce have different needs and expectations in 2021 than ever before, unfortunately.

Dykens: Do you think that the purposes of education have changed over time in our society? What shifts do you perceive?

Public school teacher #3: Education has definitely changed over time. I would garner to say that many years ago education was about gaining knowledge that separated you from others or compared you intellectually and on a cognitive level to your peers. Today education is about obtaining information that Is relevant, valid, useful in the workforce.

Dykens: Do you perceive deficiencies within your system or other current systems of education? If so, what are the three most pervasive issues you have encountered or currently encounter? Where do these issues stem from?

Public school teacher #3: Absolutely there are deficiencies. Education is treated as a business in all the ways it shouldn't be and none of the ways it should be. Lawmakers and individuals who have the greatest impact often have never spent time in a classroom. Stakeholders such as

parents, students, and educators themselves are not included in decision making when it comes to how to modify and adapt what is occurring instructionally to make the most impact on student achievement. In addition, partnerships that should occur with business constituents are not happening. Learning is more than just can concepts and knowledge. It should be about skills and thinking outside of the box utilizing various curriculums. Creating partnerships with businesses and workforce would allow the instructional and educational pedagogy in the classroom to simulate what will occur once students move into careers or jobs or their post-secondary studies.

Dykens: Do you think there is a need for alternative models of education? If yes, why?

Public school teacher #3: I do think that there is a need for alternate models of education. Not all students learn the same way or are on the same trajectory to attend college or university. However, we also don't want to dictate that only one path is an acceptable path. I have seen in my 24 years of teaching students who thought they would just join the military as 9th graders turn around and attend a university to become an engineer as a 12th grader. Somewhere in their high school education their goals shifted and changed. So even though alternative models are necessary for all students based on various learning styles and their independent goals, allowing all children the ability to change their minds and shift to more traditional settings is a necessity.

Dykens: Do you consciously hold to a particular pedagogy or philosophy of teaching? If so, please describe it.

Public school teacher #3: I would say I do not consistently and consciously hold to a specific pedagogy when it comes to teaching. I do subscribe to the idea that students need scaffolding supports to move their way from acquiring knowledge to showcasing mastery. I am also a huge proponent of giving students creative and innovative projects that meet the demands of the technological workforce so that the learning is applicable to what people do once they leave my

classroom. Ultimately my goal is to make my students global thinkers, and I am willing to use any and all tools to get them to be competitive in said market.

Dykens: Does your educational system and pedagogy reflect a view of human nature? If so, how does your system/teaching correlate with human nature?

Public school teacher #3: When I think of human nature, I think of the processes and components there one would say are norms amongst humanity. Students are just smaller components of human beings but with all of the same worries, concerns, and behaviors that we see in larger human beings. The differences within these smaller bodies they do not always have the maturity and cognitive power to understand how to control their feelings and behaviors. Creating relationships and building rapport allows my students to feel safe and comfortable.

Dykens: In your educational system, how much freedom does the child have to drive his/her own learning? On a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate the level of the student's freedom of choice? (Do you perceive this as a pitfall? Deviate if it leads to a "no freedom" answer.)

Public school teacher #3: I would say within my classroom my students would probably be around a 6 in terms of the level of freedom they have in choice when it comes to their learning. There are very specific things that have to be dictated in terms of standards that must be covered, and as an educator, I understand how to pair those standards with material and build the instructional model for mastery. However, within tasks students have freedom to expand and build upon the learning that they're getting in the classroom to push themselves further and deeper into the material or to use new tools and resources for illustrating the mastery of the learning.

Dykens: How much self-efficacy, or personal control, do you have in determining the learning process? If you feel like you lack control, or vice versa, provide examples. On a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate the level of your control?

Public school teacher #3: The only thing I do not have control over where the learning process is concerned is the standards that must be covered and the sequential order in which they must be covered. Beyond that I have full freedom in terms of texts, pedagogical choices, assessment tasks to align with the learning process. If I am able to prove the instruction I am giving is rigorous and relevant and builds to mastery of the standards, then there is no question in the choices I make in my classroom.

Dykens: On a scale from 1 to 10, how effective is your school at providing impactful educational experiences and fostering learning? Explain your reasoning behind this score. Additionally, please share specific examples of effective educational experiences.

Public school teacher #3: If I'm being honest, I would say my school is at a 6. There are teachers that are providing beautifully in depth and innovative experiences that foster the learning for our students. Some do this pervasively and daily while others make their best attempt at hitting this mark. However, until every teacher is crafting a classroom that has authentic and creative opportunities for learning and education, we are still short and missing the target.

Dykens: On a scale from 1 to 10, how well does your school foster holistic learning that is affective, experiential, and lasting? Please explain your position.

Public school teacher #3: I would say that we are about a 5 in terms of fostering holistic learning. Many of our teachers build relationships with students and do their best to create a bridge that fosters the learning to the emotional side of the student. However, exploring social and emotional learning and delving into mental health in general is a touchy subject. Parents can often feel like

this intrudes upon their role within their children's lives and may not want outside individuals, such as the teachers, impacting their children's decision making when it comes to their social and emotional health. In addition, students are so nuanced that it is difficult to tap into the emotional and mental well-being for fear that we could do unintentional damage.

Dykens: Does your learning environment allow students to learn at an individualized pace? How structured is the process and pace of learning?

Public school teacher #3: Self-paced learning depends on an educator and the curriculum with which they can work. If a particular curriculum is set up to allow for differentiated self-paced learning, it is much easier for teachers to implement this expectation into the classroom. In a secondary high school classroom where you can have upwards of 30 students, to create 30 different self-paced trajectories is unrealistic for that teacher. New curriculums are coming out through various digital platforms that are allowing teachers to create this differentiation and allow students to tackle concepts at their own pacing. But often the breadth of standards that must be covered prior to testing makes a self-paced learning environment impossible.

Dykens: How do you perceive knowledge?

Public school teacher #3: [No answer]

Dykens: What factors — political, philosophical, economical, etc. — most strongly influence the curricular design of your system?

Public school teacher #3: When you look at the design of any system, politics and economics always take a forefront at the district and state levels. Money and lobbyists grease the right hands to put their materials into the hands of educators. Once an educator is able to bring material into his or her classroom, they are often then able to be governed by their own philosophical beliefs in how that information can be disseminated. In Polk County we are given curriculum maps.

These maps are aligned with our instructional materials that went through a vetting process from the state down to the district then to the school. Once the teacher takes the materials, he or she can then choose what texts and tasks to utilize from the materials to meet the expectations of the standards that must be covered. The teacher has more freedom in terms of his or her philosophical beliefs in how to group and present that material.

Dykens: Considering the idea of "decentering the teacher," and "the teacher as facilitator," how much room does your curriculum give for the students? Do students interact with knowledge in a dependent or independent way?

Public school teacher #3: In my classroom there is both the traditional method and the method of the teacher as facilitator. Educators must look at the curriculum and make informed decisions on where they can put ownership of the learning process on the students. The ability for the students to interact with and play with the information allows for a cognitive explosion of ideas and learning. But the right scaffolds and supports must be put into place for students to be successful on their own.

Dykens: What markers would indicate a student's success (in classroom, in future educational endeavors, and life)? How well does your school prepare students for life, and why?

Public school teacher #3: The markers that indicate success vary. Some students may be at a place in their life where they don't have the maturity or the clarity to understand how to be successful and grow in their knowledge base. I would say there are some simple indicators that help a teacher know that a student will be successful without him or her in the postsecondary environment. Students who are high achievers or set high expectations and continually achieve them tend to continue this behavior beyond the classroom. Students with strong parental support throughout their academics go on to often achieve their goals. I believe that the teachers within

our school are doing their best to prepare students for life, but the state and district expectations can hinder their ability to emulate what learning looks like in the work faith force or beyond the classroom.

Dykens: Do you think that students who leave your system of education come out with strong self-efficacy (referring to a student's confidence in his ability to control his behavior, actions, and the corresponding outcomes)? On a scale from 1 to 10, how well does your learning environment foster self-efficacy?

Public school teacher #3: This question leaves me in a bit of a stump. If I had to be honest, I believe our students struggle with self-efficacy. I would say our school is probably closer to a three or four. The big issue with building self-efficacy within students often comes from their socioeconomic status. When you have a small community like Mulberry where many of our student's parents were never educated beyond high school, there is little confidence for students that they can move beyond the level of their parents. Couple this with a Floridian system that is governed by numbers to grade schools and administrators have to create opportunity after opportunity for students to complete work. So, there is no internal need for a student to strive for his or her best as they know they will be giving a safety net should they fail or fall.

Dykens: Do you think that students who leave your system of education come out as deep, creative thinkers? On a scale from 1 to 10, how well are they able to devise original and rational solutions to issues?

Public school teacher #3: I do not think that our students on the whole come out as deep creative thinkers. The system right now is set up so that we are probably a four on this scale. Handcuffing teachers and their pay to standardized tests has created an environment where creativity and deep thinking no longer exists. Up through the 10th grade students must show proficiency of specific

standards when it comes to reading and writing. And the amount of standards that must be covered in various subject areas is immense. It isn't truly until the 11th and 12th grade that there are more opportunities for creativity in the curriculum. However, by then students are conditioned to work at the lowest levels of bloom and often give kickback when asked to expand or push themselves into more creative tasks and thinking.

Appendix E: Montessori Teacher Interview Transcripts

Montessori Teacher #1 Interview

Dykens: Okay. Well, my first question is just like a preliminary, define-the-terms type of question. What would you consider the purpose of education to be?

Montessori Teacher #1: I would consider the purpose of education to be to nourish the whole child, you know, mentally, spiritually, physically, on all levels.

Dykens: Mm. Do you think there are ambiguities and presuppositions surrounding the purpose of education?

Montessori Teacher #1: You know, unfortunately, depending on the nature of the educational institution too often, there are different curriculums that some teachers don't always have a lot of control over. For example, I know in the public sector, there's a lot of pressure that revolves around testing. So in the private sector or in the Montessori world, we place more emphasis on ability and accomplishment in a different regard where we honor the whole child.

Dykens: That's interesting because Christine said something very similar.

Montessori Teacher #1: Yeah, we have a lot of the same philosophies of education and which is why we're kind of driven towards Montessori in that it is such a different perspective than traditional education. And until you know, like I have this thing when you know better, you do better. And I started out as a traditional educator and then made the switch to Montessori and it was like this huge awakening. I was like, “Wow, this is what resonates with me.” This is what I want to do because it makes so much sense and it's such a more fulfilling and holistic approach to education.

Dykens: Do you think that the purposes of education have changed over time?

Montessori Teacher #1: Yes. I think that children then were sent off to school to basically get rid of them, get them out of the house. And you know, children were kind of seen as a nuisance and Maria Montessori was one of the first advocates for children to honor them as equals, as humans with potentiality, through her observation with her medical background. And because of that, her influence on education has dramatically changed the perspective. Now as far as the public sector, I know there's some passionate educators out there who respect the child and their hearts are in it for the right reasons as well. I just think from our education, what it is today as compared to what it was, it's so different in that mentality and approach.

Dykens: So you would say like a few hundred years ago, educators put more emphasis on the child?

Montessori Teacher #1: Yeah. And I think the content… a lot of religious infiltration based on the time period where children were taught that they were to be seen and not heard. And that kind of was even in their education on a daily basis, you know, it was more, you do as we say and that's it, and these are the rules. And there was a lot of biblical tie into that with following that… And the separation happened where religion kind of slowly came out of school. So I think it's evolved dramatically from what it was to what it is now.

Dykens: Do you perceive deficiencies within the current system of education? And then, if so, what are the three most pervasive issues you have encountered or currently encounter?

Montessori Teacher #1: So I would say yes, and I think curriculum that's been implemented, especially in public school. That would probably be my first. My second would be… you know, it's so different when I compare the two. Like in the private sector, we just do things so differently… The curriculum that we have, I fully support. So I'm trying to think what would be my second… each child is met, where they are needed, is a huge issue. So making sure every

child gets what they need. Sometimes in big, larger classrooms, there's not as much individual attention given to the children that need it the most. So making sure the child's needs are met would be number two. And then number three would be I think more emphasis on normalization of special needs students. We see a lot of that in Montessori, we get a lot of students with special needs… how important it is for them to feel like they're part of something and not on the outside. And I know the public works on the IEP but I feel like there's a lot of labeling happening where a kid is labeled with an IEP. And then therefore they're kind of stuck under that umbrella.

We don't call them IEP; they're just considered a regular student with us, but we serve them on an individual basis in Montessori. So we're able to meet them where they are and take them where they need to go.

Dykens: Yeah. And you don't even really need IEPs if you're already into individualizing everything to the student's needs, which is nice.

Montessori Teacher #1: Correct. Right. And that's what we felt. We tell parents that their kids are already going to get an IEP, you know, we individualize their education.

Dykens: Do you think there is a need for alternative models of education? If yes. Why?

Montessori Teacher #1: I would say yes. I think again, I'm speaking more so, I know what works in a private sector. So if I'm speaking for the private sector, I would say not really, because I really believe wholeheartedly in Maria Montessori and her philosophy of learning... after I would say yes. You know, I would like more alternative approaches to education that involve more hands-on activities, less paperwork, pushing worksheets and dittos… learning experiences where they can absorb what they're doing. And then that in return creates that scaffold of education that they can build upon.

Dykens: Do you consciously hold to a particular pedagogy or a philosophy of teaching? And then if so, please describe it.

Montessori Teacher #1: Absolutely. The most important aspect of what we do as Montessori educators is the spiritual preparation of ourselves. And that is a huge part of our training. You really have to take a look at ourselves and make sure that we are in the right frame of mind, mentally and spiritually, to effectively guide. So my philosophy would be that of Maria Montessori's. The class should be functioning on its own, like a living ecosystem. And the teacher is a guide on the side and we just gracefully come in and deliver lessons when needed. And then we back away and we let the ecosystem kind of… in my mind, how can I effectively reach and educate and be that guide on the side without interrupting the work and the focus and the concentration of the student? It's not just jumping in too soon. So we have to work on our immediate reactions and our reflexes, because a lot of times you want to rush in and help, you know, and we have to let them make mistakes, and we have to be okay with that, because that is our tool. That is our form of assessment, is that watching and observing and being a good observer. Because through our observation, that's unbiased, without opinion, we're collecting data on the child and then better able to facilitate their needs.

Dykens: Does your educational system and pedagogy reflective view of human nature? If so, how does your system of teaching correlate with human nature?

Montessori Teacher #1: Oh, absolutely. And in Montessori philosophy one of the main pieces is care of the environment and we very much are environmentalists. And we teach that from a very young age… we can all do our part to help nature, reduce, reuse, recycle. We go over all of that, gardening, composting. Now that was your question, right? Are we talking about psychologically?

Dykens: I guess you could take that any way you wanted, but I'm really trying to pinpoint if your system reflects a particular view of the human being. So it does the philosophy rests on a certain understanding of the human?

Montessori Teacher #1: Okay. Yeah, I would say yes, our philosophy of the human being is to first and foremost honor the whole human being, mentally, emotionally spiritually, physically. And to understand that that child has an absorbent mind and will absorb education in different ways… so we take into account the human condition in that we are educating to the diverse needs of the child.

Dykens: Then, in your educational system, how much freedom does the child have to drive his or her own learning? So on a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate the level of the students' freedom of choice?

Montessori Teacher #1: I would rate it very high. I would say 9. I have worked in the primary classroom, the lower elementary classroom, and the upper classroom, and there's freedom within choice and limits. And each of those different… freedom in the three to six. And then we start introducing plans when they get into lower elementary. So they still have freedom, but it's within choice and structure. And then in upper elementary, they are given more options, but they must complete work within core subject areas within a specific timeframe. So they're given like a weekly work plan. So it's freedom within structure.

Dykens: Would you perceive this as a pitfall?

Montessori Teacher #1: That's a great question and, you know, I've been educating for nine years and I would have to say that Montessori is not for everyone. Some children actually can’t handle it; there are some children that require more structure and more targeted learning that’s a little bit

more traditional. Most love their freedom, but there are some that would benefit from a more structured environment. Now, I still advocate strongly for Montessori because I feel that everyone should at least give it a try, but there are some children that can't handle the freedom. And they come from environments at home where they're constantly told what to do and how to do it. We focus so much on intrinsic motivation and independence that if a child hasn't come up with us, Montessori from the primary levels, it is harder to jump into that freedom and independence. Like, “Here’s a work plan but it's up to you to fill it out and get it done by week’s end. We're not going to hover over you every second. And the bell's not going to ring in 20 minutes. You have to keep track of the time and prioritize your goals accordingly.” And some kids do great with that. They love it, but others require more structure and discipline.

Dykens: Yeah. So on a scale from 1 to 10, how much self-efficacy or personal control do you have in determining the learning process?

Montessori Teacher #1: I have greater control to oversee the wellbeing and education of each child; however, I do not control them individually.

Dykens: On a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate the level of your control?

Montessori Teacher #1: I would say maybe a 5. It's not a controlled environment in that sense, like there's order in the classroom but we’re not controlling them. In public school, they're all sitting at desks and it's so different at Montessori. Some are on the rug, some are at desks, some are at tables, some work outside. It's a controlled environment, but we're not controlling it; the students are controlling themselves there.

In fact, that's a big no-no in Montessori. We’re taught not to control; we look for that spontaneous teachable moment that happens during the child's own process of self-discovery.

That's where we stop jumping in and trying to rescue because we want them to come to their own conclusions. So we really try to hold back that control.

Dykens: On a scale from 1 to 10, how effective is your school at providing impactful educational experiences and fostering learning? And then, what would an example be of an effective educational experience?

Montessori Teacher #1: 10. A wonderful example of impactful experiences… last year, in upper elementary, we did a unit called "Save the Ocean." We learned biology and we studied it in the classroom and we learned about all of the endangered species and really took it to heart... Then we took it a step further and we actually had a class trip. Now, again, this is before COVID. We took a class trip down to Pigeon Key all together, as part of our curriculum to learn hands-on, face-to-face, from real marine biologists. The children were able to see firsthand, projects going…. So the kids really get a deep understanding of how they can help impact and save.

Dykens: On a scale from 1 to 10, how well does your school foster holistic learning that is affective, experiential, and lasting? Please explain your position.

Montessori Teacher #1: I'll give my school a 10. We meet a child where they are and take them where they need to go. We follow the child; that is a huge philosophy of Montessori education… and [help create] an individual work plan that helps them achieve small attainable goals. We set them up for success and not failure, and we give them lessons when they're ready for it…at their pace. They develop a love for learning and a joy for learning too. They understand that they facilitate their own learning and as they explore and learn new things, it opens new doors for things they haven't experienced before. These experiences mold them to be independent, self-starters, confident, and in time, to take tests and have that more traditional approach. They do

really well because they're so confident based on all these, you know, amazing experiences that they have had in the class.

I think one of the things that mean the most to me about being a Montessori educator is we nourish the spirit; we don't crush it. And a lot of times in public school, we get kids that have had their spirits crushed. They're in a box and it's black and white and they're just so not confident. And they don't have that freedom to be themselves and find out who they are as a learner and what they like, because they're just constantly told what to do. And here in Montessori, it's like, "Wait, I have freedom and I get to choose my own work and that's okay?" And we're like, "Yeah, that's what we want you to do." And you see the transformation happen and it's just beautiful… to help them become closer to who they really want to be inside.

Dykens: For sure. Let's see, this is a little bit of an oddball question. I was trying to see if different schools of education had different perceptions of knowledge. So this question is, "How do you perceive knowledge?" [Lists options.]

Montessori Teacher #1: Oh, that's so hard. I know I have to pick one, but it's really C and D for me, because knowledge is built on an individual experience, but it's also built upon prior knowledge. So in Montessori, every, every lesson builds on the other. And so the child has to build on what they already know before they can move further. So we can't just throw them into lessons, but it's also a lot of experience and they're hands-on learning. So that's a really hard one.

Dykens: And then what factors political, philosophical, economical, etc., most strongly influence the curricular design of your system?

Montessori Teacher #1: Our philosophy was really founded from an observational standpoint and a medical standpoint of how children grow and develop in stages. So I would have to answer it

with, “It's not political, it's more scientific.” It would have a definite psychological background to it, based on the child’s inert stages of development for learning. I would say psychological/scientific.

Dykens: Do your students interact with knowledge in a dependent or independent way?

Montessori Teacher #1: Independent.

Dykens: What markers would indicate a student’s success in the classroom, in future educational endeavors, and in life?

Montessori Teacher #1: In the classroom, it would be completing their work. For us, it would be completing their goals; we call them weekly goals.

Dykens: And what markers would indicate success in future educational endeavors?

Montessori Teacher #1: For them, they would be to work independently and complete their work plans that are set for them, working independently and just continuing to build on their knowledge. Continuing to add to their knowledge and experience. In the workplace, that's a big one for Montessori. We have a lot of students that make the transition to public school in middle school and a lot of are in honors because their level of knowledge is really beyond what the box of that grade level is because we have this huge curriculum that we teach. And so…self-starters, independent thinkers, problem solvers, critical thinking.

Dykens: How well does your school prepare students for life?

Montessori Teacher #1: I would say very well in that we are setting them up for independent success and confidence… and following the child, wherever their academic or personal interests lie. The sky's really the limit in Montessori. If they want to produce a report on whales… they can, and that counts as their cultural requirement. If they want to write poetry, put together a

slide show, there's so much hands-on learning and experiences happening that they just feel successful and they love what they do. They develop a joy for it. And they're excited. A lot of our kids are excited to be at school. In fact, it's almost like a refuge for them, believe it or not, who would think that? Right?

Dykens: And so then on a scale from 1 to 10, how well does your learning environment foster self-efficacy?

Montessori Teacher #1: So I would say, very high in that. Again, their confidence is just growing exponentially because of all of these wonderful experiences and lessons that they've had that just continuously build on each other. We have such a broad curriculum that there's so much content in such detail over the course of their education. They really get so much. I've had contact with students that are in traditional middle school now. And, again, they're doing great, they're in AP classes. They're so thankful that they had the foundational learning to push themselves and reach and do things they didn't think they can do. So yeah, I would say very high.

Dykens: This is my last question. Do you think that students who leave your system of education come out as deep, creative thinkers? On a scale from 1 to 10, how well are they able to devise original and rational solutions to issues?

Montessori Teacher #1: I would give them a 10. And I would say because the main crux of their learning is to come up with their own solutions and to create work that they are passionate about. They can bring to life their stories… things that they're passionate about. All these hands-on experiences just really help them feel prepared and confident. And what else did I want to say?

Dykens: Are they able to come up with original and rational solutions to issues?

Montessori Teacher #1: Okay. So yes, and that's because a lot of the times in our cultural curriculum, we present them with problems that they have to go out and research and find the

answers to. And that's a lot of what the upper elementary it's about, how the child will be their own investigator and their own researcher. So they come out very strong with critical thinking skills and problem solving skills, because they've taken a problem like pollution in the ocean. They have to problem-solve and find out, well, “What if we built this to help trap the plastic?” That's just an example of a project that students did last year. So in terms of coming up with solutions for problems, I think that the Montessori child is fully equipped based on the education that they receive.

Dykens: And what a Montessori school do you work in?

Montessori Teacher #1: I'm at the Montessori House Day School and we were one of the first Montessori accredited schools in Tampa. Our school's been around for 50 years.

Montessori Teacher #2 Interview

Dykens: What is the purpose of education?

Montessori Teacher #2: So my story says it's a help to life. And so, a permission for life.

Dykens: Would you say it's preparation mainly for career?

Montessori Teacher #2: No, for life. That includes a career, but it also includes, functioning in the world, and being able to come up with solutions. It's not career preparation; we're learning how to get along — for taking care of the environment and for contributing to your community, how to be a member of a community.

Dykens: That's a large distinction to make, because I do feel like some models are solely focused on career readiness.

Montessori Teacher #2: Yes, that's right.

Dykens: Do you think there are ambiguities or presuppositions surrounding the purpose of education?

Montessori Teacher #2: Probably, you know, I've been in Montessori culture for a long time. I would say that most education is preparation for career work.

Dykens: So that would be a presupposition that a lot of schools or models would have?

Montessori Teacher #2: Yes,. The University of Florida lets you stay for four years or maybe five, because they don't want you taking a lot of courses that are not in your major, that are not preparing you for your work… To me that seems like, why wouldn't you want to promote all education? When anyone comes to me and asks me about what do they do, or they're planning to get a degree in education and get Montessori training, I say don't do that because 1) they're not compatible, and 2) whatever your education is and whatever your experience is, you bring that to the classroom. Since we teach all subjects, if you have a degree in horticulture, then what a gift

to the children that you teach! Or, a degree in art. I had a teacher — she had a master's degree in textile design. She prepared the most wonderful lessons for the children. Whatever your experience in education is, you bring it to wherever you are, not just the classroom.

Dykens: Do you think the purposes of education have changed over time?

Montessori Teacher #2: Not really. I think there might have been a time when, like a liberal arts education was valued just for that. Because it was a broad education.

Dykens: Well now there's more specific focus on certain degrees.

Montessori Teacher #2: Yeah, but I think that it's really more specific now in terms of career.

Dykens: Do you perceive deficiencies, either within your system or other systems of education? Obviously you're an advocate of the Montessori model, so if you were to pinpoint three issues within the public education system, what would they be? Just three overarching issues.

Montessori Teacher #2: I think a big one is that unless you have a diagnosed disability all children get the same information, the same teaching, the same work at the same time, whether they're ready for it or not. And if you get, I don't know what it is, a 70%, you move on. And here [in the Montessori school] it's more. Here, children only get what they're ready for when they can do it 100% by themselves. Then they move on. I think that opportunity to get it completely makes it very fulfilling and satisfying, right? Especially if you've worked hard. But it also makes it so the child understands the next thing. So I have taught public school, a little bit. And what I observed was, with the curriculum, it worked pretty well for about 50% of the children. The ones in the middle, the middle capabilities, it worked for them. The ones that were not there (below 50%), they're lost. They lose interest. They feel like failures. They withdraw. They develop bad behaviors. The ones that are more capable — and this seems like a tragedy to me because the ones that are less capable get all kinds of extra instruction or accommodations, which, I agree,

they should — but the ones above that are just abandoned because, “Well they can do it, they'll be okay. They're fine.” And so the teaching is all to “these children.” The curriculum is all to “these children.” And we're wasting all kinds of capabilities. The people who are going to be our leaders are not getting an adequate education. That's my perception, from having worked in a public school, for a few years. What I found was that I didn't thrive either because I couldn't meet the needs of all the children. So one doesn't feel like a good teacher when you're not meeting their needs and feeling that, “I'm not even allowed to.”

Dykens: How long or how many years have you been within the Montessori system?

Montessori Teacher #2: Probably 30 years. I did my first training when I was in my early 20’s and then I had a family, and then I did another training, and then I worked.

Dykens: What made you want to pursue Montessori in the first place, in your early 20’s?

Montessori Teacher #2: I attended a liberal arts college and they offered a bachelor’s in a subject, your chosen subject, and you could add a fifth year to get a master's degree in education. There were a few education courses, and I came across Montessori method in the library. I couldn't put it down; it was really hard at that time because we didn't have resources… The back of the books list where you could get training, which was not nearby. But then I was able to get the training.

Dykens: Do you think there's a need for alternative models of education?

Montessori Teacher #2: Yes, because one size doesn't fit all, unless it’s Montessori. But even Montessori… we can't educate every single child. If they have major disabilities, then it could be done if parents would provide an individual assistant. We can educate almost every child.

Dykens: Do you consciously hold to a particular pedagogy or philosophy of teaching?

Montessori Teacher #2: It's a — I subscribe to the Montessori philosophy — it's a help to life. And it's a help to the child in his own personal development. So while it's very individualized, when that personal development is realized, then the individual has so much more to bring to anything. It's all about the development of human potential.

Dykens: Which happens on an individualized basis?

Montessori teacher #2: Right, because our potential is not the same. We may have really high potential in one area and not in another. But that's what it's about, development of human potential.

Dykens: Does your educational system and pedagogy reflect a view of human nature? If so, how?

Montessori teacher #2: Well it does in most ways… it [Montessori] is also very developmental. One, it promotes independence. So the child is given the independence based on readiness, and it promotes the human potential, but it's very developmental. The materials, the teaching, the organization, everything has to do with developmental stages.

Dykens: If you could rate on a scale from one to 10 how much freedom a child has in the learning process, how would you rate that?

Montessori teacher #2: Maybe nine, eight or nine. The child has the freedom to do the right thing. There are so many right things you could do, but no freedom to do the wrong thing in this in this environment — freedom to make mistakes, for sure, but not to interfere with another's freedom. There's a spectrum. So there's Montessori, which we are, which is the child may choose anything that he's has lesson in. The first time, it has to be introduced by a teacher. And then way over here, are the ones who really value exploration and the child can do whatever he

wants, and choose whatever he wants, whether he's had any instruction or not. And…. [regarding Montessori] the material has to be used appropriately.

Dykens: You have a prepared environment so in a way it [learning] is not entirely free but you're giving them the most freedom. By setting boundaries, you're giving them true freedom in a way.

Montessori teacher #2: Exactly. By setting boundaries. Yeah, that's how we have freedom as adults too, right? You can't drive your car towards me in my lane! A lot of adults are not as aware that we have boundaries. I'm also of the belief that boundaries provide security. I also believe that boundaries create the space for problem solving and creativity.

Dykens: How much self-efficacy or personal control, do you have in determining the learning process?

Montessori teacher #2: Well I have control over the lessons that I offer, which I offer based on where the child is, observation of the child. Sometimes I would like to give them a lesson that they don't want. And I have the option of requiring that. But it doesn't do a bit of good. I mean if they're not ready in that moment, even maybe they're developmentally ready — if they're not ready in that moment — you're just wasting your time and theirs.

Public school teachers, they don't have very much control, their lessons are scripted.

Dykens: If you could rate your self-efficacy or personal control on a scale from one to 10, how would you rate it?

Montessori teacher #2: I would say nine.

Dykens: On a scale from one to 10, how effective is your school at providing impactful educational experiences and fostering learning?

Montessori teacher #2: [10?] Our school is amazingly successful. If they stay the whole time — we have one that finished this year and was here from two and a half through fifth grade —

everyone who leaves, if they've been here, they go out so strong. They're strong academically, they're strong in themselves, they have a strong moral compass. They are eager to contribute. They have great work habits. They love to learn. They're just a blessing to wherever they go. I'm not saying they're perfect people, but they're strong and I always feel good. I feel good knowing that they will do well. And they will get in trouble… they're going to get in trouble in normal little ways, but they're not going to get involved in not good things.

Dykens: If you had to describe an effective educational experience, what would be a specific example?

Montessori teacher #2: I've observed a lot of successful children is what I've observed, that are successful as human beings, not just academically. I would say a successful educational experience really involves the whole development of a person, not just math… or…

Dykens: How well does your school foster holistic learning that is affective, experiential, and lasting?

Montessori teacher #2: I would say that's what do we do.

Dykens: Does your learning environment allow students to learn at an individualized pace? How structured is the process and pace of learning?

Montessori teacher #2: Well the pace of learning is very structured actually. There's sequencing in everything; everything is in a sequence. You can't just pick up something if you're not ready for it. Or if you do pick it up, you won't be able to do it if you're not ready for it. So it is sequence. I think the process and pace is pretty structured, I do. Pace depends on child.

Dykens: [Shows teacher question #13]

Montessori teacher #2: I think all of those apply. What I would say yes I think it [knowledge] is probably much more integrated in this environment.

Dykens: What factors —political, philosophical, economical, etc. —most strongly influence the curricular design?

Montessori teacher #2: Montessori is not political. Maria said that peace is the work of educators and war is the work of politicians. So, I guess I stand right there. Philosophical [factors] most strongly influences the curriculum here, but it's not just philosophical, but it's also actually science. I read a really good article about Montessori as the only system of education that's based on the scientific method, because she observed. She had a theory and would try things out. She discarded what didn't work and progressed from there. That was all based on the scientific method. And now there's a lot of research that shows how correct she was. But it's always research on one thing. There's brain research… there's also research on use of materials or not using materials, or this or that, that always comes out showing that Montessori works better. But she's the only one that integrated it, put it together as a whole. All of these are isolated. And there are sometimes schools will try: "Okay, let's do this with our reading instead." But it's just that one thing, and it's not comprehensive. So I would say science is also a big part of the curriculum design.

Dykens: Considering the idea of decentering the teacher and the teacher as facilitator, how much room does your curriculum give for the students? Do students interact with knowledge in a dependent or independent way?

Montessori teacher #2: I think that they interact in a dependent and an independent way. The child is dependent on the teacher for some instruction, right, and then has the option to explore it, or refine it, or have an understanding of the procedure, which then allows the child to absorb the information, and to repeat, as they like. Sometimes I learn things. So, there was a child who I could see was really ready for the next math lesson right, and I gave him the next math lesson.

As soon as that was over, he would go back, either to one right before, or two before. He would do those lessons again. And then maybe a day or two later, he would come back to the new one. Going back to those lessons helped him to integrate and see the connection with them.

Dykens: What markers would indicate the student's success in the classroom, in future educational endeavors, and in life?

Montessori teacher #2: Well, in the classroom if they can do it correctly, that's success. They do it independently and correctly; they've got it down. Sometimes we just let some things go. So a few years ago, I had some children who were learning the countries of North America. One called the Dominican Republic, the Dominican Publix! Well this year, I had two children. And they got the Dominican Publix, and also… Honduras was Honda. Sometimes you have to…. you know, they make mistakes.

Dykens: How well does your school prepare students for life?

Montessori teacher #2: Extremely well. The educational experience is very holistic.

Dykens: Do you think that students who leave your system of education come out with strong self-efficacy? On a scale from one to 10, how well does your school foster self-efficacy?

Montessori teacher #2: At least 8, between 8 and 10. There's personality too.

Dykens: Do you think they take more responsibility for their life outcomes, leaving Montessori?

Montessori teacher #2: Much more. There are sometimes exceptions that children don't take that on. No, and if things don't go their way, then it's always someone else's fault. Somehow they pick up victim role everywhere.

Dykens: Do you think that's maybe something that comes from family, the home?

Montessori teacher #2: Right. Some children don't have the opportunity to do things so much at home… Those things [like self-efficacy] are not promoted and they don't have it as strongly.

Dykens: But you would say Montessori would promote it?

Montessori teacher #2: I would say Montessori promotes it [self-efficacy] yes, very much.

Dykens: Do you think that students who leave your system of education come out as deep, creative thinkers? On a scale from one to 10, how well are they able to devise original and rational solutions to issues?

Montessori teacher #2: 9, all the ones I know, like 10. I see them. I haven't done a survey of them, but I see them. And I hear about them later, because their siblings are here.

Montessori Teacher #3 Interview

Dykens: What would you consider the true aim or purpose of education to be?

Montessori Teacher #3: Are you talking about formal education or? For me the purpose of education is raising lifelong learners and that passion to learn, research, find out the world around you, really. And formal education is, you know, social placement in life? So that's why I'm asking for, do you mean like education, like formal?

Dykens: I guess from your perspective, if your aim is to educate your students, what is that aim? Do you have more of a personalized outlook?

Montessori Teacher #3: Yeah, training them, giving them practical life skills, training them to be decent, loving, compassionate human beings. Honestly, that's why I got into preschool and kindergarten, because research shows that from birth to six years is the most formable years of a child's life. That's where they literally absorb everything in their environment. I wanted to make an "oomph impact" that might not be immediate, but I wanted to educate them in the way that they become lifelong learners. And to continue their curiosity, which is I think innate in all of us.

Dykens: I think one of the most impactful things for me, when I visited your classroom, was watching the mediation, where they had the rocks, or something that they held?

Montessori Teacher #3: The peace rock. Sometimes it's a peace rose too. Those are the practical life skills that are so important, the conflict resolution.

Dykens: Yeah, I saw that and I was so impacted.

Montessori Teacher #3: We all need that. We need to know how to speak to people. The whole child development — when it comes to social, emotional and academic — it's [Montessori] not

just academic education. It's not strictly academic. Yeah. It's all those, emotional, social, development of a child.

Dykens: For sure. That answers a few other questions. Do you think there are ambiguities and or presuppositions surrounding the purpose of education? If so, what are these?

Montessori Teacher #3: I think people misconstrue sometimes education as just basically reading a book. That is more formal education. And I think people need to change their mindset a little bit when it comes to education. I think simply exposing your child to classical music is a form of education. So the presumption of our society where you have to be highly educated to be smart and intelligent is not true. For example, my 86-year-old grandmother, she has maybe third grade education, she taught herself how to read and write in English. That's education, you know, and it's all self taught.

Dykens: So, would you say that a presupposition or assumption that people have is that formal education is the only education?

Montessori Teacher #3: Yeah. Like to be successful in life, yes. And in some sense it's true, but not in all sense. I mean, your level of education will give you a comfortable life, but that doesn't mean that in hardships, you don't learn valuable life skills either.

Dykens: Yeah. Do you think the purpose of education has changed over time and then what shifts have you perceived?

Montessori Teacher #3: I don't think it has shifted. I think it has evolved. It used to be that only men could be educated. So that's a huge shift, right. Only the men, the elite nobility. And then now, I mean, practically anyone can get a degree that wants to. So, in a sense, that has changed in our society, but I think that the true purpose of education has not changed. I think that the true purpose of education is still to give that lifelong learner the skills involved to learn on their own.

Dykens: Do you perceive deficiencies within either your system and then other systems of education?

Montessori teacher #3: I'll talk traditional first, because I've taught traditional before.

Dykens: You taught in public schools?

Montessori teacher #3: I have. I've taught middle school science from sixth to eighth grade. So having that experience, I mean, I had sixth graders who didn't know how to read. They were literally reading in maybe first/second grade level, and they're expected to dissect and read texts that are seventh, eighth grade level. I think the whole current, traditional approach… you have legislatures that have never taught, dictating how that should look like in the classroom. I think that's some false presuppositions or assumptions — that you sit children in desks all day and they do the same thing all day, because we already know with research, right, that children learn in different pace. I mean, not every kid learn right at six to read. Some takes a little longer, seven or eight. I've had kids read at three. That's just one example of how different, I think, how it varies, right? Like your pace of learning. So, my own children are very fast learners, and they're very good students, so it's another thing too, like good students and just learning how to follow. Does that make sense? There's a big difference with that, you know, following exactly what your teacher tells you. These are the good students, these are the students who don't barely get in trouble. But there are students who just learn, like that's what they want. They're just curious. They want to learn. And I see that a lot, especially when you compare Montessori education versus traditional education.

Dykens: I guess you mentioned this too, but where do these issues stem from? You have legislators who haven't been in the classroom have these standards or expectations that they place on students, without really knowing how a child develops and what their needs are.

Montessori teacher #3: Another, another thing too, though, that needs to be noted is systemic racism. Racism is a huge, huge part of our educational system that really separates the rich and the poor. For example, standardized testing. If you do not know how to read, if you do not have the skills to read, you will not do well on that test. Research shows the number of books in one's household mostly determines the level of education of that child. You look at someone living in poverty who barely have anything, maybe a Bible, in their house. Their parents would rather feed them than buy books. They are at a great disadvantage. I only say this because I taught in a title I school and I see this, I've seen this. I used to give them backpacks to a couple of my students.

I used to keep snacks all the time in my classroom because they were hungry. You feed the needs first, the physical needs of the students, they will learn. So in my classroom, in a Montessori setting, we always look at the whole child, what's going on at home. I have a kid right now whose parents are divorcing, and of course as a five-year-old, you don't know how to manage all that emotion. Of course he's going to act out. Of course he's going to push his friends. That kind of empathy, they need from teachers. But the teachers need to know that, why they're doing that. You know, the root of the behavior versus just dealing with the behavior. There's always a root and there's the manifestation of that behavior. And we always have to keep that in mind in a Montessori setting and unfortunately in a traditional setting. If you know how to take a test — if you have been exposed — my children, I mean, they've read in 11th, 12th grade level since like fifth or sixth grade. We have thousands of books in our house. Now, between their dad's house and my house, they have a plethora of books, and diverse books. Those things really will make a difference for them, and their amazing test takers. They never worry about the FSA. They're just like, "Okay, it's another day." Never, because there's no pressure. So anyways,

Dykens: What is your best reason as to why we do need alternative education?

Montessori teacher #3: We definitely need alternative models of education because everybody is not a cookie cutter. Children learn in different pace, adults learn in different pace. We also need a more collaborative — with where our society is going now — we need a more collaborative form of education where children learn to collaborate very early on with other people and work with them and know people. This is a huge part of Montessori education because we have that freedom in the classroom to do group projects. Like especially when they get to upper elementary all their stuff is group projects. My daughter's in middle school, in seventh grade. Every three weeks they change groups. And there are groups she hates, “Mom, I'm doing all the work.” “I'm so sorry, kiddo. You’ve got to get along with them. You're going to pull some weight sometimes.” This week, she came home yesterday, “Mom, I love my group. Like it's gonna be a really good three weeks.” All they do in Montessori middle school is group projects. They have individual work too, like math and stuff like that, but they do collaborative work and they present.

Dykens: Do you consciously hold to a particular pedagogy or your philosophy of teaching? If so, please describe it.

Montessori teacher #3: The Montessori method. I'm biased, but I think my diverse background in teaching — having taught in regular public schools — gives me a unique perspective to the Montessori education. I think the Montessori method focuses on the whole child. Not just academic, but it encompasses their actual growth. Montessori talks about planes of development that you introduce certain things at certain ages, because the draw is there at that age.

We move from abstract to concrete. By the time the child reaches third, fourth grade, there's no more imagination. It's more concrete. So we talk about the great lessons, for example, and it's the history of the world, really, the history of the universe, Mesopotamia, Egypt. So it's all concrete

at that point. So primary and Montessori is more — it moves from abstract to concrete because that's why we have a lot of materials that are touching and feeling, like sensory. Maria Montessori believed that your hands are the windows to your mind. I mean, what do babies do? They pick up something and put in their mouth; that's learning to them, you know, they're learning texture. So in a sense, I think Montessori is definitely a whole child approach and not just academic.

Dykens: Does your educational system and pedagogy reflect a view of human nature? And if so, how does your system correlate with human nature?

Montessori teacher #3: I think Montessori definitely follows the view of human nature. I think it definitely keeps it in mind. So Maria Montessori was actually a physician. She was the first female doctor in Italy. Her first assignment was actually to work in an asylum. Through that experience, she really started to really hone in on human nature and a lot of her stuff is observation. In her book, The *Absorbent Mind*, she talks about the mathematical mind of human beings. We naturally gravitate towards numbers and symbols and things like that. Even as a young child you learn your mother tongue, whether or not it's taught formally. From the womb, you are exposed to it already. People talking, you hear it as soon as your ears develop in the womb. And she ties into all that and she also talks about sensitive periods. For example, from two to five years old, is a sensitive period of order. So when you visited my classroom, everything had a place. Everything was so organized because the child… that is their sensitive period for order. They need to know exactly where things are at and they will tell the other students, “That's not where it goes,” or, “It's missing something,” or, “This is dirty.” They will tell you because they're in a sensitive period of order. And I think that's the best thing about what Maria Montessori did is she literally took her observations and made it into an educational

philosophy, where others can follow. It's a method of teaching where it gives the children freedom within boundaries and I think children need that. Absolutely need it. So, that's where alternative education I think is a good thing because you're not just doing the cookie cutter type of education.

Dykens: How much freedom does the child have to direct his own learning on a scale from one to 10, how would you rate the level of the students freedom of choice? And do you perceive this freedom as a pitfall?

Montessori teacher #3: Okay. Excellent question. The Montessori method has the ability to create human beings that are extremely independent. So independence is one of the things that we teach in the classroom. That's why there are so many kids and very few adults. As a matter of fact, the more the adults, the more the hindrances. I don't know if you know that because adults want to help; children want to be independent. Ever since they're born, they go towards independence. That's what Maria Montessori talks about. When it comes to learning, we try to equip children to have intrinsic motivation versus extrinsic. That has been our primary goal. There are children, whether its their environment at home or it's just in them, that are just not motivated to do work. In that case, we limit their choices to help and guide them self-regulate. Self-regulation is such an important thing with children. If a child knows how to self-regulate, they come in in the morning, they know exactly what to do. They know the expectations, and when they do misbehave, you know something's up. But there are children who, whether it's the way they're brought up at home or the environment at home, lack that intrinsic motivation. And we have to build that. So I have a child right now who is having so much focus issues. She's in kindergarten; the expectation is they do five academic lessons every morning. So now they have expectations because they're moving into the next phase of development for them, which is more

independence. So we have a work plan now. It's the last grading period now and they have to follow the work plan. Well, she has a really hard time competing her work plan. We also think she has short-term memory issues. You tell her something, she forgets like five seconds later. We're working with her on that too. With a child like that, I cannot give her the whole freedom of the classroom because she gets into disarray. She gets confused. She doesn't know what to do. She starts wandering. So, we narrow choices and say, “Hey, listen” — I meet with her every morning — and I say, “Which lesson did you want to do first?” And we label her work plan. So now she has a plan. And then we say, “Okay, for language, you may do the moveable alphabet, or you may do the wishunika box. Which one would you like to do?” So now we just narrow down her choices into two that is her level. That's the whole point about alternative education is you can alter things like that, and really follow the child's needs. It would be dumb for me to expect her to finish five lessons like everybody else when she's not there. She's just not there. And I feel so bad for her because she sees her other friends — this is when they start comparing each other, and it's just a natural thing, once they start moving into lower elementary they start comparing each other — and you feel bad, but like, “Hey listen. So and so has a different plan than you and that's okay. We just need more practice.” Those are phrases we say all the time, “We just need more practice.” Practice versus perfection, you know? And so we have to work really hard with that child. She is a handful.

Dykens: How much personal control do you feel that you have in determining learning?

Montessori teacher #3: In the Montessori classroom we guide versus control. We actually change behaviors through changing our environment. For example, if a child continually runs in your classroom, you evaluate the environment. So, all the shelves are on one side and all the shelves are on another. It's like a race track. You change it. So you move a shelf this way so that

there's not this runway that they can just run. So in our classroom Montessori guides, we tend to think that we guide, we do guide more than actually control or teach. That's why you often hear someone say “Montessori guides” versus “Montessori teacher,” or a primary guide. When you control a child, guess what happens? I don't care how compliant the child is. Pushbacks. So, we elicit cooperation versus obedience. Always talk to them first. So if I'm going to put in a new rule, a new boundary, in our procedures, I always talk to them first and say, “Okay, what will happen if this happens?” We walk them through a logical reasoning phase. And I can do this with my older children. I can't do this with a three year old. I can't do logical reasoning with a three year old. And I just don't fight with them. But usually I think the important thing to remember is adults tend to control a children's behavior versus guiding them. So if someone's having a really hard time, say throwing a tantrum, first of all, when a child's throwing a tantrum, you don't even intervene. So when a child goes into tantrum mode, I just sit there and I say, “Hey, I'm right here. If you need me, I'm here.” That's what they need to do. That's part of guiding that is guiding. You know, because you're showing them that wait, my behavior is actually not that great. And you're modeling for them how to stay calm in a stressful situation.

Dykens: How effective is your school up providing impactful educational experiences and fostering learning? And please share an example of an effective educational experience.

Montessori teacher #3: When it comes to impactful education, I think it [Montessori] does make a big difference. I mean, I see the difference between my children. My kids play with their stuffed animals — they have coping skills. They do bows and arrows. That is a coping skill. They don't binge eat. Part of that is because I am a Montessori teacher. There's a lot of Montessori method that's also been incorporated in my house ever since they were little. When they were little, I wanted them to be more independent. So at two years old I would teach them

how to pour that gallon jug of milk. I used to teach them how to cut strawberries and fruit. That's a life skill, you know? When they were little, I used to have a bowl fruit in the bottom of my fridge because they could just open it and they could get snack anytime they wanted. That's part of self-regulation. They don't have to say, “Mom, can I have a snack? Mom, can I have a snack?” because it's there, it's available. So you set up the environment of where you want that to go. And I think in that regard, that [the Montessori method] is super impactful because it wires their brains to be independent and it wires their brains to have that self-efficacy — by just having that prepared environment. And people are just like, “What?!” It is sort of mind blowing it if you're not really used to it.

Dykens: And it aligns with human nature.

Montessori teacher #3: Yeah, exactly.

Dykens: Does your learning environment allow students to learn at an individualized pace?

Montessori teacher #3: Yes. We've talked about that.

Dykens: So how structured is the process and pace of learning?

Montessori teacher #3: You saw this. There's a misconception with Montessori education that children just get to do whatever they want — [but] there is freedom within boundaries. Teachers draw the line; you are free to choose your lessons, you’re free to do this, within their abilities. It's definitely a bit individualized because not everybody is on the same page. I have kids that are adding four digits with the golden beads, where some of my kids can't even count yet. So you just balance that. And I think that's why Montessori teachers are such great managers because we have to know where each child is, in presenting lessons, what lessons are appropriate for the child…

Dykens: And you present lessons one-on-one, right?

Montessori teacher #3: Mostly individuals, sometimes in small groups. In the beginning of the year, I do a little bit more small groups, especially for the new students. So I can't do individual or else it will take forever. So I would group three, four kids at a time and do a little bit of lessons and then let them go and say, “Okay, now you may do the lesson.” A trial run, right? What can they handle? Can they put the materials back appropriately? Can they take of the materials? Can they hold focus and concentration? All that is observing. You observe them. The individualized piece of it [the Montessori method] goes along with observation. The teacher really has to observe the child in order to make a correct assessment of where they're at academically, socially, emotionally, before we even present lessons. And that's how we present lessons. I don't know if you know this, but Montessori teachers are actually considered trained observers. In our training, observation is a key for us to be successful in the classroom. We have observation logs. We have lesson logs.

Dykens: In your training, do you get taught how to observe?

Montessori teacher #3: Yes we do. What is the body language of children? Are they really excited? When we present lessons, we don't even talk. We try not to talk because we want them to observe our hands. So we're also teaching them observation too. We teach them how to observe correctly in the classroom. We observe with our eyes, not our mouth or hands. So we don't talk when we observe, we put our hands be on our back, because then they don't touch the materials. So we always observe with their eyes. Also, in the observation piece of our training, we have to observe three other classrooms besides our own. And it's a full cycle, it's a full three hour cycle and we write about it. We observe this child doing this. There was a conflict and this is what happened. What do the adults do in the classroom? How does that affect the child? You

know, like things like that. We have to observe a total, I think, of seven classrooms. Observation is part of our job. Right now because of COVID, we can't go to other schools, but my principal who is also Montessori trained, understands this. So we actually observe each other's classrooms. We take maybe 30 minutes to an hour. As a matter of fact, I'm observing in the next month. Lower elementary, because I want to know where my kids are going (How do they present lessons? How do they do this? How do they do that?) so that I can do this smoother transition to lower elementary.

Dykens: How do you perceive knowledge?

Montessori teacher #3: We definitely build upon prior knowledge. This is why reading is so important and this is why we encourage parents to read. Prior knowledge is so important in piecing things together. If a child goes on a trip to Washington DC, [I say] "Have a great time!" "Well, is there any work?" [I say] "Nope. Have a great time." We have to follow truancy rules, but if a parent contacts us, we never give them a hard time. And that's what the best thing about the Montessori education, because we consider all that learning. Just because you're not in the classroom, doesn't mean you're not learning. That plays such an important part in scaffolding and building from prior knowledge. The more the child gets exposed to, the more their library, I call it the library in their brain [the more] they can pull things from. That's how you get good writers. That's how you get creative thinkers. You need that basis. They pull from what they already know. I think that's a huge part in self-re realization.

The coolest part about our school is that we have limited classrooms. The cool thing is we all know each other. The colleagues, the teachers, we all know how to teach because it's Montessori method. And it continues. So like for my children, who have been there since they were four, we know how that child works. We know how that child's work ethic is. So for the past three years

we've been doing what's called a child study. So if we have a child who's having a really hard time with something, we collaboratively come together, all the teachers. The current teacher presents and says, “This is what we've noticed. This is what's happening. How can we help this child?” So if they're in lower or upper elementary and I've had them, I can give my input. You know, “When this kid was in my class for three years, this is what worked.” How amazing that is that the teachers to know who these kids are. And then we have this sense of community. So that's what I think one of the biggest things that we do right in our school is we collaborate with each other, which everybody should be collaborating, you know?

Dykens: I guess out of all these options you would say that knowledge is constructed more from existing mental than anything else?

Montessori teacher #3: Yes.

Dykens: What factors — political, philosophical, economical, etc. — most strongly influence the curricular design of your school?

Montessori teacher #3: I don’t think we follow a specific political or economical… I know for sure that we teach peace education. It's actually a huge, huge part of our curriculum and our philosophy too. Maria Montessori believes that through education, we can achieve peace. In in our classrooms, from conflict resolutions to coping skills and strategies… So, it's [the curricular design] not necessarily political or economical, it's more a philosophy of peace education. We really try to give them skills — coping skills, conflict/resolution skills — to be successful adults that can manage certain emotions and behaviors.

Dykens: You could even tie that to the humanist psychology. You would believe that humans are inherently good, I guess is what Montessori would say?

Montessori teacher #3: Yes, in a way. But also we draw a lot from our environment. This is why preparing our environment is just so important. There's a nurture piece and there's also a nature piece. Maria Montessori always says that when a child misbehaves, always look to the adult. If a child's just having like a crazy time, look to the adult. Is the adult angry? Is the adult stressed? Is the adult having a hard time too?

Dykens: Considering the idea of "decentering the teacher" and "the teacher as facilitator," how much room does your curriculum give for the students? Do students interact with knowledge in an independent or dependent way?

Montessori teacher #3: Like I said earlier, Montessori teachers are more guides. We facilitate more than dictate. So in that sense, there's definitely room for the curriculum. We don't have traditional lesson planning like most schools do because we don't do the same thing at the same time with everybody. When you have a multi-age classroom, it's just dumb, for the lack of a better word, to have the same thing at the same time. If we, do it's by level. So we have an easy, medium, and a more challenging work…

Dykens: So you would say students interact more independently with knowledge then?

Montessori teacher #3: We never dump and fill. We tend to draw from their interest. If I have a kid that's obsessed with dinosaurs, you bet I'm making lessons that have dinosaurs in them. You don't see that in public school, you know? This is why observation comes to mind again, because we really have to know the child. I think the parents really appreciate that too because we know the children so well. When we do parent conferences, most of the time I never get pushbacks from parents.

Dykens: What markers would indicate a student's success? How well does your school prepare students for life?

Montessori teacher #3: I think social and emotional growth is just as important if not more important than academics. Research shows that most millionaires are actually B students, but because they have social skills and they have emotional skills, they are better equipped in life and making money. I think what prepares students for life is their social and emotional skills and personal connection with people too.

Dykens: Would you say that personality plays into that? Because you have more introverted kids who aren't going to socialize as much. So do you respect that and let them do their own thing? Or do you encourage social interaction?

Montessori teacher #3: So if someone's introverted, and I've had children who are super introverted, they do well more with one-on-one interaction versus small groups or big group discussion. I would never embarrass a child in a circle time and ask that introverted child to answer a question for me. I will, however, go up to that child when they're doing a lesson or after they're doing a lesson and talk with them. That is also a skill in itself, just talking to an adult. So we really are sensitive to that because you don't ever want to put a child in a position where they feel like they're not in control. So autonomy is such an important thing in dealing with social things with children, what they can and cannot handle. You know, “I can see you getting really overwhelmed with this. Why don't we revisit this later.” [I] pull that kid later on a little later when it's just the two of us and see how he or she does, which I think is also missing in traditional setting.

Dykens: Do you think that the students who leave your system come out with strong self-efficacy? On a scale from one to 10, how well does your learning environment foster self-efficacy?

Montessori teacher #3: 10. I only say 10 because I think we really prepare students for life. We understand that it's not just academics, but it's also the whole child in itself. And I'll use my own children as an example, because they've went through Montessori since preschool. They're incredibly creative. They're independent thinkers. They still question things. They have the skills to research and I think it's so important with self-efficacy to have the initiative, to research what you want to learn. And research is such a big part of our curriculum when they get to lower elementary and upper elementary. And even in my classroom as primary, if a student comes up to me with a question, “Well, how does this work?” [I say] “Well, you know what, I don't, let's find out.” You learn together. And I think that's an important part of raising independent, creative thinkers is knowing that they have the skills and the tools to research and to really follow what they want to learn.

Dykens: So would you answer 18 with a 10 as well?

Montessori teacher #3: For sure.

Dykens: It’s so sad, it’s just those traits are so missing. Kids don't think for themselves. I mean it's a societal dilemma at this point.

Montessori teacher #3: But that's how traditional education, that's what they're doing. They're raising children who can't think for themselves and when you're told what to do all your life, what skill are you learning?

Appendix F: Alternative Teacher Interview Transcripts

Alternative Teacher #1 Interview

Dykens: So what would you say the purpose of education is?

Alternative Teacher #1: I would say the purpose of education should be to train and mentor children to think for themselves.

I think that in the earlier grades that comes with modeling and discussion and activities that help them grow their competence and their skill set. But as they grow older, the goal is not to, I always say, children are not an empty vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled. And to kindle that fire, honestly, and to teach them how to have opinions and back those opinions with clear evidence and facts. And, again, grow their competence in that area.

Dykens: Do you think there are ambiguities and our presuppositions surrounding the purpose of education?

Alternative Teacher #1: Yeah, I do think that a big presupposition that has steered our system in the way that it is now is that children need to learn a certain thing by a certain age, or they will fall behind and be unsuccessful. And with what we do in our program, we try very hard to break that misconception. We have seen kids who come to us from, starting in second grade, seen as very behind according to the system, seen as failing according to high stakes testing and giving them the chance and the room to breathe and to play. And yes, creating that consistency in their learning. But as they've grown, and now they're reaching the middle school years, they not only are right up with their peers and their ability, but they have a joy for learning, and they haven't been stressed out. And the joy of learning hasn't been sucked out of them. The opposite is true. Their confidence is growing, they have this quiet confidence, this ability to accomplish things,

even if it's at a more peaceful pace. So I think that idea, that kids' brains have to absorb this material at a certain time, where they will fail, is wrong.

Dykens: Do you think that the purposes of education have changed over time in our society? And if so, what shifts have you perceived?

Alternative Teacher #1: Yeah, I definitely do. We talk about this a lot. Formalized education is rather new in terms of modern history. Back in the day, children were educated depending on societies, but a lot of it, in certain societies, in certain cultures, was through storytelling, and through passing on of stories and listening to elders and working hands-on for the purpose of work. You know, a lot of children had to work alongside their families. And so they learned to do things because that's what their families were doing. And there was no formal school, you know. And then there was education in a time of the philosophers where education was just gathering in the city square, discussing and arguing. And that's where ideas like the Socratic seminar came to be, where people just share ideas, and they listened to one another. And man, I wish we could get back to that, because our society struggles with that so much. Even if our kids test the highest they can test, our society doesn't know how to argue and disagree respectfully. And so it morphed into that, and then we talk sometimes about how education became more industrialized, truly, during the Industrial Revolution, where, you know, we started factories, and things like that, and that's where the grading system you see today, you know, ABCDF, came from those ideas of factory grading products and materials. And so we grade our children the same way we grade our meat and our eggs and our milk. And then that's become what we see today is just this. Somebody said it the other day, and I forget and it's so true, we look at children and automatically see the deficit instead of the strength. So, getting back to some of that

strengths-based teaching, building up confidence, helping kids to recognize their ideas and backgrounds is super important.

Dykens: I love it. So, do you perceive deficiencies within your system or other current systems of education? If so, what are the three most pervasive issues you've encountered?

Alternative Teacher #1: I would say high stakes testing is the number one, for sure. In terms of testing, not for purposes of progress monitoring, but for teacher accountability. And for more of like those systemized accountability measures. We are not against progress monitoring for assessment, when it benefits the child and it doesn't compare children against each other, you know, when it looks at a child's growth from point A to point B, I think it can be very helpful. So high stakes testing. Homogeneous grouping. So I think placing and making those groupings large, so placing 25 kids, who are all 7 to 8 years old, and expecting those 25 kids, regardless of their background, or their life experiences or what they're going through personally, or even their genetic makeup, to all perform the same way is unrealistic. We have seen a great benefit here, with our program, of, peer tutoring and peer mentoring, and getting kids, like you see, like what you're seeing right now, kids of various age groupings, to learn together, and work together. It's beneficial for the older child to take on a mentor role, and it's beneficial for the younger child to have that mentor. And even just playing together in that regard to is very reflective of how a more ancient time of children, you know, of all ages, playing and learning together.

A third one. That’s hard. The focus on the deficit is really unfortunate, and I think some of that came with no child left behind, and just this idea that so many children are behind, and we have to rescue them from this behind-ness. And we're going to do that by testing their brains out, you know, I'm sorry, that's not very formal. But I think that that has really been detrimental to education, whereas we can really focus, it's very countercultural, to focus on a kid's strengths and

know that the more we focus on their strengths, the more their weaknesses won't even matter. They'll catch up. We always say, there's no race, what is the race? What is the end goal here? And just getting away from some of those ideas.

Dykens: This is a question I've been thinking about because I'm nearing graduation and I don't know what exactly I want to do. But I think one objection that a public school teacher could have is that, well, “Yes, we're in a homogenous classroom and group, but I'm still able to differentiate the lesson I’m teaching.” That’s something that they stress in our classes too, is you have to differentiate. They may recognize that students have differing abilities, but you're still stuck in that mindset. So how would you address someone who says, well, it's enough to differentiate?

Alternative Teacher #1: I think that's a really good point. And I think that there are so many teachers out there doing that well. I think, in a system where teachers are given more freedom to do that, and I can only speak from my personal experiences in the public school classroom, and you know, my partners, the people that I'm around, we have very similar experiences. So I can only speak on behalf of that. And the truth is that well, yes, that would be ideal. That you know, you have your whole group lesson and then you pinpoint, okay, who needs additional support, let's pull them back, let’s have flexible grouping. Let's really meet the kids where they're at. That wasn't the case. Logistically, because of the king of testing, I truly had conversations in our planning meetings with administrators who told me, you know, because we categorize kids by color, right? Red is low, low babies. Yellow is mid, middle to low. Then I think blue was like average, and green was above average. And we were literally told, “Do not even teach to the red column. They're not going to make enough gains for it to count towards testing. You need to focus on the yellow kids because they're the ones who can bump up a grade level which would help our school scoring and all of that.” That should be illegal. You know what I'm saying? So

yes, the idea is that we can serve all these kids, but when administrators, and I'm not pinpointing it on administrators — everyone is feeling that pressure from the top down — truly from politicians.

Dykens: It's systemic and it's logistical.

Alternative Teacher #1: Yeah. And then you're dealing with severe behavior problems. I taught, we all taught, at like Title One schools. And that's not just indicative of Title One schools, other schools have those as well. But the lack of support, when you're teaching 25 kids and even if one out of those 25 kids, is a disruptive child, you know, not their fault. They, what some of these kids go through at home is horrendous. And the lack of support is awful. One child can disrupt the whole learning system. And then you can't teach, right? And then teachers are so stressed out for so many minutes, so much paperwork, so many meetings, they don't have planning time. So yes, ideally, you think, yes, I can meet all of these children's needs, and make sure everyone gets taught. But the reality is that that's not happening. And that's from experience.

Dykens: Yeah. And I've only been in a few field studies, and I've seen it. So, do you think there's a need for alternative models of education?

Alternative Teacher #1: I do. I do. I do and at the same time, of course, we're an alternative model. There many others, like Montessori. And it's almost like a privilege to be able to do some of those things, because of some of the costs associated, and I know that there are charter schools and things like that. So we know that the way it is now, not every child could benefit from that. So I want to say yes, that there is a need for alternative models of education. But there's also a need for reform in public education. Because every child should be able to receive a wonder-based learning with play and project time and creativity. And that should not be reserved for people who can afford it or people who are high enough on the list of a lottery, to be able to find

a seat in a school that way, every school should be that way. But I do think that alternative education is super important. Because I mean, we are one.

Dykens: Do you consciously hold to particular pedagogy or philosophy of teaching? If so please describe it.

Alternative Teacher #1: Yeah, in terms of formal methods of education, we have been truly inspired by the Finnish model of education, which follows a lot of the same ideals that we have, where it's like, a very peaceful start. Compulsory learning doesn't start till age seven. And this is the public system. Which is another reason why, you know, yes, we're doing this in our little bubble, but they do that with their entire country. And the scores prove it. They have been consistently ranked as one of the top educational systems in the world. Because of some of the more peaceful methods, I think there's limited high stakes testing. They don't do homework; they value family time. They don't start education until later grades, in terms of like, needing to learn reading and math by this age. Like that doesn't happen till later. They believe in cross-curricular learning and project based learning, that kind of thing. So we've been truly inspired by that. And I think in terms of like, wider philosophies, we always say peacefully paced, project driven, play based and personalized. So teaching a kid one-on-one is so important.

Dykens: So you would say your philosophy aligns better with child development?

Alternative teacher #1: Yeah, I would say we always talk about how it's important to engage kids and develop developmentally appropriate activities and practices. A lot of the things in public education that kids were being asked to do, even in kindergarten, their brains are just not ready. Like you've learned of like, concrete versus abstract thinking. A lot of younger kids are still concrete learners. We're asking them to do abstract things.

Dykens: Do you guys try to move concrete to abstract or is that not as much an emphasis?

Alternative teacher #1: Yeah. And we kind of view it not as much like a stage thing like, you are this age, so you're only going to concrete things and you're this age, but you only get to do abstract things. It's more interwoven. So our curriculum provides experiences that are more concrete, like in our invitations to play and in our invitations to create, then they get to do more abstract things through their projects, like they get to research and formulate ideas about things. So it's more symbiotic than, "You can only do this because you're this age."

Dykens: Does your educational system and pedagogy reflected view of human nature? If so, how does your system and teaching correlate with human nature?

Alternative teacher #1: That's a great question. I think humans are a lot more curious and creative than we give them credit for. So, I think giving kids and adults the opportunity in their workplace, and children in their place of learning, to flex that creativity muscle to, it's hard to say, but to just give them a chance to even be bored. In public education, we have them going so much, so much, so much, they don't time to go to the bathroom, they don't have any play time. They don't, their brains don't have a chance to even wander. And when they do wander, when they seem disengaged in the lesson, it's a bad thing, you know, but some of the most amazing inventions have been created out of boredom, out of a need, because the need was recognized. So I think that humans are more curious than they think. But also, we are not as much as Montessori where we just let the kid be the true self-directed learner. We do believe that children need mentorship and guidance. And so our model is a little bit more, the teacher comes alongside and guides. Like, "Yes, that's a great idea. Do you know where this idea came from? Let me give you some more information. How can we further this?" to make sure that they reach their highest potential. Because sometimes kids, they will do the bare minimum sometimes, especially like the older that they get, they have the most capacity and the least interest. They're cool preteens, you

know, and as we teach these kids, we try to push them for excellence, not to strive for perfect letter grades or high scores on a test, but because they are capable. So we're making sure that as experts that we're not just disengaged, we're not just flies on the wall, we are truly engaged in their learning process.

Dykens: On a scale from one to 10, how much freedom would you say the child has to drive his or her own learning?

Alternative Teacher #1: Yeah, I would say there's a little bit less than in Montessori school because of that component, of teacher guidance and mentoring.

Dykens: How much self efficacy or personal control do you have in determining the learning process?

Alternative Teacher #1:Quite a bit.

Dykens: If you had to rate on a scale from one to 10, how effective is your school at providing impactful educational experiences and fostering learning?

Alternative Teacher #1: I would say, I'm going to be humble and say a 9. There's always room for growth, and I think it also comes down to what the measurement of impact is. When I look around and see kids who are learning but are also joyfully engaged in their day, that, to me, is impactful where somebody else may not see that as impactful.

Dykens: My next question was, what is a specific example of an effective educational experience?

Alternative teacher #1: I think just the one that I talked about earlier, and this is just one out of many examples, but children who were on the path of failure and stress and total disengagement in the system, and then are thriving here. Because they have the opportunity to have choice over their learning, and go at their own pace. And there's a book that goes along with it about this,

called *The Book of Learning and Forgetting*. And one of the quotes from that book is so good. It's like, “The only thing we teach kids when we tell them that they're falling behind in their learning is that they're not good enough.” Like, that's all they hear, it doesn't make them want to catch up, it doesn't make them want to improve, it just makes them hear, I'm not good enough. And that early destruction of self-confidence follows a child through their life. It truly, truly does. So, while I would love children who are both confident and completely, like knowing-of-all-the-things, I would rather a child who is confident, who still has room to grow. But that confidence is there. They can tackle anything; they can learn anything, right? Because the alternative, which I've personally experienced as a public school teacher, is kids who cram, cram, cram for that test. They work their butt off, they're there for eight hours a day at school, the parent hires a tutor for two additional hours every day. Sure, let's say they pass the test, but at what cost? You know, the cost of their childhood? That's not worth it. Now you've created a stressed out child who is going to have anxiety. And that doesn't mean every story ends like that. There are kids who do well on tests and are unaffected, but from my experience, a lot of the kids are very affected by that pressure put on them.

Dykens: On a scale from 1 to 10 how well does your school foster holistic learning that is affective, experiential and lasting? Does your learning environment allow students to learn at an individualized pace? How structured is the process and pace of learning?

Alternative teacher #1: Yes, definitely at an individualized pace. There's a framework of structure that gives us kind of like a springboard. But ultimately, the child's abilities and interests determine what they learn.

Dykens: How do you perceive knowledge? Choose all that apply.

Alternative teacher #1: Could you elaborate a little bit on “self realized from an objective source?”

Dykens: Yeah, I was, in my literature review, comparing objectivism to constructivism. So a constructivist approach to learning would be allowing the students to come to their own understanding. They're interacting with information, but it's really dependent on their perceptions and how they perceive that. Whereas a more objective method of teaching would be like, “This is what you need to know, this is true.”

Alternative teacher #1: I think it sometimes depends on the subject. Like, with mathematics, I think, as much as we try to make it project based and have them come to the conclusion on their own, there is this more concrete answer. But I would say for everything else, C and D.

Dykens: Okay. What factors, curricular, economical, philosophical, etc., most strongly influence the curricular design of your system?

Alternative teacher #1: I would say philosophical. Yeah. And economical in the sense that because we are a tuition-based program, that is dependent on economics, even though we provide scholarships. But mostly philosophical.

Dykens: Considering the idea of decentering the teacher, or the teacher as facilitator, how much room does your curriculum give to the students? How do they interact with knowledge, more independently or dependently?

Alternative teacher #1: Definitely more the teacher as a facilitator, instead of, you know, centering the teacher. It gives a lot of room, especially for project-based learning. Their projects are completely dependent on what their question is, what their driving topic is. And they've created all sorts of really neat things based off that. So we come alongside to mentor them. But ultimately, it's their choice, what they get to research and work on.

Dykens: What markers would indicate a student's success? And how well does your school prepare students for life and learning?

Alternative teacher #1: Yeah, because we don't rely on things like letter grades and high-stakes testing, we still do some progress monitoring and assessments, but we keep a portfolio on every child. And so everything that they work on gets put in a portfolio. And instead of the idea of like, "You get one chance to do something, and if you don't do it right, then we move on and you just receive a failing mark on that," they get the chance to go back and to improve their work. To us that's very much more reflective of the real world. My boss isn't going to tell me, "This report is awful, you get an F, and that's what gets put in your file." They give you feedback, and they give you notes and you improve it for the betterment of the team and the overall goal. So in that regard, I think that we prepare our kids really well for the real world. We help them learn how to accept critical feedback, and build their confidence in that regard. And that is coming from experience and myself as well, as someone who experienced the traditional model of education, and was always striving for the highest grades and the highest scores and just pleasing others in that regard. I struggled initially in my early days in the workforce and adulthood with receiving feedback, because I felt like I was a failure, instead of given that experience of, you know, failure is not bad. Failure means we get up and try again.

Dykens: And then this is obviously something that you've been emphasizing. You would say that students who leave your system come out with a strong self-efficacy?

Alternative teacher #1: Yes, absolutely.

Dykens: On a scale from 1 to 10, how well does your learning environment foster self-efficacy?

Alternative teacher #1: Yes, I would say, I would say like a 9 to 10. We work really hard to develop… it's almost like the kids are like super confident, almost to the point where it's like,

“Okay, yes, but here's what we can work on.” You know, it's almost like overconfidence. But yes, self-efficacy is a huge part of what we try to do.

Dykens: Do you think students who leave your system of education come out as deep, creative thinkers? On a scale from one to 10, how well are they able to devise original and rational solutions to issues?

Alternative teacher #1: I would say that's something that the kids are working on. Especially if they're a little bit younger. I do want to see them improve in that as we move on. Even during project time, they’ll think of a question and they'll create something and sometimes that's the best that they can get. And other times it's like, “How can we develop this further?” They definitely have that teacher mentor there to help them because a lot of times they just think in terms of one level. As they grow older, we are seeing that they have a chance to deepen their work more. Again, that comes along with teacher facilitating and mentorship.

Alternative Teacher #2 Interview

Dykens: What would you consider the purpose of education to be?

Alternative teacher #2: I think it has various purposes. I think at its most basic it's to equip students for the future, just to give them knowledge they need for their future lives and careers. But I think even more than that, for me anyway, it's to give them the knowledge that will help them understand their place in the world and why the world is the way it is. And how to not just live in that world, but, now obviously I'm coming at this from a Christian perspective, not just to live in this world, but to live as a Christian in this world.

Dykens: Do you think that there, there are ambiguities and or presuppositions surrounding the purpose of education?

Alternative teacher #2: I do because I think different people have different ideas about what it's all for. I think it varies between whom you're talking to. It varies because different people have different ideas about education. And I think there are a lot of people who just view education as a means to an end. You go through elementary school, middle school, high school to gain the knowledge you need to then get into college, which then prepares you for a career. I talk to… I teach at UNF and for a lot of students, that's what education is to them. It's just giving them what they need to do the job they want to do. And that's part of it, but I just think there's more to it. But I think for a lot of people, that's it. And they don't see that bigger picture.

Dykens: So do you think that the purposes of changed over time in our society? What shifts have you perceived?

Alternative teacher #2: I do. I know that originally, education, from the very beginning, like even before our society was a thing, if you go back through history, like to the ancient Greeks, the whole idea of education was to help people understand humanity. And over time it shifted, like

here in the United States, I think that was one of the original intents and purposes. But then the Industrial Revolution occurred and we start moving away from religion, toward more science based everything. And so, for many people, I think that's when the goal of education came to be equipping people to do their jobs. Even more so in modern times, just these last decades, we've seen more and more of a push, pushing people more and more into the STEM-related fields, moving away from humanities. So it's like, are they even going to know where they came from or why we are the way we are?

Dykens: Yeah. I know in most universities, the humanities departments are shrinking. And I just interviewed a public school teacher yesterday; he's older. He was hired at a public school solely because he has a degree in computer science and they wanted him to head their STEM class.

Alternative teacher #2: That's become the focus. Well, and you know, you're in Florida. When was it? Like 2012 or 13, something like that. The state legislature voted to change the general education requirements for all universities, because it used to be that there were various classes that were mandatory. Western Civilization, and then later World History, were two of those classes. And then they changed it. They voted again. They're like, “We don't need that.” So those courses are still offered, but not mandatory. They offer like this menu of classes you can choose from, and students are taking other things that aren't related to the humanities. And so they're coming out of school, not knowing much, and then furthering their education and still not learning in that area.

Dykens: Do you perceive deficiencies within your system or other current systems of education? If so, what are the three most pervasive issues you have encountered or currently encounter?

Alternative teacher #2: I mean, I really don't think there are deficiencies [in my system]. Except, I don't know if this would be considered a deficiency because we are a homeschool program, but

I know in a larger setting with a school, they can take into account more easily students who have difficulties learning or have different ways, you know, methods or ways of learning more so than we do at PEP. PEP is aggressive, not aggressive, but we're a fast-paced program. It's a heavy program and you've got to keep up. So I think that could be a deficiency. But beyond that, with like what we teach and how we teach it, I've been with PEP since it came to Jacksonville in 2007, and over the years they fine-tune the procedures and whatnot to where we are today. So I really wouldn't change much.

Dykens: Yeah. I think because it meets twice a week, you have time to differentiate if you needed to.

Alternative teacher #2: Well, that's the thing. And that's why I hesitated to bring that up because we are a homeschool program. And so you're right. At home, parents can work with the students who need more help. Like my sons both have visual processing disorders and my youngest also has an auditory processing disorder. So they both, it was kind of a struggle for them… It just took them twice as long to do everything, but we did it at home together. But I think you need to make sure that you have the parents involved because I do have some students at PEP whose parents are like, “Okay, go do everything.” Especially with the younger ones. I mean, when you're older, it doesn't really matter. But the younger ones, they need that parental involvement.

Dykens: And then I guess looking at other systems, like the public systems, what deficiencies would you note?

Alternative teacher #2: My kids never went to public school, but I know enough people whose kids have and people who teach in the system. And I hear this actually from my UNF students. I have a lot of my UNF students who've told me, and teachers who teach in the public school system, that they feel that all they do is focus on the testing. They teach to the test, they learn to

the test. And because of that, there are so many other things they're not learning or focusing on. So I'm thankful we don't do that.

Dykens: Do you think there's a need for alternative models of education and if so, why?

Alternative teacher #2: I do. Because everybody learns differently and because people look for different things in methods, modes, of education, I guess you could say. You know, like a five-days-a-week setting, all day long, isn't for every student. Some students just learn better two days a week or three days a week or homeschooling exclusively.

Dykens: Yeah. I found this book called *Free Markets in Education* and it applies the concept of capitalism to education, which is interesting. You need that. If you want to have democracy and diversity of thought and opinion, you need those diverse outlets of learning and streams of thought.

Alternative teacher #2: Because otherwise it's going to be like Karl Marx talked about with education funneling everyone in the same mode of thought, learning the same thing. No differences, period.

Dykens: Yeah. That's what scares me actually the most.

Alternative teacher #2: Yeah, me too. Especially as I see, like even with this move towards STEM, it's funneling people in a certain direction.

Dykens: Do you consciously hold to a particular pedagogy or philosophy of teaching?

Alternative teacher #2: Ultimately I want students to enjoy the process, to come out of it with the understanding, and I'm speaking from a historical point of view since I teach history, but come out of it with the understanding of why we believe the things we believe, why our society is the way it is today, where did all those ideas, the foundation, come from? Where was the

groundwork laid? And, you know, how history is more than just names and dates and places, it's ideas that have been around since the beginning of time. And also again, from the Christian point of view, what role has God played as he's guided history from the beginning?

Dykens: Speaking from my perspective, from being at PEP, I loved how everything related. We were doing Western Thought with Mr. Hough, modern literature, and then modern history. And I don't think I've ever in the course of my educational experience, experienced such an interwoven… you know, it was also connected. And I was like, "Oh my gosh, this all makes sense." I just hadn't really experienced that before.

Alternative teacher #2: You're exactly right. I think that's so important because for example, just a few weeks ago, we were talking about the French Revolution in Core E and they started reading a *Tale of Two Cities* about a week into me talking about it. They started reading a *Tale of Two Cities* in rhetoric. And so one of the students came in was like, "Oh my gosh, it makes sense now. You know, I understand why this happened in the book and where all this came from." Cause I had already laid the foundation. So I just think that's important.

Dykens: Yeah, for sure. Does your educational system and pedagogy reflect a view of human nature? And if so, how does your system and teaching correlate with human nature?

Alternative teacher #2: I think it does. I think it does because history is the result of decisions made by human beings. And part of human nature is the sin that we all have and we see the results of that throughout history. And that's one of the big things I talk about. I mean, if you think about wars and you know, people like Adolf Hitler and so on.

Dykens: In your educational system, how much freedom does the child have to drive his or her own learning? On a scale from one to 10, how would you rate the level of the students' freedom of choice?

Alternative teacher #2: Not a lot because we have curriculum that we follow. We have things that we have to cover. Like in modern history, I have to cover what happened from this point to that point. So, I don't think there's a lot of freedom there for the students. And what would you ask about the rating?

Dykens: On a scale from one to 10, how would you rate the level of the students' freedom of choice?

Alternative teacher #2: I'd say four or five. The choice they do have is how they're going to do the work and when. It's different from a public school where they're there five days a week; they have homework due the next morning. So, you know, they can choose like, okay, I'm going to do a little every off-day, or a lot of them stay up the night before and do a whole week's worth.

Dykens: And I think there is a lot of freedom in that sense.

Alternative teacher #2: There is, since we are only together two days a week, they have flexibility as to when they can do it. They just don't have flexibility as to what they're doing.

Dykens: How much self-efficacy or personal control do you have in determining the learning process?

Alternative teacher #2: A lot. Yeah. I mean, I basically created my own class. I mean, there were guidelines, you know, I have to cover these things. Here's the curriculum we're using. But beyond that, everything else I decided.

Dykens: So I guess if you had to rate that on a scale from one to 10….

Alternative teacher #2: Probably like seven or eight.

Dykens: Yeah. On a scale from one to 10, how effective is your school at providing impactful educational experiences and fostering learning?

Alternative teacher #2: I say this both as a tutor at PEP, but also as a mother of two students who went all the way through, I'd say eight or nine.

Dykens: What would be an example of an effective educational experience?

Alternative teacher #2: For the students? I mean, for me, like, I'll give you an example. This actually has to do with UNF, but the same applies to PEP. At UNF, I had a student several years ago who just wasn't getting it because history was not her thing. And I have students like that at PEP because it's not for everybody. Some people have trouble remembering or connecting those ideas or whatever, or just getting it. And so I had this one student who struggled and struggled and struggled. And so I had her start coming to my office to meet with me. And I just talked to her about it and went over things and tried to break it down so that she could understand. Her grades started coming up and she came to my office one day and she was like, “I just want to tell you, I get it now.” And she became very enthused about history. And so for me, I love those moments. I have PEP students as well, who just, they don't understand it at first. They don't like it, but then there's something that clicks, something we do in class or something… if I talk to them. It doesn't happen overnight, it's a process, but they just all of a sudden get it and come to enjoy it.

Dykens: That's awesome. On a scale from one to 10, how well does your school foster holistic learning that is affective, experiential, and lasting?

Alternative teacher #2: Maybe, maybe six.

Dykens: Okay. Why would you give that score?

Alternative teacher #2: There’s not a ton of freedom in some areas. It's not like traditional homeschooling where you could just decide, “I'm going to veer off in this direction because I

want to learn more about this." And you spend another three weeks that you hadn't planned on studying with a particular focus.

Dykens: How structured would you say the process and pace of learning is? If your whole class were struggling in one area, would you have that flexibility to slow down in certain areas?

Alternative teacher #2: Yes, definitely. I mean, I couldn't spend weeks, you know, slow down and say, "We're just gonna spend the next month just focusing on this." I can't do that, but I can definitely change things around so that we can spend more time on a particular topic so that they do get it. In fact, I just did that last week with a class.

Dykens: [Discusses question #13.]

Alternative teacher #2: How do I perceive knowledge? I think they all apply in different ways. I don't know if that's a possibility, but from my perspective they do.

Dykens: Yeah. I was trying to explore whether or not different systems of education have different ways of viewing knowledge.

Alternative teacher #2: Oh, I think they do. I think they do, but at PEP it's different from other forms of education and other places of education because we're using the classical model and the goal is knowledge, gaining knowledge, and you don't have to go about it in one way. Does that make sense?

Dykens: Yeah. I would say this because I've been at PEP too. You teach students that there is a truth, that there is some type of baseline, objective source of truth. While public schools will be like, "Oh, here's what we know, but you can kind of construct your own reality." And in some ways you do have to construct your knowledge and what you believe because it's all relative to your experiences. But at the same time, there's that ultimate baseline.

Alternative teacher #2: Right. Everything you do is from that baseline.

Dykens: So that's what I was trying to figure out, are public schools more subjective in the way they teach? But what I'm finding is most teachers are like, “Well, it's everything.” But the one public school teacher I talked to said, “Well, there is an agenda.” So they want you to think that they're promoting free thought, but at the same time they have a very specific agenda in mind.

Alternative teacher #2: I think a lot of educational systems have agendas. I mean, my son, Robert, my oldest, when he went to college, I remember he came home from class one day and he said he was in a sociology class. And I guess the professor put them in groups and gave each group a controversial topic with various questions. I guess they had to discuss about it, come up with some conclusions, and then present to the class. And he came home and he was truly upset. He said, “Mom, I think I'm the only Christian in this class.” Because they had topics like abortion, and you know, things like that. And he said, it was like nobody agreed with his point of view, including the professor. He said the professor [not only] that day, but the entire semester was very vocal and speaking her mind about things that we don't agree with.

Dykens: Yeah. What factors, political, philosophical, economical, etc., most strongly influence the curricular design of your system?

Alternative teacher #2: I would say philosophical, but also we have a basis. Christianity. So that's, I think the main thing. Our religion, our faith.

Dykens: Considering the idea of de-centering the teacher and the teacher as facilitator, how much room does your curriculum give for the students? Do students interact with knowledge in a dependent or independent way?

Alternative teacher #2: I think it's a little of both, but they have a lot of independence in how they use the knowledge and gain the knowledge. And I'm saying this, if I'm understanding the

the question correctly, because I try not to just stand and talk. I try to use different methods of imparting the information to the students in class so that they can still the big ideas, but in different ways, you know, like group activities. We were talking about enlightened despots a few weeks ago in core E and I put them in groups and had them make TikToks. They had an enlightened despot and I had questions they had to discuss or cover in their video about the major success of the enlightened despot, the big ideas, and so on. They were so into it. So I think there's a lot of independence because of that.

Dykens: So what markers would indicate a student's success in the classroom, in future educational endeavors, and life?

Alternative teacher #2: So one is obviously grades, but that's really not the huge mark, the big marker. So yes, it shows they're understanding the material, they're doing the work. But I think even more so it's understanding the ideas, and understanding and taking to heart the message that we're trying to convey to them, pertaining to the idea that God is involved in everything we do and everything we've done, bringing us to this point, continuing on. Does that make sense?

Dykens: Yeah. So you would say, if a student were able to grasp the bigger picture…

Alternative teacher #2: The bigger picture, right. Grades are important, but they're not everything. Some students don't test well, but that doesn't mean they don't understand the material if they can grasp those big ideas, the big picture we're trying to convey.

Dykens: How well would you say your school prepares students for life?

Alternative teacher #2: I think that it prepares them pretty well. It prepares them to go out into the world, firm in their view of the world, their Christian worldview. It might be that there are other classes that could help them. Like I teach government and economics as well. And one thing I do in economics, which I've been told they didn't do in the past, is I set aside days where I

just go over, like, “Here's how you open a checking account and write checks. Here's what auto insurance is or homeowners, here's how you choose. Here's what the policy means.” Things that you have to deal with in real life. “Here's how you create a budget and stick to it.” So I think there are skills like that that are really important that students should know when they graduate from high school. So I know, like I said, I've been introducing them. So they are getting that. I don't know what they do at the other campus. But it might be something that should be standardized, or even offer a course on life skills. Just basic things you need to know when you're out on your own. But beyond that, I think they're pretty well-prepared. Because as a homeschool program, I think students get so much more than just the knowledge, because they're learning how to manage their time and be independent as homeschoolers, you know, skills that will help them in college and in a job.

Dykens: Do you think that students who leave your system of education come out with strong self-efficacy (referring to a student's confidence in his ability to control his behavior, actions, and the corresponding outcomes)?

Alternative teacher #2: I do.

Dykens: And then on a scale from one to 10, how well does your learning environment foster self-efficacy?

Alternative teacher #2: I would say seven, eight. I mean, there are guidelines they have to follow. And part of that has to do with controlling their behavior in class with things they can't do and can do. They have to follow the rules or there are consequences.

Dykens: And then do you think students who leave your system of education come out as deep, creative thinkers? On a scale from one to 10 how well are they able to devise original and rational solutions to issues?

Alternative teacher #2: So I can't speak for every single student, but in general I would say very much so, like an eight maybe.

Alternative Teacher #3 Interview

Dykens: Describe what you would say the purpose of education is.

Alternative teacher #3: I think the purpose of education isn't just making good citizens. I think that that is a byproduct, but I think ultimately education is forming us more into God's image and being aware of that image. Which is why I think that — and I know this gets into the different models a little bit — it's hard to teach well without being able to talk about religion because ultimately, for better or for worse, we're currently in a stage culturally where it's just very nihilistic. I think every middle schooler has this question anyway, "Why are we here? What's the point of school? Why do we have to do this? Why do we have to bother with this homework? It's pointless. When am I ever gonna use algebra?" Well, you're going to use it all the time… but that's not the point. Even if you never use it again, there's something to be gained from having learned it in the first place. But ultimately, if there isn't something more, then yes, you're [the student] right. There's no point because eventually you're going to die and that's going to be sad. But if that's the end, then who cares? Eventually the Earth's going to die too, and that's sad, but if that's the end who cares? Ultimately nothing we do makes a difference if there isn't also something else. The idea of education being you educate to make good citizens —which I believe was kind of the Greek and Roman idea —I think that is part of it. But that's a byproduct and not the purpose. If you're living for somewhere else and if your goals are high and you're trying to imitate God and do what he wants, then this world will be blessed. But if you're living for this world, then I don't think this world's going to be blessed….

I don't know about all the other models, but I know all two classical schools that I've been in — going to one and working at one— from all of the ones I've heard of it's across the board, like phones aren't allowed in school…

I think part of education — the grand goal is glorify God, obviously it's just the Heidelberg catechism — a lot of little things that come with it are you learn to live with other people in the present and not just whoever you're not with through text. There's this phenomena that when I remember experiencing it, I remember being conscious of it. I was just talking with another teacher. She was telling me about how they had an exchange student and that exchange student went to a youth group function, dinner somewhere. And the kids were sitting on opposite ends of the table. The table was full, but the kid here was texting the kid here about the conversation they were having with the people next to them. And then this one was texting them about their conversation that they were having. It's just this bizarre thing where we need to talk about wherever we aren't, instead of just being there with this friend and having a conversation and then later going to your other friend and telling them about the conversation… to do that through text is weird. A lot of kids feel more comfortable talking through text; they'll say more, they'll admit more, they'll be more honest… I distinctly remember myself having this moment of realizing, "It's easier for me to talk to people not in person than when I'm in person," and realizing I don't want that to be the case. That was scary to me because I didn't want to find myself on a date one day and be like, "I don't know how to talk to someone when I'm actually with them, but when I'm not with them, I can talk to them." What message does that send that I'm a fake person because I'm not who I am, both times? This is a huge tangent but I don't think a lot of our culture really knows how to just live in the moment, which is weird because everything about our culture is saying, "Get your satisfaction right now." They don't know how to even be in the now. I think C.S. Lewis probably has a lot to say about that in Screwtape.

Education is learning how to be with someone in the present.

Dykens: Would you say there are ambiguities or presuppositions surrounding the purpose of education? If so, what are these?

Alternative teacher #3: A lot of people think there are a lot of different purposes for it…

Dykens: Do you think the purpose of education has changed over time? If so, what shifts have you perceived?

Alternative teacher #3: Metaphysically, no. Practically, yes. Objectively the purpose of education has always been the same, but humanly what we endeavor to do has changed.

Dykens: So you would say there's been more of a change with the methods?

Alternative teacher #3: Well, I guess that was kind of a pompous answer. What I meant was just that education as a whole, like what true education is, is always the same, but what we do, what we call education might change over time. In the sixties, rhetoric was taught at public schools and in college. And now we [classical teachers] have a rhetoric class in ninth grade and people go, “What's rhetoric?” It's just been gone for 60 years. Our education system itself has changed drastically within a few decades.

Dykens: Do you perceive deficiencies within your system or other current systems of education? And if so, what are the three most pervasive issues would you label?

Alternative teacher #3: So I'm sure that they are in a classical model. It's hard to see them since that's just what I've been in. Like it's hard for me to see merits (I'm sure there are lots of merits in the public school also) but since I haven't been there, I mostly see the negative parts from kids that come from them. Overall, part of what I like about classical, the main thing I like is that the idea of it is to educate the whole person. Not just the mind, not just the body, not just the soul, but body mind, spirit — all — because if they're not all educated, then you're not going to have a

healthy person. We're all psychosomatic unities. It's not just, “I'm a body with a soul,” or, “I'm a soul with a body.” We're both, that's why death is bad because they're torn asunder and that's bad. That's not natural, which is why Plato was wrong because you need them both. The body isn't a prison. It's important to educate yourself on all three and to form them all. It is not just educating the mind about math, you’re also educating the body, like doing great at sports. Those are both important because you want to take care of the temple and you want to be able to think and reason because God is a God of raising and order and not chaos. Also — and this is something that I don't know how well public schools do, and I don't know how well most classical schools do, and I know that as a new school, it's something we're struggling with — it's also very conscientious that you also need to instill this love of beauty, like a deep beauty that nourishes the soul. That’s why you read old books because they're the ones that people have remembered because maybe the words or the things that happen might not be beautiful, but ultimately the whole story comes together in a way that is…. I can't explain it well. C.S. Lewis can, his *Weight of Glory* does.

Dykens: If you had to pinpoint three issues or maybe just one, it'd be a lack of cohesiveness between educating every part of the person?

Alternative teacher #3: Yeah. And that's what I do appreciate about classical schools. They’re conscientious in trying to, however much we succeed or we don't.

Alternative Teacher #4 Interview

Dykens: What is the purpose of education?

Alternative teacher #4: I think my definition of that has evolved over time. I'm a public school product and then became a homeschool parent and it greatly changed how I viewed the whole thing. The purpose of education for me would be, at this stage, you're going to find your God-given talents in your older years, but at the beginning it's just laying out this foundation. It's super important for kids to just engage with the world, and to get their brain structure functioning, helping them learn how to do hard things and to figure things out. Helping them learn how to learn is the most important thing, rather than just of course today we have Google and you don't really need to learn how to learn. I think we're sliding backwards a little bit in that regard. People don't want to spend time digging into things, but the goal is really just to make functioning adults who are kind and generous.

Dykens: Do you think that there are ambiguities or presuppositions surrounding the purpose of education?

Alternative teacher #4: Presuppositions for sure. I think if you're not working in the education world, there's this load of experts that know how to educate your child. And we presuppose that there is this track — you have to do this and then this, and then this — and everybody has to follow the same track. Ambiguities… I think a lot of that could be cultural or economic or socioeconomic ambiguities, where again, everybody's not a cookie cutter and systems are built based on one socioeconomic or cultural track and everybody's expected to kind of fit into that mold and it doesn't work.

Dykens: Do you think the purposes of education have changed over time? And if so, what shifts have you perceived?

Alternative teacher #4: I'm coming from a scriptural point of view, but in scripture, we are taught to teach the next generation. And it was oral traditions for a long period of time. And the goal was to teach the next generation and then things began to be written down so that we were more standardized in how we taught the next generation, but it's still the same purpose: teach the next generation. I think our methods have greatly changed, obviously. Now, the next generation almost teaches itself. We've got this little bit of upside down where the younger students sometimes know more than the parents because of the internet, but yeah, teach the next generation.

Dykens: Do you perceive deficiencies within your system or other current systems of education?

Alternative teacher #4: In fact, one of my meetings this morning was [about] "What are we going to do different next year?" Because we had deficiencies this year and some curriculum and structures… we're human, we're dealing with humans. We're sinful nature. We not as smart as we think we are. There's going to be deficiencies. When I talk with parents, like when I coach parents, they're like, "I'm afraid I'm going to miss something." I have to say, "You are, you just have to kind of be okay with it. They're going to fall through the cracks and you have to trust that down the road, your student will learn it." Lord's going to bring things in your path — they'll figure it out. We all missed things in our education. So yes, there are deficiencies. There are probably greater deficiencies in some systems more so than others. A lot of the things that we have to do is define terms. Even the term education has so many different definitions depending on who you're talking to.That was pretty vague and broad, but hopefully that said something here.

Dykens: If you had to define education, then what definition would you give?

Alternative teacher #4: Gosh, it almost depends on the context, because if I'm talking about education as a system, like we're going to educate kindergarten through 12th graders, then it is like I've just been saying, preparing the next generation, preparing people for adulthood. But, I'm still getting an education, you know? So I'm having to, and that's almost like an evolution of things that I know I have had to relearn or adapt to the situation I'm in now. And that's the whole "learning how to learn" idea.

Dykens: Do you think there's a need for alternative models of education?

Alternative teacher #4: Oh, absolutely. There is some beauty in standardization because you get efficiency; we're all doing the same thing. Somebody set it up, we can do things efficiently, but that doesn't work for everybody. And in fact it probably doesn't work for 50% of the people because it has to be standardized to a certain number of people. So we've got some struggling learners, and we've got some extremely intelligent young men and women who just get bored in the system. We have college-bound kids, we've got trade bound kids. We've got military-bound kids. So you can't put them all in the same box. You've got to have alternative means and you've got different family situations. You get situations where parents are great with wanting to educate and they've got the time and the resources to educate at home. And you've got those who don't. I think we're seeing some of that with the whole COVID forced homeschooling that parents can't do it all. Something has to give and sometimes it's a child's education. So yes, there's definitely worth in that, alternative means.

Dykens: Do you consciously hold to a particular pedagogy or philosophy of teaching? If so, please describe it.

Alternative teacher #4: So, yes. I am very much of a biblical worldview… because I think that helps to build confidence in oneself and the ability to engage the world in a loving manner,

understanding the world from what's really happening underneath. And then my way of teaching is more discussion rather than literature [based], because I get to know the students so I can engage them and draw out of them the learning. I don't want to just tell you, “This is how it is.” I want you to come along with me and figure it out for yourself, you know? I'm going to give you information and facts, but let's draw conclusions together. I think that's more long-term.

I had a box of stuff underneath my desk… of the pigs for this year; it’s a lot of fun. We talk in class, we could have these discussions and you don't just have to sit there and listen to me talk about nothing and write notes.

Dykens: Does your educational system and pedagogy reflect a view of human nature? If so, how does your teaching correlate with human nature?

Alternative teacher #4: I think that's kind of the crux of my philosophy.

Dykens: In your educational system, how much freedom does the child have to drive his or her own learning? On a scale from one to 10, how would you rate the level of the students’ freedom?

Alternative teacher #4: As a student gets older in the homeschooling system, yes, they can drive their education. I think in the beginning, like for younger homeschooling students, not so much because they've got to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic. For my own…. I always ask at the beginning of the year, “What do you learn about this year?” So do we want to study astronomy or do we want to study Greek philosophy, whatever they want to do. I would try to grab that because if that was something that they were interested in, they would bite and then they would, they would engage. As a high school student, you're kind of structured, especially if you're college bound, you have to get these particular credits, but beyond that, they can decide, you know, in addition, “I'd like to take electives or I could take these things in this order. I really like sciences. Let's take a lot of that.” So I think that's more structured. I've talked to guidance

counselors in public school systems, on behalf of homeschool families. And they would just say, “No, they're in ninth grade and this is what they take.” No leniency on any of that really. So yes, learning can be more student driven where we are.

Dykens: If you had to rate that on a scale?

Alternative teacher #4: I'd say 8. Are you talking to anybody who’s un-schooling?

Dykens: Isn't that basically where the child is on their own and they really do determine everything?

Alternative teacher #4: Yeah. It might be a little in the Montessori realm in that you give them a lot of tools and they can move around. They kind of decide they want to learn for the day. So you're still giving them books and things to learn from, but you don't drive a structured schedule. It is a pretty good-sized group within the homeschooling world of un-schoolers. It would be like still going to go to the library and go to the park and go on field trips and get books and talk about things in the house. They're just not going to say, “Sit down today and do lessons 1 through 3,” and they're not going to give you a test to see what you know, they have discussions instead. So it's requests the parent to actually be more engaged because they've got to have those discussions.

Dykens: How much self-efficacy or personal control do you have in determining the learning process?

Alternative teacher #4: So in the learning process, the learning part is completely up to the student. I can feed them though. I'm going to give them every tool I can. As a teacher, I lay down the structure — you need to read these passages and answer these questions, come to class, we're going to have these discussions, but I can't control who shows up prepared and who engages in

the discussion. So that's a zero to 50, right? Compared to a public school teacher, I think it's the same, I think any teacher anywhere… it's still up to the student to come prepared and to engage.

Dykens: From the teacher's perspective, even in alternative models, you'll still have the constraints of curriculum?

Alternative teacher #4: Well, and even if you're the one who want to chose a curriculum, then you're choosing to follow those constraints. So you're still kind of constrained.

Dykens: On a scale from one to 10, how would you rate the level of your control?

Alternative teacher #4: Okay. So I want to say a 6. I'm going to kick it past the 5 because it's kind of up to me to be engaging. I can walk in and be super boring and that's on me. Or, I've got to walk in and really try to engage everybody. So that does give me a little bit more control. I think it's still up to the student to engage because there's always somebody who just doesn't want to be there.

Dykens: On a scale from one to 10, how effective is your school at providing impactful educational experiences in fostering learning?

Alternative teacher #4: Oh, I'm going to rate us pretty high. Based on feedback that we get, I would say 8 to 9 easily. We've got some really passionate tutors. The families there want to be there; they make this choice to be there. As a family they're engaged. I feel like it just all works together really well.

Dykens: Would you have a specific example of an effective educational experience, or that you would consider effective?

Alternative teacher #4: As a whole, I'm going to say homeschooling is very effective because a) you can tailor it to each child that comes along. You can give them a completely different educational experience in your home because you can tailor it to whatever they've got going on

and you sometimes have to, by their needs. If you've got a parent that's engaged, you've got the love of the parent engaged with the love of learning and the support that you're giving your student. So it really sets up this perfect storm of a good space within which learning can happen. I think you just have better opportunities in a homeschooling environment to make that happen.

Dykens: On a scale from one to 10, how well does your school foster holistic learning that is affective, experiential, and lasting?

Alternative teacher #4: Seven, because it's not all holistic, but I think the lasting part... they do get into some really good deep discussions that engage the students' minds. I feel like those are lasting.

Dykens: Does your learning environment allow students to learn at an individualized pace? How structured is the process and pace of learning?

Alternative teacher #4: I'm going to say no to that. And only because we are in a classroom setting with pacing guides. So even though students can manage their time during the week, they do have the freedom to figure out their time management, they still have deadlines. And those deadlines are pretty hard and fast.

Dykens: How do you perceive knowledge?

Alternative teacher #4: “Objective sources” are hanging me up because I think a lot of things that we tend to read, especially in history and literature, are subjective, but I would lean towards “relayed in part from objective scores,” and then mixed with “relative and subjective to individual experience.” Unless you're talking math, you've got individual experience and you've got bias in pretty much everything you're reading of some sort.

Dykens: Yeah, I was trying to see if public schools relied on one perception of knowledge over another. Because, and again, this is my opinion, but I feel like a lot of public schools have an agenda.

Alternative teacher #4: Every school has an agenda; you can't "not." But yeah, I would agree. They [public schools] definitely have an agenda; it's changing… I have a friend who teaches public school in Georgia. She teaches fourth grade struggling learners and she literally is given a script for every lesson. She has to read this script. Not cool. It's definitely agendasized.

Dykens: What factors, political, philosophical, economical, etc., most strongly influence the curriculum design of your system?

Alternative teacher #4: Oh, philosophical, definitely. Biblical worldview. Which I think then drives the other two [political and economical].

Dykens: Considering the idea of de-centering the teacher or the idea of the teacher as facilitator, how much room does your curriculum give for the students? Do students interact with knowledge in an independent or dependent way?

Alternative teacher #4: Oh, I think definitely our juniors and seniors are given quite a bit of leeway to bring in their own devices. We do a lot of debate and speeches, and you're encouraged to develop your own way.. We teach you how to speak it out, to speak clearly without emotion, factual, the whole logic/rhetoric kind of thing. I think our curriculum, our system, really drives towards that self-efficacy as a goal.

Dykens: What markers would indicate a student's success in the classroom, future endeavors, and in life? How, if you were looking at a student, how would you know that this student is successful? What would you consider successful?

Alternative teacher #4: Well, we use grades as a marker — recognizing that grades don't tell everything. If we have a student who's failing, it's just an indication that we need to come alongside and figure out why. Not that they're not worthy of anything. I think character also talks about our success. How does a student handle a stressful situation, or a confrontational situation, or an uncomfortable situation? That should be changing as they mature through our program. And they should be thinking of others more than thinking of themselves. So those kinds of characterizations speak to success for our program. It's always great to see kids come back as adults and see where they are. We don't ask them about grades when they're 22, we ask them what they're doing, what's happening in life. And that's more important than the grades.

Dykens: How well would you say your school prepares students for life and why?

Alternative teacher #4: So I would say our goal obviously is a 10, but I think we're going to have to say we're seven and a half to eight. The only reason I say that is because I'm looking at students down the road, we would love for all of them to be in these amazing, successful places, doing what God's called them to do, and that's not happening. You know, students get on in the world and the world is attractive and sometimes they head in these really strange directions and we're like, “Well, we thought we gave you all the tools,” but you didn't engage them or just whatever happened in their life. So seven and a half to eight only because looking at the fruit down the road, isn't always what our goal was.

Dykens: Do you think students who leave your system come out with strong self-efficacy? On a scale from one to 10, how well does your learning environment foster that?

Alternative teacher #4: Yeah, same. That would be 7 ½. I think self-efficacy is definitely a goal. And I think a lot of students come out well with that in place, but there's still that remnant that does not…

Dykens: Do you think that students who leave your system of education come out as deep, creative thinkers? On a scale from one to 10, how well are they able to devise original and rational solutions to issues?

Alternative teacher #4: I'll go with that same 7 ½ — same idea. It's the idea that we really want to give all the tools. And these are the ones who stay with us all the way through 12th grade, when they get through those rhetoric classes and they're doing those modern day debates in their biblical worldview in history classes, we're doing our best to give them all the tools, to think through deeply a situation and not just do a little, 140 character drive-by of a situation. What's really happening underneath? So I think for the most part, we're pretty successful with that.

Dykens: I don't know if you could compare your years in public schools to what you see as a homeschooling parent or teacher, but do you see a difference between the kids that come out of those systems, or have you seen that?

Alternative teacher #4: I think probably more relatable is my own kids, because my own kids were homeschooled and they've grown up with friends in public school, and they'll come back and they'll say things about how their friends don't understand things or don't know things or never studied things. Like one of my daughter's friends had pulled buttons off his shirt and he's like, "I have to throw the shirt away." Well, why? A button came off, you can fix that. And then another friend had never heard any of the Greek myths, at all… Things that are not learned in public schools or even common knowledge things that my kids all had exposure to, just by being home and knowing how to grocery shop, how to manage a budget, those things. And then also we could deep dive into so many different subjects.

Dykens: And then creativity-wise, would you say that your kids ended up being more creative and deep thinkers?

Alternative teacher #4: Oh yeah, definitely. I mean, that's bias on my part, I get that, but I just think in comparison, they've had the tools given to them to do that. I think there's some amazing people who have come through the public school system, and it does work, but it's not the only answer for every kid.