Fostering Creativity within Ontario’s Neoliberal Education System

By

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to explore the degree to which the neoliberal ideas embedded in Ontario education shape the way creativity is fostered in high school students. Two high school educators, who teach classes from different ends of the academic spectrum, were interviewed for their experiences and thoughts on characterizing, identifying and assessing creativity in the classroom. The purpose in selecting educators from schools that exhibit high and low academic achievement was to draw parallels with the literature that cites streaming as an outcome of a neoliberal education system. It was found that while participants greatly differed in how they characterized creativity, both supported the notion that nurturing creativity would benefit the growth and success of their students. In the analysis, I concluded that the neoliberal ideals rooted in education policy may influence the way in which creativity is characterized by schools with high achievement, but both participants do not gear their students to become agents for economic prosperity. In the final chapter, I list the implications for the educational community, along with future considerations and further limitations of this study.
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Research Study

Creativity is a subject that has become increasingly prevalent in the field of education, but is arguably difficult to identify, assess and foster due to its subjective nature. While there exists several definitions for “creativity,” many of which have overlapping similarities (Starko, 2003), Craft (2001) defined creativity as an “imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value as well as include pursuing purposes” (p. 18). As creativity is being recognized as a type of thinking and ability that can be developed, not as a trait that individuals must inherently possess, education is thusly an institution through which students can learn to build and demonstrate creativity as both a tangible and cognitive skill. Over the course of several years, literature has supported this notion by suggesting a number of ways in which creativity can be fostered from childhood to adulthood during a student’s schooling years (Davis & Rimm 1985, Guilford 1967, Karnes et al. 1961, Olmo 1977, Parnes & Noller 1972, Renzulli 1992, Sternberg & Lubart 1991, Torrance 1972, Williams 1969, cited in Fasko 2011). The purportedly latest surge of interest in fostering creativity, within the field of education, had sparked in the late nineties (Jeffrey 2005, cited in Shaheen 2010) and has since been expanding globally (Turner-Bisset 2007, cited in Shaheen 2010).

Pamela Burnard (2006) stated that such timeliness stemmed from a resurgence of activity in the field of creativity, within education, as an area of scholarship and as a significant factor shifting the context of education policy as well as the government agenda in the effort of improving schools. She further wrote that the creativity agenda is
Creativity, Neoliberal Education

being recognized as having an explicit role in the economy and is therefore a fundamentally political imperative (Burnard, 2006). Yet the desired outcomes and contexts that characterize and constitute creativity as a valued human capacity continue to be debated (Burnard, 2006). In consequence, contention persists with regards to its individual, institutional and cultural value and purpose (Csikszentmihalyi 1996, John-Steiner 2000, Runco 2002, Sternberg, 2003, Craft 2005, cited in Burnard 2006). It is this very contention and debate of creativity’s use, purpose, development, and implementation in the field of education that helped to prompt the writing of this study.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative research paper is to explore and make evident the different ways in which teachers define and foster creativity in their students amidst the economic and global factors currently affecting education, those of which include economic competition, globalization and job market.

Creativity is acknowledged in occupying a crucial role in the economy (Burnard 2006, cited in Shaheen 2010) to assist nations for attaining higher employment and economic achievement (Davies 2002, cited in Shaheen 2010). In response, there is a need for creativity to be included in education as a “fundamental life skill” (Craft 1999, cited in Shaheen 2010), which will allow students to grow and survive in the evolving twenty-first century (Packhurst 2006, cited in Shaheen 2010).

As a fundamental and transferable skill, creativity is seen manifested through a number of professions that involve innovation, such as fields in technology and entrepreneurship. In principle, it also aligns with the neoliberal education system that Ontario upholds. However, I am not presupposing that neoliberal ideals are superior or
should be followed. I am merely examining the fostering of creativity in reference to the ideals embedded in the Ontario government, those of which I neither support nor condemn, and the factors affecting the acceptance or rejection of those ideals.

**Research Questions**

In turn, the primary research question framing my work is:

To what degree does the neoliberal influence embedded within Ontario education shape the way creativity is fostered in high school students?

Below are sub-set questions that I will be using to supplement my research question:

- a) To what degree are educators cognizant of creating teaching materials that are conducive to fostering creativity in their students?
  
  - a. How do teachers characterize creativity?
  
  - b. How do educators assess creativity in their students when such assignments are formed?

I conducted interviews as my method of data collection, with the interview questions framed around my research questions. My personal goal is to gain experience in conducting and analyzing research, and learn to deconstruct and consolidate qualitative data; I wish to utilize these skills in careers not exclusive to teaching. Additionally, I hope to contribute to the existing literature in Ontario education by providing a qualitative study from which readers can understand the keys to nurturing creativity in students and for what purpose creativity is fostered.
Background of the Researcher

I am a first year Master of Teaching student at the University of Toronto, Ontario Institute of Studies in Education. My cohort is the Intermediate/Senior (grades seven to twelve) division with teaching subjects, History and English. My undergraduate degree was attained at the University of Toronto, with double majors in English and Sociology. I am conducting this research qualitative study as a graduate student who has not had previous experience in conducting and analyzing qualitative research. While this paper is a required component to the Master of Teaching program, my personal experiences also served a significant factor in my research interest.

Throughout my years in school, I was influenced by the notion perpetuated from my instructors and parents that only certain skillsets were considered of value for job market demands and professions that provided the most financial stability. During high school, I was taught to focus on improving my literacy and numeracy skills through frequent rote memorization and practice. It was to my understanding that these skills were deemed most valuable in higher education and the job market, as opposed to skills in artistry, for instance. It could be argued that my Korean parents, with my father having immigrated to Toronto nearly 39 years ago, may have had raised me to consider such factors due to influences from their cultural upbringing and the racial stigma pervasive during such time. Arguably, the view remains that particular skills, like numeracy and literacy, are crucial in helping to secure a successful future. I found this notion to be prevalent during my practicum experiences at a Toronto public school, wherein the assumption among teachers and students was that arts and music courses were conducive to creativity, and subjects perceived to be non-subjective, such as Mathematics and Sciences, were void of room for actively fostering creativity.
In addition to those experiences, I formerly led a non-profit organization in Toronto that was founded in Los Angeles. The organization provides a platform for Asian Pacific Islander (API) talent in the city and raises awareness for issues of mass media stereotyping and identity. Throughout my five years of voluntary work with the non-profit, I encountered different people who have found ways, whether consciously or not, to reconcile with the neoliberal influences in their educational experiences and value their creativity in any career field they pursued.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Creativity in the Context of Education

**Defining Creativity**

Alane Starko (2003) agreed with the author, Perkins (1988, cited in Starko 2003), in that creativity is a result both original and appropriate, wherein “the product or idea must be original or novel to the individual creator” (p.6); appropriateness refers to whether said product or idea achieves the intended goal or criterion. It must be purposeful and involve the effort to make something work and to serve meaning (Starko, 2003). However, it is not indicated clearly as to whom this product must be determined meaningful – whether to the individual or the party observing said product or idea.

Within the context of education, creativity has been further categorized in various forms and sets of knowledge (Fasko, 2011). Using the findings from Runco and Chand’s study in 1995, Daniel Fasko (2011) wrote that strategic thinking, otherwise known as problem-solving, is a cognitive form through which creativity can develop and manifest, while intrinsic motivation is a crucial tool for creative thinking. In other words, students will become more motivated should they be able to choose their own tasks and associate these tasks with merit of their own, thus fostering a meaningful connection for the individual. Moreover, it is suggested for educators to commit more time in communicating to students that that this ability to motivate oneself is as important as problem-solving (Fasko, 2011). Creative thinking, in turn, “leads to original and adaptive ideas, solutions or insights” (Fasko, 2011, p. 244).
Developing Creativity in Schools

Literature has made a number of suggestions as to how one should develop creative abilities from childhood to adulthood in primary, junior and secondary schools (Fasko, 2011). Fasko (2011) provided further examples using works and studies from a number of authors: Guilford and Torrance had observed that creative thinking abilities could be constructed through direct instruction (Guilford 1967, Torrance 1963, cited in Fasko 2011). According to the work of Karnes et al., they expressed that teaching techniques in which both convergent and divergent thinking are stimulated is critical for igniting creative thinking, becoming a more challenging experience for creative students (Karnes et al. 1961, cited in Fasko 2011). Fasko did not elaborate on what defines an individual to be “creative,” but according to Hugh Lytton (1971), a creative person is one who has the “crucial capacity of perceiving a familiar object, situation, problem, or collection of data, in a sudden new light or new context… The discoverer perceives relational patterns of functional analogies where nobody saw them before” (p. 43).

Suggested Assignments Supporting Creativity

Individual assignments focused on problem-solving is purported to inspire creativity as well (Fasko, 2011). Teachers who are open to change and model divergent thinking themselves seemingly create the most impact in augmenting a student’s capacity for creativity (Fasko, 2011). In addition to assigning individual work, teachers are encouraged to enable situations in which students can participate in group activities and learn collaboratively (Davis 1991, cited in Fasko 2011). These group activities, by which
creative thinking and academic performance are enhanced, should give students opportunities for developing peer acceptance (Karnes et. al 1961, cited in Fasko 2011). Another suggested technique for stimulating creativity is the inquiry-discovery or problem-solving approach as an indirect method of teaching, whereby creativity is pertinent to the process of discovery (Feldhusen & Treffinger 1980, cited in Fasko 2011). Both Feldhusen and Treffinger found that “experience with learning through discovery enhances one’s creative performance by forcing the learner to manipulate the environment and produce new ideas” (cited in Fasko, 2011, p. 34). They reported that the creative processes of fluency, flexibility, elaboration, and originality were encapsulated by the aforementioned inquiry-discovery approach to teaching (Feldhusen & Treffinger 1980, cited in Fasko 2011).

Neoliberalism in Education

Neoliberal Influences on Schooling and Streaming

In response to the Government of Ontario’s call for setting a target to improve student achievement, the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat was established within the Ministry of Education on November 1, 2004 (Glaze & Cambell 2007). According to Carol Campbell, Chief Research Officer for the Ontario Ministry of Education (2007), reported that the Ontario Ministry of Education’s focus in increased student achievement, reduced gaps in performance, and increased public confidence in public education is underscored by the large-scale reform of K-12 education in Ontario to improve literacy and numeracy among students.

Crawford et. al (2011) referenced two authors, Pring and Walford (1997, cited in Crawford et. al 2011), who wrote that during the time in which the Ontario Ministry of
Education and privately-governed schools adopted market values as the overarching principles driving its education policies, a competitive environment was created for students, particularly for students the education system was not structured to support, such as students with disabilities and from low-income families. Pring and Walford (1997, cited in Crawford et. al 2011) argued that schools that use such market values as a guiding framework promote an education structure that fosters individual achievement, inter-student and inter-school competition, standardized and compulsory testing, narrow measures of performance, and exclusion from resources for lower-performing students. Curtis et al. (1992, cited in Crawford et. al 2011) believed that one of the most prominent indicators of a school or school system that supports market values is the promotion of the stratification and streaming of students. The authors hypothesized that segregating lower-performing students into ‘specialized’ classes, streams and schools is a way of maintaining a mirrored version of the economic stratification experienced by groups within society (1992, cited in Crawford et. al 2011). Furthermore, classifying students into various streams according to academic capability is perceived as a market-driven tactic to ensure that only those the market views eligible for future economic contribution are granted access through higher education opportunities (Crawford et. al 2011). In addition, there is currently little research regarding how creativity in the context of neoliberal education is fostered across classes of differing academic levels.

However, Peters (2001, cited in Crawford et. al 2011) suggested that these structures may be necessary in order for society to remain competitive within the new era of the ‘knowledge economy.’ He described how neoliberal principles and their emphasis on human capital are reshaping education policies worldwide. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), as well as the World Bank, have
previously renewed their focus on education development within the context of the ‘knowledge economy’ (Peters 2011, cited in Crawford et. al 2011). The Ontario Ministry of Education (2009, p. 6) stated that “today’s global knowledge based economy makes the ongoing work in schools critical to our students’ success in life and to Ontario’s economic future.” On that note, Crawford et. al (2011) stated that the age in which knowledge is considered equivalent with economic success, human capital and the ability to manipulate knowledge is crucial to achieving rewards as contributors to the market.

**Policy in Ontario Education**

Yet in April 2014, the Ontario Ministry of Education released the policy document *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario*, outlining the province’s renewed and current approach and plan in supporting student success. Framed by its four goals for improving educational outcomes of students, the document explicitly mentions the fostering of creativity “as a valuable, higher-order skill” to support student achievement: “Achievement also means raising expectations for valuable, higher-order skills like critical thinking, communication, innovation, creativity, collaboration, and entrepreneurship” (Ontario Ministry of Education, p. 3, 2014). Though skills in reading, writing and mathematics remain foundational for academic achievement, the document posits that excellence is achieved when these fundamental skills are “combined with creativity and critical thinking, innovative problem-solving, effective communication and collaboration” (Ontario Ministry of Education, p. 5, 2014). The Ministry of Education currently aims to achieve such outcomes through a number of action plans, two of which relate to creativity:
“Foster more young entrepreneurs in Ontario schools by increasing training in innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship for Specialist High Skills Major students… Promote the value of the arts, including the visual and performing arts, in developing critical and creative thinking skills that support success in school and in life” (p. 6)

While promoting and developing creativity in students is suggested to be important for contributing to their success, the renewed mandate is, nonetheless, a reflection of the economic direction in which the province is keen to pursue. In Premier Kathleen Wynne’s 2014 Mandate letter to Minister of Education, Liz Sandals, she wrote:

“Growing the economy and helping to create good jobs are fundamental to building more opportunity and security, now and in the future. That critical priority is supported by strategic investments in the talent and skills of our people, from childhood to retirement… It is supported by a dynamic business climate that thrives on innovation, creativity and partnership to foster greater prosperity. And it is reflected across all of our government, in every area, and will extensively inform our programs and policies” (Wynne, 2014).

Her Mandate letter infers that instilling particular skillsets in children and adults, with creativity as an explicit example, would serve to benefit the businesses that support economic growth. As the Mandate is intended to guide the framework in which future policies and programs related to student success are developed, it remains unclear whether the purpose of fostering creativity in students is to support their achievement or provide entry-points in accelerating the economy – or perhaps to serve both outcomes.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

Procedure

As my qualitative research adopts a phenomenological approach through the lens of social constructivism, I attempted to explore and derive meaning from the experiences of two individuals, both of whom are high school instructors teaching English and Geography, respectively, in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). These experiences were collected from private, face-to-face interviews conducted for each participant. A follow-up e-mail was exchanged with each participant to inquire an additional question for further data analysis. Interviews spanned from 10 to 15 minutes and were recorded with the audio recording feature on my cell phone device. Participants were reassured by me that all data would be deleted upon completion and presentation of my research study. REB forms, as a form of ethical review procedure, were not required as I solely interviewed adults. My participants have retained anonymity as stated in the consent form by using pseudonyms in my interview transcript and data collection.

Participants

I interviewed full-time, permanent educators who have taught at the secondary level for a minimum of five years in order to study their experiences from a longer period of time, relative to that of a recent Teacher’s College graduate. Since my participants work in the district school boards located within the Greater Toronto Area, my rationale for choosing them to participate in my study were in some part due to their physical proximity to me as the researcher. I sought one teacher from an affluent school that accepts students with a record of high academic achievement, and a second teacher from a public school located in a significantly lower-income area, whose student body
predominantly consists of ESL and ELL students and students with mental health and behavioural issues. As the literature mentions that the neoliberal education system encourages the stratification of students to reflect market values and promote competition in support of economic growth, I selected schools with differing academic standards to explore whether their respective teachers characterize and foster creativity differently from each other. The first interview participant teaches Grade 7 Physical Geography, Grade 9 Canadian Geography, and Grade 10/11 Geography of Southeast and Southeast Asia at an affluent, private Grade 7-12 institution, whose student body is highly academically inclined. My second participant instructs Grade 11 College English, Grade 9 Academic English, and Grade 9/10 Locally Developed English at a secondary school with the second-lowest socioeconomic standing in its board. I have not specified the schools’ locations over concerns that these schools can be possibly identified by their corresponding academic profile. Moreover, I do not wish to presuppose in this research paper that a school’s socioeconomic status affects or influences the ways in which creativity is defined and promoted. It would take further research and data collection to adequately address these factors, for which I did not have the time due to parameters imposed by my graduate program.

A number of limitations associated with my qualitative study are primarily due to the time constraints in which the Master of Teaching Research Project must be completed. I was unable to interview more than two participants due to the two-year duration of the program by which my research study must be submitted for graduate requirements. One should remain aware that the data presented in this study will not entirely represent the perspective of a number of educators. Consequently, I opted to not interview a third participant who would have taught a school course in Mathematics or
Science, albeit, it would have lend itself well to exploring distinctions in the importance of fostering creativity across different subjects. I also recognize that creativity may be assessed and conceptualized differently between different subjects such as Geography and English. However, both subject areas lie within the Humanities domain and draw some parallels in the type of skills required to understand and demonstrate knowledge in the course material.

Further, I am aware that private schools can exercise relative autonomy regarding the extent to which they follow the Ontario curriculum. It is difficult to identify the degree to which private institutions are influenced by education policy when they operate separately from the public sector of education. Given the constraints of this program and the number of interview participants I am able to select, I chose a teacher from a private school whose learning mandate and partnerships, including the academic profile of their students, was already familiar to me in some capacity. Readers should take note that such biases in light of time restrictions affect the reliability of my sampling and findings.

**Participant Recruitment Plan**

1. **Access**

To recruit participants for my study, I requested my Associate Teacher from my second teaching practicum to be interviewed, along with the colleague of my Associate Teacher from a previous practicum placement. As I am only a novice teacher-in-training, my personal network and resources in finding educators are limited, thus I resorted to finding participants with whom I have worked in the past, in spite of the implications of ‘questioning my backyard’ (I describe this concept in a later section).
Initially, I was slightly wary of asking potential participants whether they had demonstrated creative fostering in the classroom. I recognized that teachers may abide by their own pedagogical conduct and deem creativity to be a lesser priority, hence, finding my question to be a slight against their usual practices. To reconcile with this issue, I reminded myself that my study is processed through a phenomenological approach, bounded by a social constructivist framework; I would invariably need to find teachers who share experiences in fostering creativity through which they construct the meaning of certain classroom situations. On the other hand, should a teacher have very remote experiences in such a topic, their answers to my interview questions could also provide clarity for any factors attributing to their lacking experiences. Subsequently, I informed my participants that I wished to interview them for their thoughts and experiences with creativity in the context of teaching.

II. Setting

I asked my participants their choice of public space in which they preferred to be interviewed, provided that it was in relative proximity to me (i.e. the Greater Toronto Area). Both participants preferred being interviewed in their school classrooms during periods in which they did not teach. As I was aware that interviewing participants in a public area could invite disruption from students or colleagues, I had requested to post a sign outside the classroom door that indicated a period of quiet space. However, towards the end of my interview with the second participant, she had been previously occupied with class-related responsibilities and consequently had shorter time to complete our interview, possibly influencing her to answer the interview questions succinctly, albeit briefly. As a result, I forewarn readers of this paper that the data collected may be
relatively sparse compared to that of the first interview. I was unable to conduct follow-up interviews with my second participant due to scheduling conflicts and time constraints.

III. Rapport with Participants

I am aware that interviewing participants with whom I already have a professional and amicable relationship may influence them to answer with the notion that their answers should benefit my study. To reconcile with this possibility, as ‘questioning one’s own backyard,’ I encouraged my participants prior to the interview that they should answer as honestly and comfortably as they feel.

In approaching my participants for their consent in being interviewed for my study, I inquired for their voluntary participation in-person for the purpose of completing my Master of Teaching Research Project. I informed them that I was seeking to gain insight on their thoughts of fostering creativity in the classroom. Both participants were supportive in my research efforts and agreed to be interviewed, emphasizing that they need not receive compensation for their participation. Prior to the start of each interview, I initiated sparse conversations with the participant to alleviate possible anxieties associated with being interviewed and recorded. I reviewed the consent form with each participant and provided them time to read the form themselves and indicate their consent by signature. Further, they were made aware that I would document notes in my notebook to keep track of their responses during the interview, while recording their responses with my cell phone device. I sat across from each participant at a table in the classroom for the
duration of the interview. By the end, I conveyed my thanks and appreciation for their time and support.

As there is little benefit to them as participants, while my primary benefit in conducting the interviews is to complete my qualitative paper for a program credit, I anticipated that our communications would continue for the purpose of updating them of my progress in this research study and in my career development.

Regarding possible risks with the study, participants may feel uncomfortable with sharing their authentic thoughts on creativity should they interpret the interview as a subversive critique of educators who do not foster creativity in their students. To reduce further risk of antagonizing my participants, I decided against using explicit interview questions that asked whether my participants were cognizant of the neoliberal influences embedded within Ontario education. Such line of inquiry may not only deter the focus of my interviews, with participants feeling that they need to defend a political stance, but it would be problematic to assume that educators have already considered the political environment in which they teach. Thus, I chose to ask interview questions that drew focus to the experiences of teachers helping to instill creativity in their students, including the value with which they held creativity as a skill. Thereafter, I analyzed their answers against the policy documents and literature surrounding Ontario’s neoliberal education and explored the degree to which their fostering of creativity aligned with these neoliberal ideals.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The data collection for this research study consisted of two interviews for two participants in total. Interviewing as a form of data collection was necessary to achieve
the details required for analyzing and constructing the meanings of participants who describe their experiences in fostering creativity in students.

As Creswell (2013) states that there are four types of observers, my involvement in the interview was within the capacity of a complete participant, but I was wary of “controlling” the direction of the interview by eliciting answers considered appropriate for my research questions. To mitigate such risks, I only prompted the participant to clarify or elaborate their responses as needed.

Regarding my method of qualitative data analysis, I interpreted the term “code” as a sub-theme pertaining to a specific set of data (otherwise considered the excerpt from my interview transcriptions), as adopted from the “General Code Families and Definitions” chart outlined by Bogdan and Biklen (2003). The term “theme” was interpreted as the blanket concept under which these codes were categorized.

First, I transcribed the audio recording for each interview by using software called Transcriber AG. I reviewed each transcript in a Microsoft Word document several times to discern initial, emerging codes. To prepare my coding, I highlighted statements from the interview that I found pertinent to my research question and categorized them into similar concepts (Creswell, 2013). I made notes on the margins of my transcription regarding the types of experiences my interview participants had touched upon in their answers (Creswell). Once I finished establishing a number of codes derived from my transcription, I filtered and grouped the codes according to their similar nature of inquiry. For instance, I could recognize that creativity as an ability to take risks, as well as an ability to demonstrate unconventional thinking, were codes that aligned with each other, hence, I analyzed the overarching context in which they were connected and developed them into umbrella themes. The areas of research around which I had constructed my
research question also served as a helpful framework in identifying thematic topics. I focused on analyzing for themes that not only pertained to my research question, but those of which asserted a claim with respect to my question; I had anticipated that such claims may provide insight into my findings for future discussion. Afterwards, I synthesized my findings and analysis into a coding chart, with the left column reserved for themes and the right outlining pertinent codes.

In addition, I wrote memos of key concepts, ideas and phrases in the margins of my notes (Creswell, 2013), and linked them to pertinent quotes from the interview on a separate document for analysis. I reflected on my findings in the following way to better parse the data for analysis: Information that I expected to find before the study; surprising information that I did not expect to encounter; and information that is conceptually interesting or unusual to me or the general audience (Creswell, 2013). In order to reflect on the context in which the phenomenon was experienced, I occasionally added an explication of what the participants experienced in relation to such units of information (Creswell, 2013).

**Validity and Reliability**

Applying the definitions provided in Creswell’s work (2013), I decided “validation” as the attempt to assess the ‘accuracy’ of my findings was best suited for supporting this research study. As I could not spend extensive time with the participants nor could I conduct several interviews due to the program’s time constraints, I was unable to entirely validate my research by arguing for its ‘goodness’ of in-depth quality. I neither sought for consensual validation to avoid cluttered interpretations for such sparse data compared to long-term phenomenological studies. Further, the contents of the
participants’ experiences must be held in confidentiality, thus I saw no grounds to share their descriptions with “competent others” (Eisner 1991, cited in Creswell 2013). In terms of sustaining reliability in my study to some degree, the most feasible strategies I could implement were ensuring that the interviews were transcribed accurately, and assess for myself whether I had inadvertently modified the participants’ descriptions when analyzing their experiences. Though the validity of my study will be contested by the fact that I interviewed two participants with whom I have an amicable and professional relationship from previous practicum, I attempted to mitigate this issue by requesting my participants to answer the interview questions honestly, with which they felt comfortable. I also recognized that a single excerpt (or unit of data) to substantiate an emerging theme would not adequately validate my analysis, but the amount of data collected could only give way to themes that connected to a single statement at minimum for supporting evidence.
Chapter 4: DATA COLLECTION AND THEMES

Introduction

This chapter will present the data collected from two face-to-face interviews conducted with two participants in total. I interviewed two individuals who have taught at the secondary level for over ten years in school boards based in the Greater Toronto Area. My questions were intended to gather information regarding the degree to which neoliberal influences embedded within Ontario’s education affect the way these teachers have promoted or developed creativity in their students during class time. As purported in the literature on the institutional effects of a neoliberal education system, wherein students are streamed to reflect market values, and assessments are tailored to individual achievement, I was interested in noting whether there were differences in how creativity was characterized by teachers who instruct students from different ends of the academic spectrum: One participant teaches at a private school renowned for high, rigorous academic achievement, and the other whose classes primarily consist of students performing at a significantly lower academic level. Granted, the data illustrates the perspectives of only two teachers and does not entirely speak for educators with similar class profiles across the board.

Based on the data collected, both participants agreed that creativity should be valued as a skill nurtured in students by the teacher. While they mentioned that creativity was difficult to assess in student work, the types of challenges related to assessing creativity varied in the participants’ responses. The examples with which the participants described how their students have demonstrated creativity were also different in the outcomes intended by the type of summative work assigned, which could possibly
highlight how the teachers have defined creativity within the context of their students’ level of academic achievement.

In the following data, note that names have been changed to maintain anonymity with the participants’ identities, as stipulated in the interview consent form. I have organized the data into three themes with codes (otherwise considered sub-themes) to provide an analytic overview of the responses provided by the participants. The findings are presented in as objective a manner as possible, but readers should remain aware that my analysis was derived from the connections I could discern on my own, without implementing academic measures of consensual validity.

Theme One: Creativity Consists of Various Interpretations for Teachers

  Creativity as an Ability to be Different

The first participant, Elric, is a Geography teacher at a private school well-known for emphasizing the importance of critical thinking and housing highly academic students typically bound for elite universities. He described creativity to be “the ability to take risks and try something completely new in whatever context… whatever the assignment or activity might look like,” and “the ability to kind of push yourself… in a way that maybe you haven’t thought before.” He elaborated that students who demonstrate this effort to produce work atypical to that of their peers are, in fact, “thinking differently than a lot of the other students.” He noted that such students carry an “intrinsic kind of excitement” in diligently pursuing an idea of their own. Elric’s description harkens back to Daniel Fasko’s works in 2011, with the latter having stated that intrinsic motivation is
a key tool in cultivating creative thinking, by which students will feel more motivated through tasks they wish to complete based on their own merit.

Elric elaborates this point in his own experiences with teaching:

“They're learning for themselves probably more than - you know, a student who maybe struggles with creativity, in the sense that they really get jazzed about an idea, and they really want to pursue it on their own… where maybe students who, you know, struggle with creativity, they're more thinking, 'Okay, what is this teacher looking for - like, what is gonna get me a good mark, or how - what do I think they want from me.'”

In Elric’s view, it seemed that student ownership of work derived from an original idea of their own is conducive to developing confidence and individuality, both of which can be key to helping to nurture creative thinking. Particular to note is Elric describing students who may struggle with creativity because they aim to present what they believe their teacher wants to see, or what they assume will reward them with a high grade. With respect to educators, Elric’s response sheds light in how teachers could perhaps better foster creativity by way of being more open in allowing students to diverge from convention and accommodating for flexibility in their summative expectations, but not necessarily compromising the knowledge students are required to demonstrate.

**Creativity as a Skill Allowing Growth for Students and Teachers**

The second participant, Riza, teaches Academic, College and Locally Developed-level English classes with students having high-needs and/or identified as ESL/ELL learners. She stated that she embraced creativity as an important skill to foster in students, teaching staff and administration “because it allows for so much growth and perspective” into different areas of fields, including the everyday functions of society. She added in a
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follow-up inquiry: “I try to model my appreciation of creativity and alternative approaches to issues and literature.”

Elric also touched upon the importance of utilizing creativity as a skill for teaching strategies and class material. He said:

“Yeah, and I think also how you model it yourself, you know. Like, are you creative as a teacher, you know, or not, and students I think - they're gonna see - if they see you taking risks and trying things that, you know don't always work out, but you know, maybe trying things that they've never seen before.”

This supports the literature conducted, in that teachers who model unconventional thinking themselves seem to create the most impact in widening a student’s capacity for creativity (Fasko, 2011).

Theme Two: Difficulty in Assessing Creativity with Precise Instructional Methods

Examples of Assignments Supporting Creativity

I asked both participants to provide examples of their students demonstrating what they deemed to be ‘creativity.’ Elric had assigned his Grade 9 Geography students to design a poster about a national park. He said that several of his students had depicted various sceneries, geographic formations and related landscapes, but a student in particular had illustrated her arctic national park through the visage of a polar bear on her poster submission. Elric noted that “it was just so completely different” compared to the posters submitted by her peers. In describing the student, he said, “She wasn’t necessarily the strongest student academically, but I just thought, ‘Wow, it was such a risky thing to do… She didn’t care.’”

The second participant, Riza, said that regardless of her class’ academic level, she strives to incorporate creativity into her lessons and assignments. As an example, she
designed a photo essay as an alternative way for students to engage with essay writing. She said that approaching essays “is often difficult for kids to grapple with and be successful,” thus she “incorporated visual components” for students to draw “connections between media form and literary form.”

To summarize, both participants provided examples of assignments that focused on visual expressions, through which students could showcase their creativity on the basis of individual effort. In contrast, the literature had cited suggestions for providing class assignments that enable problem-solving, collaborative work, and an inquiry-discovery approach (Karnes et al. 1961, Davis 1991, cited in Fasko 2011). These elements, alongside creativity, have been defined by the Ontario government as valuable skill sets that foster student achievement and contribute to greater economic prosperity (Wynne, 2014).

However, the difference between the participant responses is that Elric emphasized on the outcomes of the student’s output and the meaning derived from the product. He stressed that the student demonstrated divergent thinking, whereas Riza only spoke to the visual component of her assignment as a “mode of expression.” While creativity is a means through which one can express their individuality, as per the literature cited, it must also be purposeful, "original or novel to the individual creator," and involve the effort to serve meaning and achieve an intended goal in order to be considered as such (Starko, 2003, p.6).

**Challenges in Assessing Creativity through a Criteria-Based Framework**

Upon asking Elric what challenges he identified in assessing creativity, he described his attempt to evaluate creativity as an objective measure with a grading rubric:
"When I first started teaching, I actually had a rubric, where I had, in one of the rows was creativity, and usually for each of the rows in a rubric, I would have all these pretty particular look-for's, or criteria, or things I was looking for. And for creativity, I remember when I first started, I couldn't really put - pin - you know, exactly my finger on what I was looking for, so for that, I just said the 'wow' factor."

He said his students expectedly could not understand how the 'wow' factor should be conveyed through their work. He, then, elaborated on the feasibility of assessing creativity for student assignments:

"I don't think you really can feasibly grasp it 100-percent. I might be a little more specific, like, "You know, creativity with regards to the design and layout for example, or creativity with regards to the content, when you've actually decided to choose - or even creativity in the topic you decided to explore - but it's supposed to be like the 'wow' factor, so just maybe being a little more specific about creativity in certain kind of nuanced or micro-areas? But it's very difficult to define and difficult to assess well."

Elric's response suggests that assessing for creativity is not limited to a single aspect of a student's work. Evaluating creativity can/is a multi-faceted approach through the topic chosen for an open-ended assignment or the different ways in which content is presented. Should teachers design such a rubric pertaining to creativity, one would imagine it would have to be co-constructed or consulted with students to review what ‘creativity’ entails and in what ways it can shape a student’s work.

**Assessing Creativity through Holistic Approaches**

Riza identified that a challenge in assessing creativity is the subjective nature of creativity itself, albeit it was not further explained by her. One could assume that she was inferring to the fact that creativity can be interpreted differently between people, including the degree to which something is considered creative. On the other hand, Riza expressed a benefit in the subjectivity of assessing creativity:
"I also think it's also one of those qualities that you could still work towards, like you could work it towards an advantage, like, say for poetry - so long as poetry evokes some sort of an emotional response, be it a positive one or a negative one, it served its purpose, so in that sense, it can still remain subjective, but because it has done what it's supposed to do, you could say that 'yes, they satisfied the criteria of this.'"

Should evoking emotion in a reader be the goal of a student in his or her attempt to demonstrate creativity, the literature cited would agree that the student's work is purposeful, but it does not necessarily entail that a goal alone achieved through any means is considered a product of creativity.

In responding to the question of whether it is feasible to assess creativity in student work, Riza stated it is feasible by observing the effort invested by said student:

"Yes... because you can definitely tell somebody has put in creative effort versus no creative effort - say, for example, within Literature Circles, one of the roles that I assign is the Creative Approach, and you can always tell when somebody has spent some time and tried to connect with the text on a creative level, versus someone who said, 'Oh, this is due in five minutes? Let me doodle something,' and they submit a stick figure or something that does not necessarily take much thought."

To clarify, a student occupying the Creative Approach role for a Literature Circles activity is required to convey significant excerpts from a novel through a visual representation; guidelines regarding how the student should present the visual is purposely open-ended to give students leeway in expressing themselves. Since creativity is compelled by intrinsic motivation, as mentioned in the literature by Daniel Fasko (2011), effort is certainly a component considered feasible to assess, but such evaluation can be transferrable to any type of work submitted. Subsequently, Riza's response does not identify the specific aspects of student work that would indicate a level of creativity as supported and defined by research.
Elric also provided his thoughts on how creativity could possibly be assessed. He stated that the greater number of years in teaching would help one discern the type of work usually submitted by students for certain assignments, from which one could identify what is considered "stepping outside of the box" and creating original work. He replied with the following:

"...You see patterns of certain types of assignments that students are coming up with, and then you see other students who are just completely stepping out of the norm, or stepping outside of the box and creating - see, you kind of get the sense of what's original, or what actually is creative, kind of differentiate between - between something that maybe you've seen year after year. Even if it's well done, it doesn't really bring a lot of originality or creativity to it. But it's really challenging... I usually include creativity on most of the assignments that I give, whether it's written or, you know, if it's something to do with technology, or it's more descriptive art, like a visual arts kind of assignment. I usually try to bold that in - it's always the toughest part of the rubric. It's, again, what is the - what does that mean to you?"

In contrast to Riza's reply regarding the assessment of effort, Elric mentioned that a student's submission could have been completed with a high degree of quality, but it may not necessarily offer originality or creativity.

**Theme Three: Nurturing Creativity to Support Student Success**

**Developing Student Interest and Growth Beyond High School**

I asked participants what they thought were the benefits of nurturing creativity in students for their short and long-term goals.

With regards to short-term objectives, Elric stated the following:

“Probably in their short-term, I think they're just gonna be more interested in what they're doing… Yeah, they're gonna have fuel that they're excited because it's inherently interesting to them, it's kind of like something that's dug into them, and they've got some traction with it, and there’s just that kind of part in you that wants to kind of create something new, you know? Or figure something out. Um, so I think it'll make school more enjoyable.”
In alignment with his previous responses, Elric emphasized again that creativity fosters motivation and excitement due to the student’s autonomy over the process through which their novel ideas are developed to produce something new. According to Fasko (2011), this excitement would draw meaning to students through the process, thereby increasing engagement in the classroom and extracurricular activities beyond class time.

In terms of creativity contributing to a student’s long-term goals, he said:

“It'll foster more of an independence, you know, I think - not only in school, but in terms of who you are and your own maturation. Yeah, you just kind of be more autonomous in terms of how you look at things, and not so worried about fitting in, or - you know, what's the right thing to do whether small decisions or larger decisions. I think you find students who are displaying a large degree of creativity, they're just a little more open in things, I think, and I think that's gonna help long-term in terms of maybe figuring out what you really want to do.”

While Hugh Lytton (1971) described a creative person as someone with the “crucial capacity of perceiving a familiar object, situation, problem, or collection of data, in a sudden new light or new context,” Elric’s description of the benefits in fostering creativity for a student’s long-term goal suggests that certain behaviours and traits, such as independence, resolution, and open-mindedness, are developed as a result and may reflect the competencies exhibited by a “creative person” (p. 43).

Riza’s response to my question drew some semblance with Elric’s answer:

“So, addressing their short-term goals, I think it, uh, I think it hooks them and it gets them engaged in the learning process. Uh, for the long term, I think that it helps to develop out-of-the-box thinkers, which is I think, um, what we need to develop in our students, and just as a society, it's something that we need to develop.”

Riza did not elaborate on the reasons for developing students and members of society as “out-of-the-box” thinkers due to the time constraints for our interview. I did
prompt her with another question, asking if she was connecting such long-term goals to
the students’ career aspirations and pathways that they would take beyond high school.

     She replied, “Um… Not directly, I don’t mean to – if I do, I think that’s an extra
bonus, but no, just getting them thinking about things through different perspectives, or
through different lenses – I think it’s an important sort of skill.”

     Riza’s intentions on fostering creativity is made more apparent here, as she states
that the long-term purpose of developing such a skill in students is to broaden their
perspectives. Though her answer does not entirely nor explicitly align with what the
literature on creativity has presented, namely that one’s open-mindedness would have to
eventually result in a novel idea and product, it does bring to light that the subject matter
she teaches, such as English, could possibly have influenced her take on creativity to
some degree. The English subject is arguably taught to explore the different perspectives
of characters in literature, and is generally a principle of mindfulness that teachers hope
to promote in their students. My analysis is admittedly a form of conjecture, but
throughout the data collected, her answers on creativity have primarily been pertinent to
the ways in which English has been taught. It may also reflect the skill sets she wishes to
impart on her students who are struggling with academic achievement and social
integration into Western culture. This analysis will be elaborated in the following chapter
of my discussion and findings.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

My primary research question aimed to discern the degree to which the neoliberal ideals woven into Ontario’s education shape the way creativity is developed in students. In this study, I asked two participants, who are educators with over ten years in the teaching profession, for their experiences and perspectives on fostering creativity within the classroom setting. Elric teaches Geography at a private school esteemed for their high academic achievement; Riza is a secondary school English teacher whose classes are comprised predominantly with ESL/ELL and high-needs students, some of whom have behavioural and mental health issues.

As mentioned previously in this paper, I could not explicitly ask participants whether they were cognizant of the neoliberal politics driving education, in risk of not only antagonizing or highly discomforting my participants with a contentious topic, but presupposing that they were already aware of neoliberal ideals affecting the educational experiences of students, as supported through the literature cited. In chapter four, I referenced the literature to draw connections and compare with what the participants have explained about their experiences on developing creativity in their students. In this chapter, I parsed the data collected in relation to the primary research question posed, followed by highlighting implications for the educational community, future considerations and further limitations of my study.

Neoliberal Influences on School Environment

Elric’s descriptions of creativity and how it has been demonstrated in his assignments aligned more closely with what the literature and policy documents have cited in relation to creativity. He had spoken of creativity as a form of risk-taking, growth
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and innovation manifested throughout the student’s work, which carries the same sentiment in the *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision in Education* (2014) document. This is not to say that he tacitly supports the neoliberal ideals embedded in Ontario education – the findings only make relevant that his characterization of creativity follows a similar vein.

Riza’s explications of creativity, on the other hand, mostly focused on creativity as a mode of visual expression and subjectivity, using a photo essay as an example to support her statement. The literature cited does not entirely support her definition of creativity. The Ontario government outlined in its Mandate letter that they would promote “the value of the arts, including the visual and performing arts, in developing critical and creative thinking skills that support success in school and in life” (Wynne, 2014). In analyzing Riza’s answers, it would seem that her definition of creativity reflects some of the ways in which she teaches her students according to the study of literature in general.

To compare the school environments in which both participants instruct, Elric teaches from a wealthy, private school that is accustomed to having their students attend prestigious universities and pursue illustrious careers overtime. According to the school’s website, their alumni consists of CEO’s of respectable companies and other high-profiled professionals in various fields such as arts, sports, science, and business (note that I cannot explicitly reference the school’s alumni website in risk of breaching confidentiality agreements with the participants). Though it was not explicitly stated in his interview, his perspective on creativity greatly coincides with what Ontario policy and professionals of today would deem as the keys to success. This is supported by the 2014
Mandate letter in which Kathleen Wynne has affirmed that Ontario educational policies will reflect the Ministry objective to grow the economy and create “good jobs” (Wynne, 2014). Given the *Achieving Excellence* document is a result and extension of her Mandate, investing in skills such as creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship would likely match with the sentiment of a number of different businesses, non-profit organizations, and system leaders that were consulted for their input during the development of *Achieving Excellence* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). These same leaders and businesses would mirror how students bound for high achievement are taught to value and develop their critical and creative thinking skills – as skills for risk-taking, novelty, confidence, and pushing boundaries, all of which happen to be essential for economic growth. However, it is problematic and perhaps even erroneous for readers to assume that teachers in high-performing, wealthy schools are gearing their students to be agents for economic prosperity – I aim to illustrate that it is the school environment in which Elric teaches could be one of the factors contributing to how he characterizes creativity in his assignments.

Riza’s school is evidently a stark contrast to the types of students typically educated in Elric’s school, including their learning environment. As stated in her interview, the school at which Riza teaches ranks with the second-lowest socioeconomic status in its board, with many of her students profiled as ESL/ELL and low-performing learners, with some identified as having behavioural and mental health issues. Since her school is understandably not supplied with the same capital and teaching resources that Elric’s private school provides its students, I would imagine that teachers like Riza herself are more focused on developing fundamental skill sets in their students, such as
literacy and social integration skills. During her interview, she alluded to creativity being a mode of expression that allows for different perspectives to be considered, which one can argue is both a literacy and social skill that students are encouraged to develop for academic and individual success. However, should creativity, as characterized by Elric and the Mandate letter, serve as the skill that is sought by institutions and businesses for economic prosperity, I suspect that students in Riza’s classes would fare with a relative disadvantage in a system that fosters competition. As per the literature cited in chapter two, Pring and Walford (1997, cited in Crawford et. al 2011) posited that a competitive environment is created for students when schools adopt market values by which educational policies are driven, endorsing individual achievement, inter-student and inter-school competition, and exclusion from resources for lower-performing students. Curtis et al. (1992, cited in Crawford et. al 2011) also argued that a school or school system supporting market values would also promote the stratification and streaming of students.

Ultimately, both participants in this study have made apparent that they foster creativity in students to support their growth throughout their schooling years and pathways beyond. While the neoliberal ideals rooted in Ontario education may have influenced the ways in which schools of high achievement characterize creativity, I do not posit that their teachers foster creativity with the intent nor pedagogy to optimize their student’s achievement for the neoliberal market. In the end, it seems that educators who prioritize the quality of their students’ learning first will not seek to foster creativity for such a purpose.
Implications for the Educational Community

Given the neoliberal influences shaping the development of educational policies and programs affecting today’s Ontario schools, educators should remain cognizant of the intention and outcomes in fostering creativity in their students. The qualities of creativity as outlined in the literature are supportive and conducive to student success, but creativity should not be considered as the means to an end for economic value, but rather, as a skill that will provide students opportunities for growth and empowerment to create meaning from their work.

Though low-performing schools such as Riza’s may characterize the development of creativity according to the unique needs of their students, educators could still model for creative thinking through the flexibility and open-ended nature of the assignments given to students. Such summatives would require further feedback and guidance from teachers to ensure their students are on track, but it would evoke greater engagement from students if they are able to showcase their individuality by way of being creative.

There remains the question of whether creativity can actually be taught to students, or if it is a quality intrinsic in students. Based on the participants’ responses, assignments could provide a gateway for students to be creative, yet it does not answer how one can ‘be’ in the first place. However, I think the inquiry-discovery process as mentioned in the literature would be conducive to nurturing the mechanics of creativity, as exploration and inquiry in itself is a pathway to producing creative work. While works cannot be entirely, utterly original, the ways in which students infuse their lived experiences with their unique skill sets and perspectives can produce work that is original, purposeful and meaningful (Perkins 1988, cited in Starko 2003).
Future Considerations

For future studies on the topic of creativity, I would recommend that studies be conducted across different subject areas. The participants in this study taught courses in the Humanities field, and it would be interesting to note whether and why educators find it easier to foster creativity in certain subjects more than others. For instance, one could claim that Mathematics leaves little room to allow creativity when the mathematical content itself is indisputable. These varied studies could inform potential teaching strategies that help nurture creativity while ensuring that content-knowledge is learned and applied. In addition, I would recommend for future studies with similar time constraints to interview participants from high and low-performing schools within the public domain of education. Otherwise, measures of validity must be enacted to adequately identify the degree to which private institutions are affected by Ontario's education policy, as their curricular and school conduct is separate and provided leeway from the public education sector.

Further Limitations of the Study

Throughout this paper, I have already included notes on study limitations in most of the chapters. The following will be limitations that I have not yet addressed in this paper.

It must be recognized that schools in Ontario operate differently from each other. I did not conduct research into how most high and low-performing schools in Ontario have designed or promoted their learning programs. Readers must remain aware that the
lack of data does contribute significantly to a generalized analysis of educator perspectives. Further literature on the topic of creativity and Ontario’s neoliberal education system is required for greater validity in this study.

Teachers also bring with them nuanced experiences and perspectives when accepting or refusing to foster creativity in students. Considering the subjective nature of creativity and the contention behind topics related to political ideals, future participants in similar studies may not always express their authentic views.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to make evident how neoliberal ideals found within Ontario education may shape the ways in which creativity is fostered in students across different school environments. I acknowledge that the study, for which only two interviews were conducted, does not provide an entirely reliable nor sufficient overview of the topic. I believe the study’s value is in discussing the issues surrounding creativity and bringing to light the direction in which Ontario education is being guided.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How long have you been teaching?

2. Have you been taught as an individual to value and define creativity as a skill and ability? If so, how?

3. What are some examples of your students demonstrating creativity in the classroom, if at all?

4. From what you’ve experienced, what do you think are some of the challenges in identifying and assessing creativity in the class? Is it feasible?

5. What do you think are the benefits to fostering creativity in students for their short and long-term goals?

6. How important do you think it is to foster creativity in students? Why?
   
a. Do you think it’s the responsibility of the teacher to foster it?
Appendix B: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ___________________

Dear ___________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying the fostering of creativity in high school students for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Garfield Gini-Newman. My research supervisor is Garfield Gini-Newman. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 10-30 minute interview that will be recorded by an audio or cell phone device. There is a possibility that I would require two interviews in total, in addition to follow-up e-mails to further inquire your experiences strictly for purposes of collecting more data to analyze in my assignment.

I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There is little risk or benefit to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by _____________________ (name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ___________________________________________

Name (printed): _____________________________________

Date: _____________________