

**TRANSCENDING INVISIBILITY THROUGH THE POWER OF STORY:  
AN ANALYSIS OF THE LIFE JOURNEY OF MR. JOHN,  
A RURAL SCHOOL CUSTODIAN, AS TOLD BY HIS GRANDDAUGHTER**

A Dissertation

by

GERRI M. MAXWELL

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2004

Major Subject: Educational Administration

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Approved as to style and content by:

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Linda Skrla  
(Chair of Committee)

---

M. Carolyn Clark  
(Member)

---

Christine A. Stanley  
(Member)

---

G. Patrick Slattery, Jr.  
(Member)

---

James Joseph Scheurich  
(Head of Department)

December 2004

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## ABSTRACT

Transcending Invisibility Through the Power of Story: An Analysis of the Life Journey of Mr. John, a Rural School Custodian, as Told by His Granddaughter.

(December 2004)

Gerri M. Maxwell, B.A., Texas Lutheran College;

M.Ed., University of Houston at Victoria

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Linda Skrla

Public school leaders routinely overlook the talents and contributions of blue-collar support staff that can and do play viable roles in the success of schools. Somewhat ironically, a common piece of advice given to first year teachers by more experienced mentors is, “Get to know the school secretary and custodian – everybody knows they really run the school.” Although this phrase is commonly bantered about by educators and informal school lore accords it the status of truth, the school leadership research literature is virtually silent about the contributions such workers can make. In Texas, where there are over one thousand school districts, many of which are rural and “stepping stones” for career track administrators, it is these community members who work as the secretaries, bus drivers, and custodians that many times serve as the cultural glue helping these districts survive. These invisible workers make important contributions to the coherency of the culture and mission of the school.

My white maternal grandfather worked as a custodian in a rural school district for more than fifty-three years. Within the past five years, in the course of

conversation, two casual acquaintances volunteered information regarding my grandfather's contributions as a custodian in that school district that later I realized were instrumental in the sense of the project coming to me (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

As a rural school custodian with a third grade education, my grandfather lived with multiple oppressive forces in his life. The lack of opportunity for education, the low socio-economic status of his rural family, the marginalization that society deals to those persons who choose dirty work (Meagher, 2002), and the sometimes overt, but often just an unintentional, power struggle with school leadership were all oppressive forces in his life. Whether he consciously realized it or not, my grandfather's behavior (as evidenced by informant conversations) revealed this oppression. He survived, even thrived, and dealt with this oppression through the most effective means he knew of and obviously honed throughout his lifetime. My grandfather used humor as a means of survival.

My grandfather was a master storyteller.

This is his story.

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to the invisible workers in the public schools of rural Texas; they are the unsung heroes who make a difference daily in the lives of countless children.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing a dissertation is about perseverance. In my life, numerous persons have been responsible for and facilitated my perseverance.

In my career in public schools, I am particularly indebted to several master teacher friends who molded my teaching when I first entered the public school arena. They are as responsible for the teacher I am today as anyone. They are Dana Roberts, Nancy Maass, Marvin Jurries, and MaryTom Middlebrooks. I am also indebted to Gerald Krause, the first public school principal who hired me, and Ben Seeker, friend and middle school principal, who inherited me on his campus, and early on and often encouraged and supported my instructional innovation. I am appreciative to Mike Roberts, who hired me in my first administrative job. I am also thankful to Jim D. Copeland, superintendent of the district for which I currently work, who has understood the importance of this project to me and has allowed me the freedom of a very flexible schedule to pursue my doctoral studies while I have been employed as curriculum director.

I wish to thank Dr. M. Carolyn Clark for her guidance and the key role her own research interests played in the surfacing of this research project. I also appreciate the encouraging words of Dr. Christine A. Stanley, and Dr. G. Patrick Slattery, Jr. as they served on my doctoral committee.

I wish to thank Dr. Linda Skrla, my doctoral chair, who like all great teachers, saw more in me than I saw in myself. Her support throughout my coursework, and her positioning of me professionally for success remains wondrous to me.

I would like to acknowledge my mother, sons, siblings, in-laws, stepfather and other extended family members without whose continuous support, I would have never come to know myself through this project.

Finally, I thank my selfless husband for his continuous, abiding love and support throughout our lives together.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
I INTRODUCTION.....	1
Personal Rationale .....	3
Academic Rationale.....	5
Description of the Study .....	10
Research Questions .....	12
Methodology.....	12
Limitations and Possibilities.....	15
Significance .....	16
Summary .....	17
III REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	18
Challenging Traditional Leadership Methodologies .....	18
Challenging the Majority Story.....	19
Challenging the Way Types of Work are Valued.....	23
The Challenge to Value Custodial Work.....	25
The Challenge to Understand Oppression .....	27
Challenging Unitary Subjectivity .....	32
Solution: The Power of Humor .....	36
Solution: The Power of Story.....	41
III METHOD.....	45
Introduction.....	45
Purpose .....	46
Research Questions .....	47
Research Design.....	47
Data Collection .....	50
Data Analysis .....	53
Trustworthiness and Credibility.....	56
Significance and Summary .....	60
IV FINDINGS.....	61
Introduction.....	61
The Private Mr. John .....	63
The Search for the Public Mr. John .....	71
The Public Mr. John.....	78

CHAPTER	Page
V SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS....	112
Summary .....	112
Conclusions.....	115
Recommendations.....	122
REFERENCES.....	129
VITA.....	140

**LIST OF FIGURES**

FIGURE	Page
1 Wedding Photo.....	64
2 A Turning Point.....	66
3 The City Girl.....	68
4 Mr. John and the Boiler.....	72
5 The Hallway.....	99
6 The Gym.....	105

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*It's as if all narratives were upside-down storms – smooth on top, choppy underneath.*

*Julie Allen, 1999, p. 33*

This dissertation is about my grandfather, a custodian in a tiny rural school district in South Texas and how he, through the power of story, transcended his invisibility and left a lasting legacy within that school district.

His story serves as an exemplar, not only for all invisible workers in schools and for the necessity of school leaders noticing their contribution and impact, but his story also is an exemplar for all marginalized persons who create their own identity portals into visibility through the power of story.

That is not to say I am telling the fairy-tale life history of one perfect man. To the contrary, I am telling the story of a charismatic blue-collar worker who was replete with all of the humanness we all possess. The focus of this narrative is on one man's contributions as an invisible worker in a school, but there is a story beneath the story. There are layers.

This study examines not only the rationale for why invisible workers should be of significant notice to school leaders, but also why this story has

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The journal used for this dissertation as to style and format is *Educational Administration Quarterly*.

been suppressed in the professional literature. It also examines the nature of dirty work and its societal implications, and, finally, it focuses on how the power of story and on how humor (loosely inclusive of story, jokes, pranks, and “chain-yanking”) (Quinn, 2000), as not only part of a sociological bonding mechanism among various groups of people but also a means of displacing oppressive forces, afforded my grandfather visibility and recognition though he lived in the world of “other.”

Because I am analyzing not only the life journey of my grandfather, a white rural custodian, but also my own journey in this process as well as a white, first generation college-educated female, this qualitative dissertation will have overtones of auto-ethnography. I choose the stream of consciousness style of Carolyn Ellis (1997), who pleads, “I want to talk a different way, not just talk about talking a different way” (p. 116). I also employ a strategy used by Skrla (2000) in her self-proclaimed non-traditional academic writing style, and that is “introductions, elaborations, and explanations are provided at the point they become necessary (in my view) in the flow of the text rather than where they might customarily be expected” (p. 612). Carolyn Ellis (1997) likens this to sandwiching text. Finally for all of those qualitative researchers like myself for whom methodology such as “unpacking the research baggage,” is crucial to the research in story process, I begin with a personal rationale for my study (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

### **Personal Rationale**

*In a sense, the topic found him. It was a topic begging to be researched.*

*Ardra L.Cole & J. Gary Knowles, 2001, p. 52*

*I would stand at one end of the long hallway with the original wooden floors of the school building now nearly seventy years old and be overcome by the enormity of the human toil which had polished these floors to a glowing amber from corner to corner, one end of the hall to the next, and be literally breathless at its beauty. I am overcome now with the memory of that vision, the scent of the school building and the memory of the man who had a singular impact on this rural school district for over forty years.*

*Leveridge, a pseudonym, 2002*

This was the recollection conveyed to me by a perfect stranger, a former teacher, who knew and worked with my grandfather, known to all as Mr. John, who was a white rural custodian in a predominantly white tiny rural school district in South Texas. I met this teacher, Mr. Leveridge, by chance or perhaps destiny. He and his wife were at a school function in another district and mentioned they were from this particular small town, East End, where my grandparents had lived. I immediately shared my knowledge of this town through my grandparents and the Leveridges' discovered I was the granddaughter of this man. Mr. Leveridge glared almost with urgency into my eyes imploring the question, "Do you know what your grandfather meant to this school?"

Of course, I was pleasantly taken aback by this man's inquiry and chatted at some length with him. To describe my response as pleasant fear is appropriate because as Mr. Leveridge asked me this question, it was almost as though I should be faulted for not having already had this realization. Mr. Leveridge was impassioned, to say the least, regarding my grandfather's role in East End (pseudonym). For nearly a half hour, he regaled me (eyes twinkling, aside coughs followed by chuckles of personal bemusement) with numerous stories about my grandfather, now ten years deceased, and his contribution as the custodian in East End Independent School District.

At the time I first recalled this conversation, I was most struck by the novelty of my grandfather, a custodian, being cited as possessing agency as an influential person in that school district. However, after some additional research, study, and a mental review of that conversation, as well as another encounter with a former administrator in that district, I have since realized that sometimes it is what is not said that tells the real story. Both of these men, obviously being politically correct upon our first meeting, merely chuckled or displayed an accentuated twinkle in their eye in describing their memories of my grandfather to me.

It was not until I had completed a number of interviews with persons from that district that I began to have a sense that while I was personally seeking to tell my grandfather's story, I uncovered his legacy as a storyteller, a creator of everyday stories, often pranks, which no doubt served to pass the time and

deflect the oppressive actions of others toward him while he attended to the multitude and often mundane tasks of custodial and maintenance work.

Thus, what began, for me, as a quest for seeking solutions for leadership in schools, evolved not only into an effort to recognize the contributions of invisible workers in school, but also into an examination of how one man, my grandfather as exemplar, transcended this invisibility through the power of story.

### **Academic Rationale**

#### *Introduction*

In Texas there are over one thousand school districts. Of that number, eighty percent of these districts are small, many of them rural districts. Most of these districts share similar challenges of not enough qualified teachers and quality administrators to run their schools. Yet, in spite of these challenges, these school districts, whose leaders frequently move in and out in only a short period of time, manage to survive because the schools themselves retain some coherent culture and mission. Individuals who work in these schools and have longevity, even though they may be in support staff positions like custodians and secretaries, frequently are the “glue” that holds these school communities together. Colleges of education tell first year teachers, “Get to know the school secretary and custodian – everybody knows they really run the school.” And although this phrase is bantered by educators in general, the research literature does not tell their story – does not recognize their contribution.

*Call for qualitative studies to inform leadership*

Perhaps part of the reason the contributions of invisible workers have not been included in the professional leadership literature is a product of the limitations that empirical, quantitative research places on intangibles such as measuring the impact of custodians and secretaries and reducing that data, if it could be collected to a uni-dimensional numerical state. Josselson (1995) says,

We have entered a new age, the age of narrative, an interest that is sweeping a range of academic disciplines. The historians, grappling with narrative frames of reference, are wondering about the relationship between history and literature and between history and autobiography. Are autobiographies history? How do the stories that people tell reflect the dominant assumptions of their age? And people in literature are wondering how to distinguish what has usually been thought to be literature from autobiography. Just as within psychology, the question of how to treat people's lived experiences embarrasses our more technical understandings of intellectual conceptualizations. (p. 32)

Reissman (1993) as well concurs that a number of fields ranging from history to psychology, even law and medicine have embraced narrative as an effective methodology able to hone in on findings not possible through traditional scientific methods.

Specifically, Conger (1998), as an anthropologist/ethnographic researcher, finds that qualitative methods offer the following advantages for studying educational leadership including:

- 1) the flexibility to discern and detect unexpected phenomena during the research (Lundberg, 1976);
- 2) an ability to investigate processes more effectively;
- 3) greater chances to explore and to be sensitive to contextual factors; and
- 4) more effective means to investigate symbolic dimensions. (Morgan & Smircich, 1980)

Conger (1998) further elaborates that the complexity of leadership is a by-product of its characteristics that include its dynamic nature, its involvement with multiple levels of phenomena and its symbolic component. Using only quantitative methods to flesh out these variables is insufficient. Furthermore, when only quantitative methods are used, implying a cause-effect interaction, the misguided notion that leadership is uni-dimensional is reinforced (Lantis, 1987).

Several of the advantages of qualitative research over quantitative research for studying school leadership are realized through the genre of life history. In the genre of life history, the stories of individual contributions are highlighted, examined, and digested for insight into particular phenomena. This approach fits well with what Slattery (1995) would encourage for educational administration -- a post-modern world where "a post-competitive sense of relationships as cooperative rather than coercive and individualistic" (p. 19) would rule the day for building community and relationships between custodians and administrators, teachers, and students. Here the phenomena of leadership and what it means to be a school leader offers the opportunity for going beyond

relationships between staff members in public schools where relationships of unequal power such as between administrator and custodian, can be re-examined. Leaders would be people who have greater authority to “name what they and others notice” (Witkin, 2000, p. 104 ), to step back and, from a different perspective to gain *more* effectiveness as leaders by being in charge, in authority, *less*.

*What makes this a good story? (Or why is this story worth telling)?*

If qualitative studies to inform leadership are desirable, why this story? What makes a good story? What as my second research question asks is unique about Mr. John, a rural school custodian, that makes his story worth telling and of interest to school leadership? Bruner (2001) says:

The only requirement imposed by having to tell a life story is that one tell something “interesting”. What makes for something “interesting” is invariably a “theory” or “story” that runs counter to expectancy or produces an outcome counter to expectancy. But expectancy, of course, is controlled by the implicit folk psychology that prevails in a culture. It is the case, then, that a story (to meet the criterion of tellability) must violate canonical expectancy, but do so in the folk-psychologically canonical that is itself canonical—that is the breach of convention must itself be conventional. (p. 30)

Labov (1972) refers to this breach of convention as reportability. That is, “An event is not reportable if it is something that happens every day; to be turned into a story, an event must either be unusual in some way or run counter to

expectations or norms” (p. 390). As I have already revealed, this story of my grandfather’s “storied” life came to me by chance, and through two separate incidents of story from perfect strangers who were part of the culture that “storied” Mr. John. What makes Mr. John’s story worth telling or unique is the agency that he as a custodian possessed in this school district as told to me in fact by two former professionals from that school district. The drama Mr. John created on a daily basis, the power wielded from his unlikely station as custodian create that imbalance Kenneth Burke (1945) described as essential to creating drama in story. The Pentad, or “interplay of five elements” (Bruner, p. 31), are “comprised of an Actor who commits an Action toward a Goal with the use of some Instrument in a particular Scene” (Bruner, p. 31). Furthermore, “Drama is created..., when elements of the Pentad are out of balance, lose their appropriate ‘ratio’” (Bruner, p. 31). In the case of Mr. John, he was not supposed to be as a custodian, a primary actor wielding power in this school district. The fact that he apparently did, and did so primarily through his ability to create story, creates that drama and make this a story worth telling.

*Potential criticisms of auto-ethnographic research (Or why this isn’t navel gazing)*

Having now made the argument for qualitative research to inform leadership, I feel in this research project that I push the envelope a little further by the auto-ethnographic nature of the study. In fact, my recent doctoral course in *Researching the Personal* revealed anything but an easy road ahead.

I acknowledge that several interlocking tensions and perspectives are at work as I write this piece. As a qualitative researcher analyzing my grandfather’s

life and attempting through narrative to give meaning to or to uncover the essence of his apparent ability to rise above his invisibility as dictated by his occupation which placed him in a particular social class, some readers may question this study. However, "It is impossible for sociologists, or any other members of society, to avoid narrative" (White, 1987, p.24, cited in Ewick & Silbey 1995, p. 204). In fact, Ferber (2000) says, " We give meaning to the world and construct reality through narrative, highlighting the active, but often concealed, role played by the researcher" (p. 341). Thus I choose to foreground my perspective as researcher/ granddaughter of my subject despite the fact that this may be a threatening approach to traditional sociologists, "not only because stories are seen as less objective, or because an alternative story may be presented, but because this approach provides an inherent critique of traditional sociology and our predominant understanding of reality itself, as well as the relationship between representation and reality" (Ferber, p.342).

### **Description of the Study**

#### *Purpose*

As a current public school administrator, I have chosen to name what needs to be noticed (Witkin, 2000). I have chosen to write the life history of my grandfather's life in the context of invisible workers in schools in order to highlight not only his contribution but also that of other persons with similar longevity and impact in schools that go unnoticed and untapped. This counter-story has seldom been formally recognized because the dominant discourse is led by the professionally trained educators and administrators who are responsible for

school success. These public school professionals, thus, unknowingly or obviously exclude the talents and contributions of blue-collar, uneducated support staff who can and do hold viable roles regarding the success of schools and the students in their charge.

*Emerging layers for study*

Additionally, I hope to make an interdisciplinary contribution to sociological research by examining how one man used the power of narrative to transcend his invisibility. Only after the initial round of conducting and transcribing seventeen interviews, and, as suggested by Reissman (1993), “having spent considerable time scrutinizing the rough drafts of transcriptions, often across a number of interviews” did a “focus for analysis emerge, or become clearer” (p. 57).

That focus for analysis in several conversations in particular generated different responses from most of the other interviews conducted with professional informants. Reissman (1993), says:

In my experience, the task of identifying narrative segments and their representation cannot be delegated. It is not a technical operation but the stuff of analysis itself, the “unpacking” of structure that is essential to interpretation. By transcribing at this level, interpretive categories emerge, ambiguities in language are heard on the tape, and the oral record—the way the story is told—provides clues about meaning. Insights from these various sources shape the difficult decision about how to represent oral discourse as written text. (p. 58)

It was after closer analysis of these particular conversations, that the true essence of this study emerged. No longer was this a study about the fairy tale life of a rural school custodian, but rather this became a sociological examination of the oppression marginalized workers experience and how one man through his own wit and fortitude responded and thrived through honing his ability to create story.

### **Research Questions**

1. What was the life history of Mr. John, a small town school custodian, as retold by informants knowledgeable about his life?
2. What was unique about Mr. John that allowed him to overcome his invisibility?

### **Methodology**

*Researching lives is always a delicate affair, often highly intrusive. Life history researchers step into lives only to retreat after a time; yet, those examined lives live on both within and without the researcher's experience. The business of doing life history work is complex and consuming, exhilarating and elusive, demanding and defining, even tiring and tedious, but with understanding the lives of others comes the possibility of understanding oneself and one's location in the world.*

*Ardra L. Cole and J. Gary Knowles, 2001, viii*

This study took the form of a posthumously created life history of my grandfather's life, particularly as it pertained to his work as a custodian in a rural school district in Texas. Information for this ethnographic study was framed from

my own recollections of my grandfather and by stories I have been told throughout my lifetime. Interviews with seventeen informants selected (plus two additional family members who read the initial draft and provided feedback for trustworthiness and credibility) using the snowball sampling technique were conducted. These informants included family members and former administrators, teachers, staff, and students in the East End Independent School District.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of these persons. Each of these interviews was taped with permission and transcribed. The life history conversations included guiding questions that retained the focus of this study. The interview protocol included questions related not only to the details of my grandfather's life and how those factors created the person he became, but also about the work ethic he displayed and the commitment he exemplified. Additionally, recollections from the interviewees regarding daily routines and notable incidents over the years of my grandfather's service that exemplified his commitment to the sustainability of the culture and mission of this tiny rural school district were revealed.

As I began interviewing these informants, something unexpected occurred. As Josselson(1995), pointed out, "If we listen well, we will unearth what we did not expect" (p. 30). Indeed, the original story I sought specifically as the life history of my grandfather, became something much more intense. This wasn't a pretty process. I definitely did not hear exactly what I expected to hear. My grandfather, certainly respected and revered, also had a somewhat "edgy"

side to his personality. As I continued interviewing and analyzing data, I finally realized that rather than this “edginess” being a personality fault, it, along with his ability to “story,” revealed what was to become the true findings of my research. That was that this was not only to be a life history, but even more so a sociological examination about how my grandfather, a rural custodian, managed the oppression he felt in his role either consciously or subconsciously and how he used story to “manage” that oppression as well as to exert leadership in that school district even from his life station as custodian. Cole and Knowles, (2001, p. 99) tell us that “life history research has no formula or recipe” and that this sort of emergent data is “typical and highly desired.” Indeed, this emergent data completely refocused and added depth of meaning to the original study intent.

As researcher, I also sought an explanation for these contradictions and in my search, uncovered and embraced the concept of non-unitary subjectivity (Bloom, 1998). According to Koschoreck (1998),

It is presumed that by thoroughly investigating how these various subjectivities function in a person’s life, we might therefore be able to understand more fully how both the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic social forces operate to reproduce and to modify social relationships. (p. 50)

A more detailed exploration of the concept of non-unitary subjectivity (see Chapter II) and how it served as an appropriate metaphor for understanding the life activities of Mr. John occurs in Chapter IV of this dissertation.

Additionally, artifact analysis was conducted on documents and artifacts shared with the researcher by the informants. These artifacts yielded insight regarding how this school community viewed the roles of its support staff workers and how the perspective of leadership toward those workers evolved over the years.

Member-checking and triangulation to validate research data as appropriate and described by Lincoln (1985) included use of prolonged engagement and establishment of trust with my informants, was ongoing and rich as a variety of persons from different perspectives were solicited for their perspective on my grandfather's life and his contributions to this school district. Additionally, the triangulation process revealed a number of contradictions (actually desirable in qualitative research), and as described in chapter three, these contradictions served to better inform and shape the direction of this research project.

### **Limitations and Possibilities**

The primary limitation in this research, as with all biography, is that of attempting to write a life story posthumously. To come to the realization of the significance of my grandfather's contribution while he was living would have perhaps yielded better access to even more information; however, ten years ago, I, as researcher, was not of a mind to conduct this research. Thus, truly, this limitation is voided because without myself, researcher as instrument, this particular study could not be done in the same way by anyone else. I also add not as a limitation, but as a support for multiple perspectives, that the story of Mr.

John eleven years after his death may have magnified over that period as persons with whom he worked realized how significant his presence had been. It is likely the story I write today would look very different from one I might have written ten years ago not only for that reason, but also due to my enhanced perspective that comes with maturity.

As a feminist constructivist, I acknowledge that the very knowledge I construct from examination of the informant conversations and interactions is salient only as long as I recognize that at best this knowledge is always contested and eternally partial (Lather, 1991). What I have written here will be read, deconstructed, and reconstructed uniquely in the minds of all those who care to read it and depending on the frame of the context in which they read it, may also for themselves be able to construct multiple interpretations.

Once my topic was identified, I was compelled to begin the research as soon as possible for a number of reasons. In addition to my current passion directing the need to immerse myself in this study, the ready access to a number of persons within my immediate geographic area who had knowledge of my grandfather in that school district facilitated completion of the project. Finally, as time passed, the potential for persons who had knowledge of my grandfather's contribution to predecease completion of the project was a concern, and so I began in earnest.

### **Significance**

The singular phenomenon of my grandfather's fifty-three year career as a custodian in a tiny rural school district in South Texas is, in and of itself,

noteworthy. Additionally, the fact that his contribution to the culture and mission of that school district was volunteered to me as researcher and granddaughter, by mere acquaintances, magnifies the essence of his contribution.

There no doubt are other persons like my grandfather, who work in invisible roles in schools, and, by their longevity, contribute to not only the success of those schools but to the betterment of society. It is significant that his story be highlighted in the professional research literature as an important resource for school leaders who in this twenty-first century society (rife with its ills) must be made aware of the need to tap into these intangible and vital resources for improving schools and society.

Finally, my grandfather's story is significant for the highly visible members of society who frequently do not see the significance of recognizing all persons in our society who are marginalized or made invisible.

### **Summary**

This introductory chapter has provided both a personal and an academic rationale for this auto-ethnographic analysis of the life journey of my grandfather, Mr. John, and the contribution he made to the school district where he worked as a custodian for over fifty years. This chapter has outlined the qualitative research design including the purpose, significance, method, and limitations of this study.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

*The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice.*

*And because we fail to notice that we fail to notice, there is little we can do to change; until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds.*

*Ronald Laing, 2000*

#### **Challenging Traditional Leadership Methodologies**

It is important for me to notice the contribution of my grandfather, a custodian in a rural school district, as I, a doctoral educational administration student, embark on a career in leadership in the public schools. Not only I, but researchers more astute than I, such as Conger (1998), cite the need for qualitative research in the investigation of leadership topics due to the extreme and enduring complexity of the leadership phenomenon itself. No longer is even the new breed of professional managers espoused by Tyack and Hansot (1981) “who reshape schools according to the canons of business efficiency and scientific expertise” (p. 9) meeting the needs of leadership in public education. These masters of business efficiency measured in the scientific, well-theorized leadership literature “miss the mark,” and there are calls for qualitative methods to reach the richness of the intangibles that impact leadership. Both Conger and Yukl (1994) agree that there is not yet, “a general theory of leadership that explains all aspects of the process adequately” (p. 19). Conger (1998) further elaborates that the complexity of leadership is a by-product of its characteristics

that include its dynamic nature, its involvement with multiple levels of phenomena, and its symbolic component. Furthermore, Avolio and Bass (1995) support the multi-dimensional nature of leadership as being composed of behavioral, interpersonal, organizational, and environmental components. The typical survey used in quantitative leadership studies fails to get at these components and at the depth of the leadership concept (Conger, 1998). Part of the reason for the “difficulty in use of quantitative methods in any dynamic process is that, by their nature, they measure only static moments in time” (Conger, 1998, p. 109). These static moments in time in quantitative studies are “not easily able to track in any richness of detail how events unfold or how they may reshape interpretations of events”.

### **Challenging the Majority Story**

#### *Introduction*

The research literature contains little about the roles and impact that custodians have in schools. In all of the peer-reviewed research literature, I found only one study that focused on the significance of the contribution custodians make to schools other than in their job-defined role (Reed & Salazar, 1998). However, when one searches the topic of mentoring on the World Wide Web, there are literally hundreds of links that discuss the use of custodians in school mentoring programs to note just one other contribution these persons make daily in schools.

For this reason, it is the story that has not been told, the counter-story, the counter-narrative, which tells the real story. One can imagine without too

much struggle that the custodian's story has not been told because it is not important to the persons engaged in the dominant discourse who explore leadership in schools.

Why is this? Is it that clean, safe schools are not important? Is it that if all of the trashcans remain full for a week, it doesn't matter? Is it that everyone can just wear a jacket because the building is cold because the custodian is ill? Is it that because the janitor is African-American and he or she is the only African-American adult in the school and the students he or she informally mentors will not notice if he or she is suddenly not working there any longer? Is it that custodial work is dirty work and persons working in this low-status occupation are invisible?

### *Dirty work*

These questions highlight what society takes for granted from those persons who do the dirty work for other human beings—for the desire to delegate dirty work to someone else is common among humans (Hughes, 1958, 1994, p. 64). “Delegation of dirty work is also part of the process of occupational mobility” (Hughes, 1994, p. 64). Generally, administrators and leaders in schools reinforce the sub-status of the custodian by delegating dirty work to those in that occupation. Custodial work is considered a lowly occupation. Because of this disparity in occupational status, school leaders have not recognized the contributions of these staff in the research literature.

I suggest that the reason why school leaders have not given voice to persons in custodial work, (as evidenced in the void on this topic in the research

literature), is because not only is it an occupation with low social status, but it is an occupation generally that is dominated by minority workers, generally women and persons of minority ethnicity (particularly in the private sector of household domestic work), (Roberts, 1997), which the overwhelmingly white male dominated school administrative leadership does not recognize.

### *Critical race theory and work*

Thus, the untold story of the role of custodial workers in public schools has heretofore remained untold due to oppressions involving gender and economic status. Fortunately though, critical race theorists who tell the untold story, seek to “give voice to marginalized persons and their communities” (Aguirre, 2000, p. 320). Within critical race theory, persons of marginalized race and gender become the focus of the stories critical race theorists seek to unmask. Critical race theorists use storytelling as a methodological tool in research studies, “that challenge the majority’s stories in which it constructs for itself ‘a form of shared reality in which its own superior position is seen as natural’” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2412). Critical race stories offer “both the minority and the majority the opportunity to ‘enrich their own reality’ and acquire the ‘ability to see the world through other’s eyes’” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2439). Critical race stories seek to bring people together as do many kinds of work.

Hughes (1994) says “most kinds of work bring people together in definable roles, thus the janitor and his tenant, the doctor and his patient, the teacher and the pupil...” (p. 65). Certainly the janitor and his “tenant” -- the public school, -- must collaborate on several levels. However, “part of the social psychological

problem of the occupation is the maintenance of a certain freedom and social distance from these people most crucially and intimately concerned with one's work " (Hughes, 1994, 65).

These distances and oppressions are highlighted by McIntosh in Martinez-Salazar (1998), who finds that oppression cuts across race, gender, and social class lines and is interwoven between these. Additionally, while some of those oppressions are visible, others are embedded forms that the dominant discourse chooses not to see. The blindness of the dominant discourse supports the appropriateness of qualitative study for revealing the richness of contributions by those persons who are not part of the dominant discourse according to Giorgi (2003). He argues for "a different kind of science...a different kind of rigor." He states:

I am arguing for an approach that includes a philosophical anthropology of what it means to be human. I am arguing for a non-reductionistic science that focuses on essential human characteristics.... It allows all dimensions of being human to be acknowledged and claims that they are worthy of study and deeper understanding....It realizes that all human achievements are correlated with the activities of consciousness. (p. 182)

In summary, there are a number of sociological and psychological factors that have lead to the untold story of custodial and other "invisible workers" in schools. At the heart of it all is this sociological concept of noticing and that "noticing reflects a standpoint" (Witkin, 2000, p. 4). As I see it, in public schools where a hierarchical organization exists in relationships between pupil and teacher,

teacher and principal, support staff and superintendent, the untold story of the invisible worker exists because those persons with the vantage point have subordinated others to the point of silence. Although building community is espoused by school leaders, the proliferation of this hierarchy in effect stymies leadership effectiveness in building true community unless the leader begins to take notice.

### **Challenging the Way Types of Work Are Valued**

In addition to the untold story in general, other sociological researchers have tapped deeper into the relationships between occupations, social status, and the concept of meaningful work. The view we have of work originates from our own perspective within the social structure and, therefore, the way we view and value particular occupations is dependent upon our own social location (Looker & Thiesen, 1999, p. 226). Our “images of work are welded to images of the kind of person who does that work” (Glick & Perrault, 1995, p. 565; Kefting, Berger, & Wallace, 1978). Generally, “certain types of work are done by those with low status and therefore become undesirable” (Rubin, 1994, p. 40).

Moreover, the “social location of the incumbents of various jobs imparts additional meaning to the work they do” (Looker & Thiesen, 1999, p. 226; Terkel, 1974). It is like a vicious cycle. Persons of little social recognition take these low-paying, little respected jobs and, because they possess little social recognition, they have no voice, and, because they do jobs undesirable to other persons, they are attributed low social status, and so the silencing continues. As though social class and race were not enough to reinforce the undesirability of the custodian’s

occupation, additionally, it is because occupations that are dominated by males are more attractive to both men and women (Ahlberg, 1988). Because custodial and domestic work, in particular, has long been considered women's work (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1990; Luxton, 1983; Wilson, 1986), the importance of custodial work is further suppressed.

An entire body of research exists that reveals the menial perspective from which domestic work (primarily by women) is viewed, but it also explores how the (particularly) women who do this kind of work are exploited by their employers (Meagher, 1997, 2002; Looker & Theisen, 1999). Some additional research captures the essence of the morality of having anyone perform dirty work for any other human. In fact, the very ethical nature of hiring domestic workers "damages domestic workers, women as a group, and society as a whole" (Meagher, 2002).

Custodial work in a school setting seems to have been removed from some of the problematic ethical and exploitive issues feminist researchers articulate regarding domestic work performed by women (Meagher, 2002). However, because a singular oppression never exists in a vacuum but rather there is an "intersectionality with other forms of subordination" (Bernal, 2002, p. 110), there too always exist these multiple layers of oppression. And so continues the silencing of the stories of the contributions that custodians in schools make to the success of schools.

## The Challenge to Value Custodial Work

### *Knowledge of students*

Custodians as well as other school workers, such as secretaries and maintenance workers, perform their tasks in the midst of student populations while students are changing classes in the halls, getting books out of lockers after hours, and so forth. Not only does the location of where custodians, and other school workers perform their jobs enhance their opportunities for interactions with students, but also, because of their availability while administrators are in offices and teachers are engaged in teaching class, custodians are in a unique position to develop relationships with students. Oftentimes, in addition to their logistic availability, custodians and other support staff have longevity within the community, whereas administrators focused on career advancement do not have this longevity. Familial ties and community ties that these custodial workers may have enhance their connectivity to students (Trump, 2000). According to Larry Watkins, director of school safety and security for Flint (Michigan) Community Schools, “Perhaps one of the most overlooked safety assets the custodian offers is his or her ability to develop positive relationships with students”. Some students “feel a greater rapport with the custodian than they do with teachers or administrators ... and the custodian is in a position to influence students in positive ways’ ”.

Because the custodian is in the halls, in the restrooms, and so forth, “they are in a position to see and hear things among students that teachers and administrators might not pick up,” says JoAnn Snellenberger with the St. Louis

Public Schools and Building and Grounds department (Trump, 2000, p. 5). For example, “the custodian may see students who are misbehaving, or the custodian may hear comments about an upcoming fight, or about a student who has a weapon, or about any other type of safety issue that the custodian can then report to the front office”. Additionally, the custodian may be the first person visitors come in contact with and the custodian can be cognizant and likely will be aware of strangers to the campus (Trump, 2000).

### *Building safety support*

Although custodians provide these many opportunities for awareness and interaction during the school day, the role of twenty-first century schools has changed with many of those schools providing after hours programming and community activities where school safety needs extend beyond normal school hours. “After 3:00 p.m., the custodian becomes the building manager... because he or she is the only one on hand representing the school” (Trump, 2000, p. 6 ).

Custodians also serve a purpose beyond these informal connections to students and visitors. The custodian is also frequently the facility expert when it comes to “gas and electrical operations, sprinklers and fire systems, alarm and bell controls, the phones and public address system, the locking system for classroom and building doors, and all the unique nooks and crannies of the building” (Trump, 2000, p. 5 ). In a post-Columbine and post 911 world, the custodian, with the dual role of facility expert, becomes critical in the event a crisis requiring knowledge of building operations arises. Kenneth Trump, president and CEO of National School Safety and Security Services, based in

Cleveland, queries, “After all, who knows better the physical aspects of our school buildings? Not even the principal” (Trump, 2000, p. 5 ).

### **The Challenge to Understand Oppression**

*Oppressed people tend to be witty.*

*Saul Bellow, year unknown*

#### *Academic oppression*

As I begin this section on oppression as a white, somewhat privileged by education, first generation academician, I expect to emphasize the oppression experienced by my grandfather as a blue-collar, non-formally educated custodian. I have elaborated in this literature review the several causes for why the custodian’s story remains untold in the professional leadership literature and realize that, perhaps, not only is school leadership as a gatekeeper of its professional research base to blame, but perhaps even academe itself in general. Perhaps, as Leah Vande Berg (1997) suggests, academe must grapple with “our responsibility for privileging some voices into the academic domain and for failing to welcome, to include, to ‘voice’ others” (p. 87). Strine(1997) reiterates the necessity of including the “heuristic potential of narrative voice as an analytic trope for mapping the psychodynamics of cultural ideologies” (p. 449). Since 1997, obviously narrative voice has progressed far as being a means of being “heard” in the professional research literature. However, a recent experience of mine at the 25<sup>th</sup> Annual David L. Clark Graduate Student Seminar, for which I was nominated and invited to attend, revealed to me that at least one professor in academe still keeps the gate on studies such as mine. Indeed, in

reviewing my work, he (older, white and male) chose to berate, criticize, and threaten the ethical nature of my work, obviously serving as oppressor and not willing to privilege my voice into the academic domain by choice of my topic and research.

That being said, it is not difficult to understand the intersectionality of multiple layers of oppression and those persons scratching and clawing at the bottom of the heap who literally see no way to the top to get a breath of air, to have a voice. It is absolutely my attempt to add my voice to those in academe who would have these stories heard. As I begin, I am careful, though, as a novice researcher to mention that I do not intentionally essentialize groups of oppressed persons by practicing identity politics and articulate that I attempt to not simplify or discount the “myriad of experiences that shape” (Bernal, 2002,p. 118) unique persons within those operational classifications of race, class, gender or other groups.

### *Oppression defined*

According to Paulo Freire (1987), “Oppression is overwhelming control; an act is oppressive only when it prevents (people) from being more fully human” (p. 42). Freire says that:

Oppressors see only themselves as “human beings” and other people as “things”. For the oppressors, there exists only one right: their rights to live in peace, over against the right, not always even recognized, but simply conceded, of the oppressed to survival. And they make this concession

only because the existence of the oppressed is necessary to their own existence. (p. 43)

In other words, those in “power” in our schools, and generally in society are overwhelmingly white, and overwhelmingly male and those persons have been in the majority particularly in America since the days of our founding fathers. The world works for them. They do not feel oppression. Frequently, when they do recognize someone of a different race or culture as a person rather than a thing, these white oppressors grant themselves “doers of good deeds” all the while still maintaining that control while “buying” perhaps in their own minds salvation for making the world a better place while providing for those less fortunate. So long though as there exists an “us and them” recognition, oppression exists, the oppressor exists because there is still someone essentially less human, less important than they who are in control of the decision-making processes at whatever societal level. The privileged grant themselves this superiority because in their minds, “the world owes them a living.” The advantaged status some whites feel justified in defending is founded in the concept of historically-based racial superiority (Helms, 1994).

In order for this oppression to change, those who are in the majority culture would have to forego some of their power and influence and many are not ready to do that (ASHE-ERIC, 2002). It is only through projects such as this dissertation and the message presented by persons like myself, white and female, somewhat privileged by education (that I have paid for myself), but still in touch with where I came from, that keeps me cognizant daily of the need to

ameliorate oppressive forces by whatever means available that will eventually be able to minimize oppressive forces in society. It is not only the oppression that is intolerable, but even critical is how this societal oppression affects “the development of individuals from racial, ethnic, and other social minority groups” (ASHE-ERIC, p. 18) that is at the very least inhuman.

### *Themes of oppression*

In this section, I explore and elaborate on these effects of oppression as they permeate the lives of those who are not majority. It is the pervasive nature of oppression and its infusion in social institutions as well as in the minds of the oppressed that makes breaking the cycle of oppression so difficult to break (Bell, 1997). Furthermore, the restrictive nature of oppression both through societal structuring and the ensuing material constraints begin to preclude a person’s life chances and even their own mental sense of possibility. It is through these societal hierarchies that benefit dominant groups in these subtle yet pervasive ways that further characterize oppression. The effect at times is snowballing, complex, and matrix-like in nature where power and privilege of the dominant group is multiplied by these overlapping societal structures. It’s like because someone has a friend who knows a friend who knows the “secret handshake,” that each of those persons in the network are afforded the keys to the kingdom. All of these overlapping oppressions eventually result in becoming internalized not only within the oppressed, but the mindset of the oppressor as well. This overarching system of domination through various “isms” including “racism, sexism, classism, anti-Semitism, ablism, and heterosexism” becomes nearly

impossible for the oppressed to permeate and navigate through in order to be heard (Bell, 1997).

*Social oppression matrix model*

A third model takes these overriding themes and intensifies the effects of them “where one social group denigrates another social group to promote larger gains for themselves” (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997).

This model is known as the social oppression matrix, according to Hardiman and Jackson (1997). Social oppression occurs when these key elements are evident:

1. The agent group has the power to define and name reality and determine what is ‘normal’ and ‘real’ or ‘correct.’
2. Harassment, discrimination, exploitation, marginalization, and other forms of differential and unequal treatment are institutionalized and systematic. These acts often do not require the conscious thought or effort of individual members of the agent group but are rather part of business as usual that becomes embedded in social structures over time.
3. Psychological colonization of the target group occurs through socializing the oppressed to internalize their oppressed condition and collude with the oppressor’s ideology and social system.

4. The target group's culture, language, and history are misrepresented, discounted, or eradicated, and the dominant group's culture is imposed. (p. 17)

In summary, social oppression exists when one group is the beneficiary of privileges because of their social group membership (Hardiman and Jackson, 1997). The dynamic, under-girding nature of this matrix as well as the fact that these "privileges are supported by institutions and structures of a society as well as by individuals who assist in the operation, support, maintenance, and perpetuation of these benefits" (ASHE-ERIC, p.18) will require the similar ongoing, tireless, and relentless persistence of those who would eradicate it.

### **Challenging Unitary Subjectivity**

#### *Subjectivity defined*

As I began to explore the concept of non-unitary subjectivity as a possible explanation for the varied behaviors of my grandfather in his role as school custodian, I sought first to define subjectivity. I found that, "Subjectivity is a central concept in the social sciences today, but there is no real agreement as to what subjectivity actually means. Some researchers use the concept of subjectivity as synonymous with the concept of self" (Nordtug, 2004, p. 87). Still others distinguish the two concepts. Lupton (1996), "argues that the self usually refers to the unified self, while subjectivity describes the manifold ways in which individual understand themselves in relation to others and experience their lives" (p. 87). I found in my research in examining how Mr. John narrated his identity that I agree with Nordtug (2004) who emphasizes that the concept of subjectivity

deals with the experience of ourselves in language” (p. 88). Indeed, Mr. John narrated his identity based on the context in which he found himself at any particular time.

*Accessing subjectivity through situated responsiveness*

As you might imagine, narrating one’s identity based on particular contexts could cause some confusion both for the self narrated and those with whom one interacts. Walkerdine( 1990) believes “conflicts are the most interesting sites for locating subjectivity and gaining understanding of how subjectivity becomes fragmented” ( p. 88). Indeed, it was those very contradictions in Mr. John’s behavior that brought me to seek coherence that I eventually found in the concept of non-unitary subjectivity. Bloom (1998) agrees and suggests that “subjectivity can best be accessed and studied, namely through language” (p. 15). Mr. John shared pleasantries with female support staff; rough, sometimes raunchy humor with his maintenance peers; and conducted himself with professionals adequately and admirably enough to overall gain their respect in spite of a few ongoing power struggles. Being able to navigate in these various contexts through narrative reveals at least for Clark (2001), that “it is through narrative that the complex self is made visible” (p. 15). Truly Mr. John’s ability to story or narrate himself particularly through story aligns with the concept that not only is the complex self made visible, but also that identity is created and maintained through the development of narrative (Linde, 1993; Clark, 2001). It is then the language one uses as multiple portals to the various facets of one’s

personality or one's non-unitary subjectivity that "offers a way of accessing the various selves through their different narratives" (Clark, 2001, p. 15).

Ellsworth and Miller (1996) take the concept of non-unitary subjectivity a step further when they suggest that one way to make sense of conflicted subject positions is to examine what they call situated responsiveness. "Situated responsiveness refers to the idea that responses to particular situations must not be generic, but specific to the complexities of the situation. It also suggests that individuals may call upon different strategies to respond to given situations" (Bloom, 1998, p. 89). Functioning as Mr. John did in the multiple roles of custodian/facility expert/adult/male/uneducated person of low socioeconomic status simultaneously is blurry, non-unitary and certainly not simple or straightforward. Walkerdine(1990) says that power dynamics are fluid because of the multiple roles persons can simultaneously hold in discourse. That paired with situated responsiveness specific to the complexities of a particular situation-- from negotiating with the superintendent regarding facility issues to the typical male bonding between maintenance peers in the bus barn, caused Mr. John to need to be able to navigate and shift between maintaining those working relationships positively while still other times fending off oppression. This ability to narrate himself made him a storyteller extraordinaire.

#### *An alternative script*

Mr. John in rewriting the male master script – assuming power from his powerless occupation wrote beyond his own ending (DuPlessis, 1985). He made conflict central although he masked it in his own narrative – his storytelling, his

joking, his daily drama. His rejection of a patriarchal script (Smith, 1987, Blume, 1998), was ahead of his time and more likely mirrors a script akin to Sartre's (1963) progressive-regressive method bounded in understanding the lives of people within their unique historical context. What I mean by this is that, "this progressive-regressive method is an analytic process for moving forward and backward through a personal narrative to chart significant events that recur in a person's life in different forms over time" (Bloom, p. 65). According to Sartre (1963), each individual's life "develops in spirals; it passes again and again by the same points of intersection in the spiral." According to Bloom (1998), the progressive-regressive method is the process of examining these points "by considering and reconsidering life experiences in light of the analysis of previous experiences" (Bloom, 1998, p. 64).

The historical contexts of Mr. John's life included living through the depression of 1929 and the economic aftermath of WW II in 1945. He was thirteen in 1929 and did not serve in the military due to physical limitations. Any identity he may have been afforded through military service did not exist, and certainly socio-economically, he as a young man moving off the family farm into a custodial occupation did not enjoy any identity advantages. Sartre (1963) studied the societal, historical, and cultural limitations individuals tolerated and he believed that the individual had the ability to change the terms by which they live in the world. I'm sure Mr. John never heard of Sartre, but Mr. John most certainly did ascertain a means of escaping invisibility. Sartre's andro-centric analysis lends credence to my premise that Mr. John's practice of situated

responsiveness through story became him; he became story. He did experience an internal shift in subjectivity. He wrote beyond the ending.

### **Solution: The Power of Humor**

*The nature of humor is complex because it resides not only in the logic and content of what is said, but in the performance of the teller, in the relationship between the teller and the audience, and in the immediate context of the instance.*

R. Walker & I. Goodson, 1977, p. 212

“Given its ubiquity in everyday human relations, it is surprising that humor as a social phenomenon has drawn so little attention from social scientists. It is as if we have bought into the minimizing claim that ‘it’s only a joke’ ” (Quinn, 2000, p. 1160). In fact, humor serves not only to entertain, but by being masked as “entertainment,” joking can really have multiple functions all the while appearing as entertainment.

Generally, humor, surprisingly is most often about power. “What is said and silenced in a joke can reveal a lot about the distribution and practice of respect, identity, and membership. We joke to say who is a member of our group and who is an outsider”(Quinn, 2000, p. 1160; Fine, 1987; Miller, 1997; & Kanter 1977). Certainly this was true as Mr. John and his maintenance peers “bonded” with their blue-collar humor. Likewise, Mr. John “bonded” with female support staff as he “brightened their day” with pleasantries.

Humor served several purposes for Mr. John. Sometimes humor was a way to pass the interminable boredom of long hours sweeping classrooms. But

sometimes, humor was something very different for Mr. John. Sometime humor was something very serious. Sometimes humor and story afforded Mr. John the only means he knew of to combat the multiple subtle and overt oppressions in his work environment.

### *Purposes of humor*

#### *Humor to defeat boredom*

As a dapper young man of twenty-five when Mr. John began working in this rural school district in 1941 with only a grade school education, I'm sure he didn't have any realization of the working climate he was about to enter. Peter Woods (1976) says laughter is good medicine for schooling and although his research focuses primarily on the oppressiveness of schools upon pupils, what he and others say about the culture of schools and humor as a response are appropriate to this study. For Dubberley (1993), humor in schools is "produced as an effect of the tensions between the local working class culture of pupils and the middle class authoritarian culture of the teaching establishment (p. 88). Willis (1976) sensed a:

"Parallelism" between the school counter-culture of humor and the shop floor. When the lad reaches the factory there is no shock, only recognition...he is immediately familiar with many of the shop-floor practices: defeating boredom, time-wasting, heavy and physical humor...(p. 193).

This insight of humor's purpose being to defeat boredom in working class jobs is helpful in understanding one purpose humor served in Mr. John's life. That is

that humor no doubt served to pass the many quiet hours alone sweeping and cleaning late at night when the rest of the staff had gone. Conjuring up drama for the next day as well as time to think of subtle ways to combat oppressive actions and comments from administrators no doubt filled Mr. John's thoughts as evidenced by his fifty year long run as stand-up comedian on that rural school district "stage."

*Humor as deflection and not taking it personal*

One response to humor (and oppression I propose) is not taking it personal. According to Clair (1993), an appropriate reframing which can divert the intended power breach, is to reframe by refusing to take the joke personally. According to Quinn (2000), not taking it personally allows a person to "maintain the emotional cool necessary to resist chain yanking and maintain relationships in the face of these power moves" (p. 1168). Reaction reveals "what everyone who has faced power humor knows" and that is "which lines to cross" (Quinn, 2000, p. 1173) and how to get a reaction.

To be able to not take a joke (or oppression) personally is an act of deflection. "In not taking it personal, its veracity as descriptive of one's person, one's true, complex, and multifaceted self, is rejected" (Quinn, 2000, p. 1168). By not responding, "this tactic infers that the comment says more about the speaker than the target" (Quinn, 2000, p. 1169).

In chapter four, I explore several instances where Mr. John effectively used humor to deflect oppression, and at least one instance where the target

refused to respond and silenced the power struggle momentarily, but evidently fueled it for all time.

### *Two types of humor*

#### *Insider humor*

One type of humor which surfaced in the interviews in this study relate to insider humor that is frequently used as a form of male bonding typical among blue collar workers. Fine (1976) says:

Insider humor may be employed in the service of group solidarity and identity. It can act as a mechanism for building and reinforcing cohesion which derives from shared experiences, particularly experiences which are seen as essentially private and localized. (p. 138)

As evidenced by a number of stories I share based on interactions between Mr. John and his maintenance peers, it was truly those shared experiences in the everyday work world and the solidarity based on that “work play and pithy vocabulary (Quinn, 2000, p. 1165), that made humor less an outcome and more so a means of survival, -- even a means of identity formation. Kehily & Nayak (1997) believe that humor is “constitutive of these very identities” rather than a by-product of working-class masculinity (p. 70).

#### *Yanking chains*

Yanking chains...is a form of entertainment that attempts, through insults couched in humor or prank, to ‘get a rise’ out of someone, that is, to produce a socially inappropriate display of emotion. To get someone to ‘rise to the bait’ – with its obvious display of embarrassment or anger—

signals the successful yank. You have them; you have control and they don't, and therein lies the pleasure of the act. (Quinn, 2000, p. 1161)

In at least one interview with an administrator, it seemed that “yanking chains” was a reciprocal technique used both by this administrator and Mr. John to each get a “rise out of the other.” Whether the situation called for Mr. John being “commanded” to accomplish a particular task immediately, something that this administrator obviously knew would annoy Mr. John, or Mr. John in return refusing the task, waiting instead for example for this administrator to shorten a Christmas tree for a teacher (too short) only for Mr. John to arrive two days later, saw in hand, ready to complete the task. This reciprocal “yanking of chains” and the oft refusal to respond on either’s part created the oppressive tension evidenced in numerous instances between the power of expertise held by Mr. John and the formal power of the administrators. When used to avert oppression or for any other purpose, this type of humor is an “oblique display of power and control disguised as good fun” (Quinn, 2000). For example, this administrator referred to instances like this as “little tricks Mr. John had for him the new principal” choosing to cloak his anger instead in a seemingly harmless comment.

Cloaked in the seemingly jovial, the target is left with the awkward question: Is it an insult or just a joke? If the former, one should protest or risk being seen as a pushover. Yet to take a joke seriously signals one’s chains and potentially marks one as socially clumsy or overly sensitive. This ambiguity serves to bound the target’s response, effectively short circuiting direct complaint” (Quinn, 2000, p. 1163).

Throughout this administrator's interview, he laughed repeatedly and had these looks like he was reminiscing in fact possibly how Mr. John "got him" and perhaps even enjoying now the successful yank while simultaneously feeling that recurring power struggle he shared with Mr. John. I gathered that this administrator fancied himself as having developed a rather masterfully calm exterior and had enjoyed being center-stage as principal, but resented the occasions when Mr. John became actor principal.

### **Solution: The Power of Story**

*Why do any of us write? First of all, we write to tell stories.*

*Joanne Cooper, 1991*

#### *Reflection*

Creating story is about creating an identity. People like Mr. John who are expert at story create a particular identity. Is this an inherent characteristic of them? Do they work so hard at creating an external narrative that comprises their identity because they have something to hide? Did Mr. John become an expert at creating this public self, this public identity because if he did not create such an overt identity, he sensed that he would surely remain invisible? My premise of course is that his creation of this storied identity did allow him visibility. Linde(1993) speaks of several overarching characteristics inherent in narrating the self.

#### *Narrative as a relational act*

Linde (1993) considers the "act of narration itself a relational act" (p. 112). By this Linde means that "narratives of personal experience are frequently told as

moral or behavioral *exempla*, suggesting how the addressee should behave in a similar circumstance in his or her life” (p. 112). An example of this would be sharing with another person how one might handle a particular situation to sort of “compare notes” on appropriate behavior in a particular situation. By doing so, the narrator can reify his/her own actions or gain a better understanding of how a particular situation could have been handled. Sharing these exchanges allows for creation of relationships between participants. I have focused primarily in this dissertation on how Mr. John created his own identity. As example for narrative as a relational act however, I focus for a moment on how this school district created its identity – in particular, how it narrated itself through posthumous story about Mr. John. As various supernatural occurrences, strange noises, and so forth occurred and were observed among the staff in this district, they had to collectively and likely informally determine how they would narrate these occurrences. In effect, they compared notes and they shared similar circumstances to determine how they would narrate the posthumous Mr. John.

*I am now deep enough into this research project where today I get a sense of coming full circle as all of these mini literature reviews start to converge and mesh, reifying the concepts and ideas in each other. It strikes me as so odd, yet so reassuring that the narrative in blue-collar humor mirrors the scholarly structure of purposes of narrative.*

#### *Narrative to establish group membership*

In life story, most people belong to any number of identifiable groups. Some are innate such as gender/age/occupation, and yet others are group

memberships that either evolve or are sought after. Regardless, these groups all have their own narrative, their own shared experiences which create “group membership for the self and solidarity for the group” (Linde, 1993, p. 114).

There are various means of maintaining group values including “the exchange of narratives about shared interests” (Linde, 1993, p. 114). Within these exchanges, other behaviors or language reveal knowledge or intimacy of frequent contact such as knowing something about someone’s family that is shared in conversation. Other negotiated values such as task difficulty or moral ambiguity particularly in relation to on the job relationships and incidents provide fertile ground for reinforcing or negating relationships. As I referenced earlier, these same characteristics for group membership parallel the characteristics of the research on male-bonding and blue-collar humor.

#### *Reflexivity of narrative*

“The ability to relate to oneself externally, as an object or other” (Linde, 1993, p. 120) is essential especially as related to narrative. Over his lifetime as Mr. John “narrated” himself, constantly observing, reflecting and correcting the self he created as we all do, he likely simultaneously made more of his “narrated” self visible by virtue of the amount of “story-ing” he did, and possibly less of his real identity visible as masked by this public self. Linde(1993) says:

Because of its social function, narrative is crucially involved with the social evaluation of persons and actions; it is always involved in the question of whether an action (and hence an actor) is expected or unexpected, proper or incorrect. Such judgments are not only—indeed, not primarily –

external. Each speaker needs to be able to reflect, to judge, perhaps to enjoy the self, and this must be done from a removed standpoint. (p. 121)

This research project has in effect hinged on the reflexivity of narrative.

The fact that virtually all information yielded about Mr. John is that remembered posthumously. This is a story of the stories people remember about the self Mr. John narrated. There are layers. Within these layers, there is ample room for skewing the representation of Mr. John either one way or the other. Because I have sought to reveal contradictions and the various interactions of Mr. John with various persons in various roles has allowed for trustworthiness to reign within this reflexive process. According to Linde(1993), "The act of narrating itself requires self-regard and editing, since, a distance in time and standpoint necessarily separates the actions being narrated from the act of narration" (Linde, p. 122). The fact that I have written this analysis of the life history of Mr. John eleven years after his death likely has some impact on the telling of the stories of Mr. John. Whether Mr. John's true self was visible was not important to him. What was important was in the midst of oppression was that he navigated his identity – his visibility through story.

## CHAPTER III

### METHOD

*As chroniclers of our own stories, we write to create ourselves, to give voice to our experiences, to learn who we are and who we have been. Our diaries become the stories of our journeys through life, stories that are both instructive and transforming in the telling and the listening. These stories, these myriad voices, then serve to instruct and transform society, to add to the collective voice we call culture. Diarists, then both as researchers and research subjects, begin to heal themselves and the split society has created between subject and object. Thus diaries, these insignificant objects filled with the simple words of our lives, can serve to make us whole.*

*Joanne Cooper, 1991, p. 111*

### Introduction

The purpose of this study is to uncover the life history of Mr. John, a rural school custodian, in expectation that those findings would inform school leaders regarding the vital role that invisible and auxiliary workers serve in schools. It is expected that through qualitative inquiry, the multitude of daily activities of this one man as a rural school custodian for more than fifty-three years in this same district would serve as exemplar of the contributions of these “invisible” workers.

Finally, as is characteristic of emergent ethnographic qualitative design, the answer to the begging question which emerged after the first round of interviews regarding how one man could persist for fifty-three years in an

invisible occupation, has resulted in the realization that at least for this particular man, the power of story through his own charismatic persona of storyteller, enabled him to forge an identity portal through invisibility to self-actualization. Thus, much of the research analysis of this project revealed the power dynamics of story and how that storyteller persona facilitated identity formation in this man's life and in turn, how that identity formation facilitated his noteworthy contribution to the success of this school district though he was not a formal educator.

While this study is ethnographic in focus, the resulting heuristic study became intensely auto-ethnographic. Patton (1990) says the "uniqueness of heuristic inquiry is the extent to which it legitimizes and places at the fore these personal experiences, reflections, and insights of the researcher" (p. 72). This tacit knowing or "inner essence of human understanding, what we know but can't articulate," (Patton, 1990, p. 72) has evolved alongside the ethno-methodological question in this study regarding how people (Mr. John) made sense of his everyday life "so as to behave in socially acceptable ways" (Patton, 1990, p. 73).

To address the research questions, it was essential that an appropriate research design and method be selected. The remainder of this chapter describes that design, the data collection procedures, data analysis, and trustworthiness and credibility of the student.

### **Purpose**

As a current public school administrator, I have chosen to write the life history of my grandfather's life in the context of invisible workers in schools

attempting to highlight not only his contribution, but also the here-to-fore invisible contributions of other auxiliary staff with similar longevity and impact in schools. Because the dominant discourse in traditional educational leadership is led by the professionally trained educators and administrators who seldom recognize this counter-story, I seek to make visible the contributions of these invisible workers through my grandfather as exemplar.

### **Research Questions**

1. What was the life history of Mr. John, a small town school custodian, as retold by informants knowledgeable about his life?
2. What was unique about Mr. John that allowed him to overcome his invisibility?

### **Research Design**

#### *Introduction*

This study employed qualitative methods and used the snowball sampling technique for selecting interview participants for researching the life history of Mr. John, a custodian in a rural school district in Texas for more than fifty-three years.

Traditional sociology attempted to “aggregate people, treating diversity as error variance, in search of what is common to all” and by doing so “often learn what is true of no one in particular” (Josselson, 1995, p. 32). “Narrative approaches allow us to witness the individual in her or his complexity and recognize that although some phenomena will be common to all, some will remain unique” (Josselson, 1995, p. 32). Richardson (1997) uses as a central

image for qualitative inquiry the crystal, rather than a triangle. I find this an appropriate metaphor for a study of the multi-faceted subjectivities of one man's personality. In that fragmentation, in those reflections—through those mirrors and prisms images gleam and glint, overlap and meld into a paradoxical and complex man. L'Engle (1972) says, the more contradiction and paradox, the more complex the personality.

Qualitative research for this study has been selected because in creating and interpreting the life history of Mr. John, both personal and public, interview and narrative analysis of those interviews along with artifact analysis are the most appropriate methodology to reveal the persona of Mr. John.

#### *Snowball sampling defined*

The snowball sample, also known as chain sampling, is “a group of cases that are selected by asking one person to recommend someone suitable as a case of the phenomenon of interest, who then recommends another person who is a suitable case or who knows of potential cases; the process continues until the desired sample size is achieved” (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996, p. 770).

#### *Instrumentation*

In qualitative study, the researcher is the instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, Patton, 1990). The principal sources of data for a qualitative researcher are interviews, observations, and document analysis (Patton, 1990). In ethnographic study, interviewing is frequently unstructured. “The idea is to get people to open up and let them express themselves in their own terms, at their own pace” (Bernard, 2002, p. 205). Bernard (2002) also suggests that semi-

structured interviewing is desirable particularly when you wish to “demonstrate that you are fully in control of what you want from an interview but leaves both you and your respondent free to follow new leads” (p. 205).

For this study, I selected more of a semi-structured interview approach including an interview protocol composed of a list of eight questions designed to get the interviewees to talk. Desirable was that this list of questions would serve as a springboard rather than a restrictive noose for interviewee’s responses. This semi-structured approach seemed a good fit to provide me with some confidence and structure as a novice researcher because of the group of informants who would be involved in my study. Those informants were persons who worked with and respected my deceased grandfather. Also, because although this study was somewhat exploratory in nature, I did have a primary goal in mind and that was gleaning from these interviews information and insight particularly focused on my grandfather’s life and contribution to this school district so that having a focus for those conversations seemed appropriate. With that in mind, I then took Bernard’s (2002) advice. He suggests, “ The rule is: Get people onto a topic of interest and get out of the way. Let the informant provide information that he or she thinks is important” (p. 209).

Also a concern of part of the research design is the development of rapport between researcher and participant. Caution however, should be taken not to establish over-rapport because at that point trustworthiness of the study could come into question.

## Data Collection

### *Participants*

Initially I contacted the current superintendent of this school district to secure his permission to conduct research. Critical to the success of this project though I did not realize initially, was the personal interest he took in the project because of the value he places on this type of research and the fact that he too considers himself a writer as well. This serendipitous entry afforded by this current superintendent was facilitated further by the groundwork he laid with who with staff members regarding the purpose of my project. He was instrumental in initial informant selection as he was able to make several key recommendations by his extensive knowledge of district staff and their experience within the school district. I make some clarification regarding his recommendations; these were not restrictive. There was no one that was selected by the administration to not contribute to the study. As researcher, I was allowed complete access to anyone on campus or within the informants in the community. I visited the campus on three different occasions and conducted both scheduled and spontaneous interviews. All of the participants I asked to participate agreed to do so and provided the required informed written consent.

Participants for the project did include a number of the superintendent's recommendations and those persons in turn recommended triple the number of informants I initially projected for the project.

From the large field of potential informants generated by this snowball sample, I selected informants for the first round of interviews that would provide

me with a cross-section of levels of interaction with Mr. John. The informants selected through the snowball sampling process for this study included seventeen persons including a former principal, a former business manager, a former board member, several current and one former secretary who worked in that district while my grandfather was living and working, several teachers who worked in that district during the time he was employed, several former students, now teachers, in that district who were able to share both student and teacher perspectives of the man, and five previous maintenance/transportation peers who remained employed in that district. Additionally, my grandfather's brother was one of these nineteen persons as well as two of my immediate family members. All of these persons brought knowledge of their long-term relationships with my grandfather as invaluable insight regarding him as a person and insight into his contributions in that district as well. Additionally, insight from myself as granddaughter as well as family reminiscences contributed to this collective process and added credence to insights shared from informants. Finally, as one means of ensuring trustworthiness and credibility, I asked my brother and sister to read the initial dissertation draft. Both concurred that Mr. John was as they remembered him.

As I continued interviewing staff, there were several potential informants mentioned by those I had already interviewed. Therefore, I specifically sought out these additional informants. This embedded member checking and triangulation, so far as providing informants reputed by several informants to be

appropriate, contributed to the trustworthiness of the study. I elaborate further in this section regarding trustworthiness and credibility.

### *Interviewing*

The research protocol involved the plan to interview fifteen informants individually with a list of eight generic research questions whose primary focus was to “get informants to talk” about their interactions, reminiscences, and relationship to my grandfather, Mr. John, in his role as custodian in this rural school district. I successfully completed the required number of individual interviews in this manner and a couple of additional interviews primarily with informants that other informants in the sampling process insisted that I speak with.

To my surprise however, (characteristic however of the emergent nature of qualitative study) informants in several cases actually self-selected not only their participation but the format for their participation. Additionally, although the protocol initially called for individual interviews, in at least two instances, those interviews involving maintenance workers, one group self-selected group format which provided for unique and interesting dynamics apart from the other individuals interviews conducted, and a second interview setting with two bus barn workers was a paired interview. Because of these unplanned, incidental interview settings, data emerged which likely would not have otherwise due to the group dynamics involved. I share my analysis of these findings in chapter four.

## **Data Analysis**

All interview sessions have been transcribed completely. Data interpretation began at the end of the first interview and has continued until completion of this research project. Stake (1988) describes qualitative research as a process where “issues, emerge, grow, and die. . . the course of the study cannot be charted in advance” (pp. 21-22). I have interpreted the interview data through narrative analysis using a feminist constructivist view of knowledge.

Multiple means of narrative analysis have been used to get at the life history and the story behind the story as I elaborate further in this chapter.

### *Transcribing*

As a novice qualitative researcher, all interviews were initially transcribed verbatim without regard to pauses and inflection within the responses. The researcher initially organized all responses into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and coded portions of each response by key word or words. Responses were also coded by interviewee, role (such as administrator, teacher, student, etc.), gender, setting of the interview, date, and researcher reactions. This archaic analysis served as a starting point for organizing the conversations and quotations from each of the informants and facilitated the more significant process of intensive narrative analysis of key conversations within the hours of interviews transcribed.

## *Narrative analysis*

### *Holistic*

As I started to review transcripts from interviews, I used Reissman's (1993) perspective that includes incorporation of some of Ginsburg's (1989) ideas that include looking at:

a comparison of plot lines across a series of first person accounts....The analyst examines causal sequence to locate the turning points that signal a break between the ideal and real, the cultural script and the counter-narrative. ( p. 30)

In addition, I not only read the narratives simply for content, but paid particular attention to the structure of each narrative. Reissman (1993) suggests that considerations such as how the narrative is organized and "why does an informant develop her tale this way in conversation with this listener?" (p. 61) are significant to note. Important as well is recognition that "individuals' narratives are situated in particular interactions but also in social, cultural, and institutional discourses" (p. 61). Finally, Reissman (1993) notes that investigators cannot overlook power issues such as which voice does the final product represent? Also significant is whether or not the text presented is open to other readings or interpretations.

Using this narrative analysis approach, the most evident themes from a review of the data included the theme of leadership, the theme of invisibility and oppression, and a hauntingly recurring reference throughout the data to story. (And I do mean hauntingly as I will later describe.)

### *Class analysis*

Intrigued by a piece by Gee (1985) where he/she compares the storytelling of lower class black children to middle class white teachers, I retranscribed an interview with maintenance workers and evaluated it for distinctions in how those workers narrated themselves as compared to how administrators narrated themselves.

### *Gee's discourse analysis*

I evaluated one particular conversation using primarily Gee's (1985) basic discourse analysis. By re-transcribing this conversation, this time attuning to pauses, inflections, silences, within the transcription, I was able to come to a number of conclusions supporting my premise of oppression and invisibility.

### *Artifact analysis and a timeline/crescendo of oppression*

The final narrative analysis I conducted was on data collected from artifacts given to me by other support staff in the district. This included primarily yearbook pages they copied for me. They were eager for me to have photographs of my grandfather, but at least one of those secretaries pointed out to me how my grandfather was singled out for recognition in early photographs, but not so later on. I pursue an analysis of these artifacts and other cumulative data to draw some conclusions about the rising oppression over the years in this district as evidenced by this data.

### **Trustworthiness and Credibility**

*It's a though a fisherman were to use multiple nets, each of which had a complement of holes, but placed together so that the holes in one net were covered by intact portions of other nets.*

*Yvonna Lincoln, 1985, p. 306.*

As a naturalistic researcher desiring to establish trustworthiness within and credibility about this project, I referred to Lincoln and Guba (1985) as well as others to ensure those features inherent for the success of this study.

In seeking trustworthiness, Lincoln & Guba (1985) says the researcher should be concerned with activities that increase the probability that credible findings will be produced. One of these, prolonged engagement, is the “investment of sufficient time to achieve certain purposes; learning the ‘culture’, testing for misinformation introduced by distortions either of the self or of the respondents, and building trust.” (p. 301). Additionally, trust must be established and it is facilitated by prolonged engagement that is “a must if adequate trust and rapport are to emerge” (p. 303).

Initially, trusting instinct primarily, and based on two conversations with complete strangers regarding my grandfather’s role in this school district as well as having personal insight/commitment to reveal the contributions of marginalized people, I wrote this research proposal. Further study of the qualitative process seemed on target with serendipitous occurrences like these conversations and embracing Cole and Knowles’ (2001) concept that the research frequently comes to the researcher begging to be investigated. Once

approved, I planned my strategy for entrance into this school district with but a novice understanding of how to proceed.

Using some common sense, I determined that I would not purposely do any interviewing on my first visit, but rather would spend the day casually meeting potential informants and attempting to get a “feel” for the culture. This process as described by Lincoln is crucial in establishing trust thus facilitating prolonged engagement with the potential informants. Lincoln (1985) supports this by insisting that the naturalistic researcher “spend enough time in becoming oriented to the situation, ‘soaking in the culture through his or her pores’ to be certain that the context is thoroughly appreciated and understood” (p. 302). Having been somewhat familiar with this small town culture and potential school culture from the relationship with my grandparents for over thirty years, I knew that several factors would be essential in the success of my research. First, as I entered this district and sought to establish communication and relationships with informants, I first sought to honor my grandfather’s legacy as my primary objective. I knew that being a doctoral student would likely be unimpressive or even haughty if I assumed that posture. It was certainly easier to assume the posture of granddaughter genuinely seeking to honor my grandfather’s legacy than any other posture as researcher.

At first, I was of course still very much romanced by the idea of my grandfather having such a positive legacy that indeed I came back and sent my chair a list of “gems” as I referred to them, regarding my grandfather’s leadership role in that school community. In fact, I wrote a poem dedicated to that school

community in appreciation of their hospitality. I was on the verge of “going native” as described by Lincoln and Guba (1981), “when an anthropologist has become so like the group he is studying that he ceases to consider himself (herself/sic) a part of the profession or cease to consider either his cultural or professional subgroup as his dominant reference group” (p. 4). Fortunately, my research chair prodded me to see contradictions in the story I was hearing from my informants.

*I just didn't see it, hear it or apparently want to. All I could think about was how could I tell a story about my grandfather that wasn't this sort of hero tale? Would I be forever excommunicated from my family? What would the informants think when they read the story?*

Lincoln and Guba (1985) tell us that “if the investigator produces field notes and makes interpretations that are continuously predictable from the original formulation, then that investigator has either not spent enough time on site or has persisted against all logic in his or her ethnocentric posture” (p. 302).

Researchers must also beware “distortions introduced by the respondents. Many of these are unintended” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln & Guba, (1985) caution:

During the period of prolonged engagement the investigator must decide whether he or she has risen above his or her own preconceptions, whether misinformation has been forthcoming and whether that misinformation is deliberate or unintended, and what posture to take to combat that problem. (p. 303)

As the granddaughter of my research subject, attention to the issues of a “Pollyanna” viewpoint and a realization that my informants likely considered their responses to me in light of my relationship to Mr. John had to be dealt with in establishing the trustworthiness and credibility of this project.

For me, as researcher, this was quite a quandary. I visited this district where my grandfather worked on three occasions, had various email contacts and phone calls throughout this data collection period and was aware that in the background, conversations regarding my project were taking place as shared by several informants. I ended up with more informants than I could use. Everyone in this town wanted to share their story of Mr. John; they were excited to say the least about the project. My impression was that I certainly built trust and rapport with my informants. In the midst of this lay an ethical question however, I pondered how to maintain that trust by telling his/their story, while also getting at the heart of what was going on. What was his life really like? What were his innermost thoughts? How did he feel in several of these instances where he was oppressed?

As these contradictions presented themselves, I began to find the heart of this research through narrative analysis which revealed the overriding theme of communication through story, and I began to realize that although this is not the story I expected to tell, the story the informants thought they told me, I realized that anyone reading the story would likely be able to relate to the theme of oppression if they had ever experienced that themselves and if not, that was OK. I couldn't continue to support oppression of marginalized workers and people by

not telling this story. I take some comfort from Bruner (2002), who says, “great narrative is an invitation to problem finding, not a lesson in problem solving” ( p. 20).

### **Significance and Summary**

My grandfather’s fifty-three year career as a rural custodian in a tiny school district in Texas is, in and of itself, remarkable. The fact Mr. John’s contribution was volunteered to this researcher (his granddaughter), by perfect strangers, makes it noteworthy.

I currently work in a small rural school district and there are “Mr. John’s” in this district as well who lead near invisible roles. It is through their longevity and dedication, that similar persons like them in schools everywhere contribute not only to the success of those schools but to the betterment of society. It is significant that my grandfather’s story, their story, be highlighted in the professional research literature as a significant resource for school leaders who in this twenty-first century society need to tap into every available tangible and intangible resource possible to ensure success of our schools and society.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Introduction**

This dissertation is a story – my findings are a story. In fact, there are two stories. The first story is the focal point of this study – the life history of my grandfather, Mr. John, including both his private and public self. It is his story, his struggle, and his victory over the oppressive forces with which he lived. It is the tale of how one man, lacking worldly goods and educational advantages, used his own insight to discern a path that would navigate him through life not as a rural custodian quietly passing his hours in anonymity attending the mundane, but rather it is the story of a man who by his presence and contributions instead impacted the lives of hundreds of students and the other adults who taught and cared for them as they passed through this school district’s wooden hallways spit-shined with the droplets of perspiration from his labor over the period of fifty-three years. It is a story that reveals the juxtaposition of the life of a non-high school educated man possessing the genius, perceptivity, and realization that humor and story could ameliorate the oppression he felt. It is this “canonical breach” in a conventional story format (Bruner, 2001, p. 30) that makes this a story worth telling and makes it reportable (Labov, 1972). I reveal the private Mr. John through personal and family recollections. I reveal the public Mr. John as discerned through narrative analysis of his interactions with his maintenance peers, and other support staff including secretaries, students and administrators. The conversations with each of these groups revealed important insight

regarding the social nature of those interactions as well as Mr. John's non-unitary subjectivity as he maneuvered and sought to maintain a visibility and identity in relationships with each of them.

The second story is how I, as a white female, first generation college graduate and academician, came to know my grandfather eleven years after his death through the eyes and ears of the people he worked with over the period of fifty-three years in this rural school district. My story, like Mr. John's, is more likened to a multi-faceted three-dimensional crystal (Richardson, 1997) as reflected in this qualitative study, rather than a uni-plane triangle more characteristic of empirical quantitative research. Although this entire work is first person narrative by myself as researcher and ethnographer, at times in this chapter, I reveal my very innermost thought processes and reactions with italicized text similar to Carolyn Ellis' (1997) style of her own meta-cognitive processes.

Inasmuch as I reveal Mr. John's non-unitary subjectivity (or ways of accessing one's various selves through different narratives) (Clark, 2001), likewise I also reveal my own. One facet reveals self as researcher and my journey as that researcher having originally viewed this project as the straightforward telling of the story of a hero, my grandfather; however, having come to a fork in the road, I chose all paths. I instead uncovered by this circuitous route, multiple layers of themes and potential explanations for what was going on here. I shifted from "dutiful (grand) daughter" to a feminist analysis of what was really going on here. Abandoning this patriarchal storyline was

inherent because giving voice to a silenced population who are support staff in public school does not follow the traditional educational leadership patriarchal script. I had been lured by the “ ‘ irresistible attraction’ to the narrative genre” which De Lauretis(1987) explained often happens when women create narrative reproducing these patriarchal ideologies because “the ideologies work like ‘master scripts’ on the individual subject regardless of sex” (p. 108).

The other predominant facet of my own non-unitary subjectivity reveals in story those personal reflections and musings interwoven and highlighted throughout the text in the stream of consciousness style of Carolyn Ellis (1997), revealing not only my inner thoughts throughout this process but also how I as a person have migrated from a naïve, Pollyanna trust in the face-value of human interaction to the realization that there is an ongoing parallel, subliminal script underlying almost every human interaction and that attending to that script is critical to comprehend, digest, react (or not), and understand what is really being communicated, whether through words spoken or words silenced.

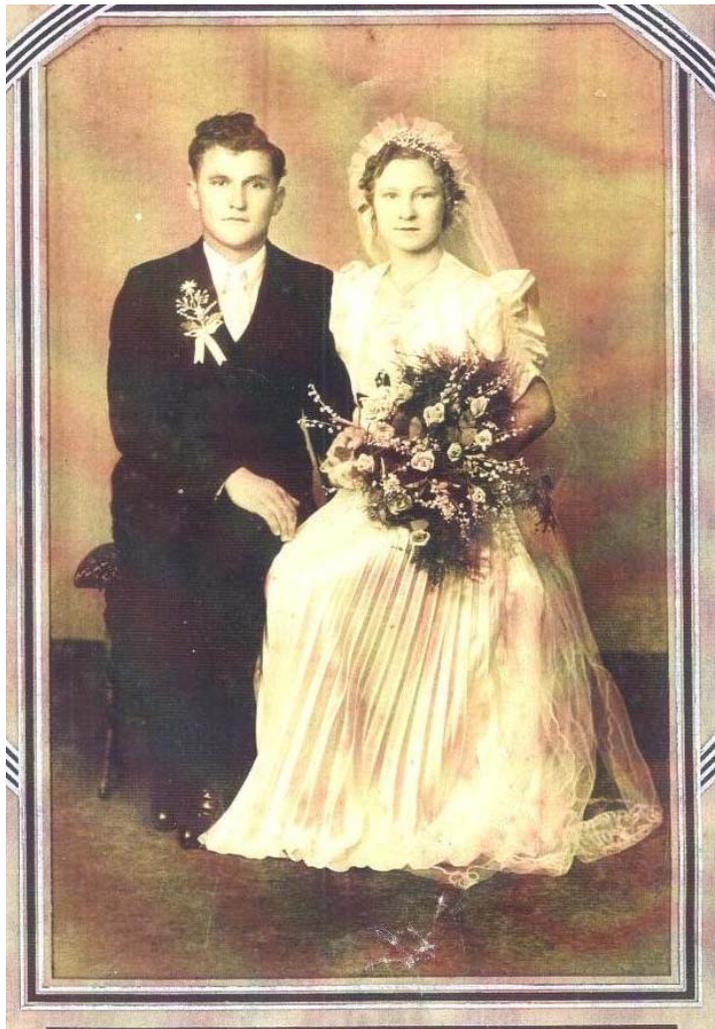
I begin with the life history of Mr. John as compiled from my own recollections and those of my family members in order to situate my grandfather within the life of our family.

### **The Private Mr. John**

#### *Birth order and invisibility*

Born as the third son, and the eighth child in a white rural family of thirteen, in the year 1916, my grandfather was invisible at an early age. As a son in this large family, he was probably less invisible than his female

counterparts, but nonetheless his birth signified more than anything, no doubt, another set of hands available to work on the family farm. His story was typical of many rural, Catholic families at the time. Since practicing birth control was prohibited for Catholics, families were large and, additionally, for economic reasons, rural farming families were large as well since being self-sufficient and



**Figure 1. Wedding Photo.**

managing the many tasks of farm life were essential for survival for these families. However, it is likely that since my grandfather's father was not a practicing Catholic, having a large family was probably more by design for economic reasons and likely the accepted norm rather than a faith-based decision, at least on my great-grandfather's part.

### *Turning points*

My grandfather chose to marry a non-Catholic, my grandmother. (Figure 1) This did seem to impact relationships between him and his siblings and him and his parents. Additionally, his decision to leave the family farm to work "in town" was monumental, no doubt, for this period in time. Perhaps also instrumental in his decision to leave the family farm was an incident that occurred when he was seventeen and working in the fields. Bruner (2001) says these turning points "represent a way in which people free themselves... from their history, their banal destiny, their conventionality" (p. 32). A treasured family photo reveals my grandfather standing behind a plow where the three stocky mules that were pulling the plow lay dead, having been struck by lightning. Only moments before, my grandfather, manning the plow behind the three mules, decided that he would go to the house to get a light jacket as it was becoming cool in the field. Upon his return, the three mules lay dead. (Figure 2) No doubt, losing these three mules must have had a devastating economic impact on this rural family. That impact combined with this brush with mortality at the tender age of seventeen likely both were factors influencing my grandfather's decision to find another line of work. The family farm, still owned by the descendants of

my great grandparents-- one of the brothers and his family, contains several fruit orchards that were planted and maintained in addition to other farm duties thus instilling a valuable work ethic within my grandfather.



**Figure 2. Turning Point.**

### *Typical life*

My mother recalls with great pleasure good times going out with all of her cousins to have Sunday dinner at this family farm where all of the cousins would be seated on a bench at a sixteen foot table and foods grown and prepared on the farm would be served. Beef and chicken that were prepared and preserved with minimal refrigeration were typical Sunday dinner fare. My mother recalls going out to the storehouse with my great grandmother to retrieve beef that had

been chunked and layered with lard in huge crocks ready at a moment's notice when company came to visit. Likewise, chickens raised on the farm were butchered, then boiled and then left to cool perhaps early in the morning, then battered and made into fried chicken once dinner guests arrived at lunch. These reminiscences serve as examples to situate the background of family life from which my grandfather came.

### *Self sufficiency*

These skills for self-sufficiency my grandfather learned on the farm continued as he and my grandmother made their home in a small house located adjacent to the school district where my grandfather took a job as custodian in 1942. My grandparents, on this small corner lot, covered about half of this plot with vegetable gardens, which grew annually to miracle proportions. Additionally, in their neatly kept yard, they raised chickens and ducks. My grandmother never worked outside the home after their marriage (having worked as a "city girl" doing secretarial work in Houston immediately after high school), but sewed and made and sold homemade egg noodles at the local store. (Figure 3) Within this simple life they both led, my grandmother expected a certain amount of decorum. For example, if they were going to have a beer in the evening, it was only to be consumed in the "wash-house," an addition to the original three-room house. On Sundays, the family always had a multi-course meal followed by dessert at noon and it seemed about two hours later, an afternoon snack where once again, table was set, and everyone stopped and enjoyed another light meal of sandwiches with store-bought bread (which was

pretty significant for my self-sufficient grandparents). For my part as a kid, I can remember thinking –oh great, we get to wash dishes twice!



**Figure 3. The City Girl.**

Occasionally, my grandparents would tend a calf or sheep for some nearby neighbor in town and provide for their family in this way. My grandfather also spent a good deal of time tinkering with lawnmowers for almost everyone in town. Whether he learned these mechanical skills on the farm or honed them out of necessity as custodian/maintenance person for the school district where he was employed, it was this self-sufficiency and work ethic that were

predominant characteristics of the man. Additionally, he always had a joke or story to tell; however, when we visited on Sunday afternoons, most of these were told in conversation with men: my father, my husband, stepfathers, brother, or uncle and never in the mixed company of family.

### *Love*

My grandfather never wore a tie, didn't go to church, loved my grandmother deeply and lived very simply. He was the custodian for a rural school district for forty-three years and another ten years after he retired. He died barely a year after my grandmother died, literally of a broken heart. They were constant companions although my grandmother seldom stepped foot inside the buildings where my grandfather worked for these fifty-three years. My grandmother was a church lady. It was as if their identities outside of their home were respected by each other. In this small town where the school was across the block and the church only several blocks down the road, territorial lines were drawn so far as identities for my grandparents outside their home were concerned. Perhaps because each respected the other's outside interest/occupation is how they were able to remain married fifty plus years and live their entire adult lives literally within several city blocks of this small town likely no more than a half-mile in radius.

### *The man*

This story is about the identity of one man of very simple means in an occupation many would not choose or do not respect because of the dirty work involved, and yet, this man was "king of this castle" – well-respected in this small

rural community, possibly the most storied individual to live in this small town. His impact as a man not having completed a high school education on the education of thousands of students within this rural district over his career is immeasurable. Although he has been deceased eleven years, the stories of the public Mr. John live on as first told to me from an administrator who worked in that district. However, interestingly enough, the informants I interviewed were able to tell me little about what Mr. John's private life was like outside of school although he lived "catty-corner" to the school district.

What is revealed by this "silence as a presence" (Rogers, et.al., 1999, p. 80) from informants from all positions within the district including his maintenance peers through former administrators could be interpreted several ways. Perhaps this resounding silence about the identity of a man, Mr. John, outside his public school persona as custodian reinforces the depth of his invisibility and the catalyst for his creation of a personal identity through his role as custodian. Otherwise perhaps, he apparently would have been a considerably less visible person in that community. Because no one, at least from the pool of school informants, recognized any other identity that he may have had in that community, my premise is reinforced that his narration of self through becoming known as a storyteller forged his identity, -- created a presence where there otherwise was absence. In fact, now that he and my grandmother are both deceased, it seems that the absences have created visibility. One teacher, who has memories of Mr. John back to age five when she was in kindergarten, and currently teaches in the classroom on the corner

across the intersection where the house my grandparents inhabited is located, said:

He had that beautiful garden. The cabbage was huge. I look over there now and the garden's not there. It breaks your heart. It should be there. To us, that will always be their house. The young kids, they don't know, but we do.

This limited information about Mr. John's simple personal life sets the stage and creates the paradox for the public Mr. John who was reputed by one administrator to wield great power and respect: "Everyone was loyal to the superintendent and the custodian, Mr. John."

And so for this man, Mr. John, his simple life: married to a beautiful woman -- my grandmother, money in his pocket though meager for some, but more than he had ever had in his youth -- invested himself and his identity as a rural school custodian. (Figure 4)

### **The Search for the Public Mr. John**

#### *Introduction*

The search for the identity of the public Mr. John was the initial focus of this project. I knew the private Mr. John at least as seen through my own eyes as a child, teenager, and adult. What, or rather who, I didn't know was the public Mr. John: Mr. John, the custodian; Mr. John, the storyteller; and, Mr. John, a school leader. As I have revealed, a contradictory story rather than a singular thematic story about the public Mr. John had presented itself.

Embedded within this portion of his story is part of my story as researcher and how I came to uncover information that revealed his multi- faceted identity;



**Figure 4. Mr. John and the Boiler.**

so, first I share how I found the story behind the story and how I sought to make sense of this contradiction and acceptance of it through the frame of non-unitary subjectivity. The two stories are parallels of a meshed process that I cannot separate, and thus I implore the reader permit me this digression to reveal myself as researcher as part of the findings and the process for uncovering the public Mr. John.

*The story comes to me*

Several years ago, I met Mr. Hall, a former principal in the district where my grandfather worked, at a football game in another district where my own son was playing. As we conversed and he stated he was from this particular school district and I shared that perhaps he knew my grandfather, Mr. Hall stopped me mid-sentence, stared into my eyes and said, "Do you know what your grandfather meant to that school?" He continued by saying, "Do you also know that the staff there believes he is still there?" (At the time of this conversation, my grandfather had been deceased eight or nine years.) Mr. Hall shared that the maintenance staff would synchronize the clocks in the hallway one day and the next day, they would be all "out of whack." He shared that this and similar occurrences led the staff to believe my grandfather was "still there" in spirit. Well, the story warmed my heart and amused me, and I just did not think that much about it until about a year later when I met a teacher from my grandfather's district at a textbook fair, and he shared a half-hour of stories with me. Still, I thought, "What a lovely tribute," and just sort of mentally tucked this occurrence away for safekeeping.

It was not until I was in a qualitative course summer before last and heard of a study Dr. Carolyn Clark was involved in regarding studying the Texas A&M custodians when an "AHA" occurred. At this point I recalled these two stories from acquaintances about my grandfather, and realized there was likely, very likely, a story here for leadership regarding my grandfather's role as a rural school custodian.

*The journey*

As I have said, I then set out capture his story. It wasn't too long before I began hearing not only the expected but also the unexpected stories and responses to questions about my grandfather's public person as this rural custodian.

"He was an institution for this school system."

"We couldn't have had school without him."

"You were loyal to the superintendent, and you were loyal to Mr. John."

"You can't find people who will give his whole life – his job was this school – that was his purpose in life."

"Another word to describe your grandfather is self-reliant. Part of his contribution to the school district was whatever it was, he could do it, we knew it and depended on that.

These were all comments made by various informants in the original pool of seventeen interviews about the impact that Mr. John had on this rural school district.

From that same pool of informants, many of whom made the comments above, came the following comments as well:

"Mr. John was hard-headed—that is John had his own way."

"He could tell the superintendent what to do. There was a definite clash of wills—both men were headstrong and this contributed to the solidity of the school district."

"He did have his little tricks for me the new principal."

“He was always messing with somebody.”

*These comments, especially the latter, caused me to agonize about what was going on here. To me as researcher, there wasn't coherence here, or was there? And so, I sought coherence.*

The last several comments as revealed above were primarily made by two of the initial informants. These comments only scratched the surface of the impending avalanche of contradiction I was about to encounter. Initially, narrative analysis of even my own verbal responses in conversation revealed months later, that I, upon first hearing these sorts of comments, chose to immediately dismiss them. Consider for instance the first several lines of a transcript with the current head of maintenance who when asking me what types of stories I wanted to hear about my grandfather saying, “I'm not sure what sort of stories you want... Stay away from the dirty stories?”

I responded, “You don't have to tell me those.” I recall now my own shock that a perfect stranger would literally within minutes of meeting me, choose to say this.

I knew Mr. John loved pranks and loved to tell a good one, but here in this research for a professional degree, how was I to deal with these contradictions in my grandfather's personality?

*I'm not sure what I must have been thinking when I began this project -- that perhaps he was on his best behavior at school? That somehow for all of those years, the rascal I knew my grandfather could be had not surfaced while on the job. I guess I expected only “glowing”*

*reports because what I was focusing on were those initial encounters with two professionals who brought me to the recognition of Mr. John's significance in that district. How naïve. I knew my grandfather, or thought I did. Characteristic of how he lived his life, he very much put himself out there—what you see is what you get, down to earth – take it like it is—tell it like it is. Why had I expected something different in these interviews?*

With these contradictions swirling all about, my greatest concern came to be, how could I tell this story? Things didn't add up; I wanted to believe that things would hang together; make sense, yet I was experiencing these contradictions (Ewing, 1990). Thoughts continued to swirl in my head.

*How could this be my dissertation? Can I publish this sort of near criticism about my grandfather? What made him behave this way?*

*After several weeks of trying to make sense of this all and going through the various stages of mourning beginning with denial (Kubler-Ross, 1997), I racked the recesses of my brain. I was constantly asking myself, "Have I missed something here? How do I remember my grandfather?"*

Repeatedly, the most frequent thought was he was a joke teller and I knew primarily from my husband and brother's interactions with my grandfather, he loved a well-played prank. Unfortunately, and I had never given it much thought really, some of those pranks seemed downright mean-spirited. Interviews both from professionals and maintenance workers alike shared some

of Mr. John's congenial joke-telling, but also shared some of his mischief, some of his pranks.

*To me as researcher, "ick", this didn't feel very good. What was going on? Why hadn't I realized this before? Now what?*

Fortunately, it became clear to me as time went on that there was something in particular about my grandfather that caused him to behave this way, to be this jokester, and that allowed him to rise above his "invisibility" as a school custodian. It was an explanation I amazingly, in a relieved sort of way, felt comfortable writing about my grandfather. In fact, I was no longer embarrassed by some of his antics, but became, as never before, compassionate for the life he had lived now that I had some notion of what was really going on beneath the surface.

#### *An aha or two*

Late one night, in search of the answer for, "Now what? ", not knowing I would find some inkling of a clue there, I searched the sociological database for humor. Much to my surprise, I found several articles, not a huge research base, nothing really very recent, but nonetheless, a few studies done over the last ten to fifteen years, on humor and its various purposes including male bonding and a means of deflecting oppression. I went back to my transcripts and looked for the frequency of references to joking, storytelling, and creating daily drama. What I found was indeed, virtually all informants and almost exclusively for the maintenance workers, their memories of Mr. John revolved either around jokes he had told, pranks he had pulled, or situations that revealed the canonical

breach (Bruner, 2000) and made them stories worth remembering and telling even eleven years after his death. Indeed it seemed that Mr. John had narrated himself, his life, his identity through story. That “storying” served many purposes as I would later discover through narrative analysis. The one most intriguing, particularly as related to pranks, was the purpose of shirking the oppression Mr. John felt, as I will share later in this chapter.

I discovered that one means of telling the story of Mr. John’s life would be to reveal the characteristics of the man that emerged through the various and numerous stories informants told me that were by and about him. These stories were about drama that he created daily that was so unexpected that it was entertaining and memorable even years after his death. These stories were about situations that occurred that became memorable “events” because Mr. John found a way to make them “remarkable.” These stories were also about jokes he told, -- “good ones” still remembered that had obviously become part of the folklore in this school district.

### **The Public Mr. John**

*In this section, my own story retreats and becomes backdrop for the research that revealed the public Mr. John. What I learned about my grandfather’s life as told through these informants informs my own worldview and my view of his reality as never before. I write this story from my own multiple perspectives. I live simultaneously in the world of “other” as well as the world of “privileged.” My grandfather lived in the world of “other.” My grandfather had an “us and them” relationship at*

*times with administration. As an administrator, I am “them” in this relationship. I have spoken in this project of the crystal being an appropriate metaphor for qualitative study. A crystal is also an appropriate metaphor for myself as ethnographer writing this story. Each facet of that crystal, whether granddaughter, administrator, “other,” or “them,” provides an internal ongoing juxtaposition of contradiction that has driven the search for this story.*

*This is Mr. John’s story.*

### *Introduction*

As a rural school custodian with a third grade education, my grandfather lived with multiple oppressive forces in his life. The lack of opportunity for education; the low- socio-economic status of his rural family; the marginalization that society dealt to those persons who choose dirty work (Meagher, 2002); and the sometimes overt, but often just an unintentional, power struggle with school leadership who did not always recognize his toil and contribution all were oppressive forces in his life. Whether he consciously realized it or not, my grandfather’s behavior (as evidenced by informant conversations) revealed this oppression. He survived, even thrived, and dealt with this oppression through the most effective means he knew of and obviously honed throughout his lifetime. My grandfather used humor as a means of survival.

I suspect Mr. John sensed that humor as he first used it, and later honed it to perfection, could enable him to manipulate any situation to his advantage and make him the central, visible figure. Stronach and Allen (1999) explained:

The unwitting mistake becomes the artful joke; the passive victim the active agent who defines the situation for others, manipulating how they will respond; and the marginal figure becomes central and powerful in defining the situation. (p. 35)

My grandfather was a master storyteller. As that storyteller, he was center stage with not only the stories he told, but through creating story out of everyday occurrences, he honed this skill, escaped the mundane, and squelched the oppression he lived with daily.

*Visibility through stories of Mr. John's expertise*

Although Mr. John could have allowed his economic status to make him a passive victim, he chose instead to upstage his economic status by demonstration of his skill, foregrounding that expertise and making himself the central figure, rather than that passive victim accepting his or the school district's lack of resources as a defining characteristic. One teacher told the following story, which reveals both Mr. John's keen expertise and creativity out of necessity.

You know on a pack of cigarettes, he took the cellophane, and he said, I'm going to show you how to time that engine on that lawnmower. So he used that. He took the coil apart, he loosened it up, he set it up on top of that center where it is supposed to fire. He put that cellophane in the points because you wanted to see when they open. He put that in there. He wanted something real thin. He put that in there and said, "Right here, tighten it down." We did and it ran. And he used a piece of cellophane.

You're supposed to use a gauge, an electronic thing. But that cost money. Here at school, we couldn't afford it. John couldn't afford it. He used to pull that stunt all the time.

This sort of expertise made Mr. John almost indispensable. He seemed to hold the keys to the kingdom in this small district. For him, this expertise was a source of power. Just as power in its various forms is rarely shared, likewise he apparently protected his power by not teaching others how to do what he did. When he passed away, the district had to remove the boiler system that heated the school district, because according to one administrator, "John was the only one who could get those boilers working." One secretary commented that the clock in the main office by which all other clocks were set, had to be resynchronized every so often by Mr. John because the time would be off a few minutes. When Mr. John passed away, according to the secretary, the timekeeping system had to be replaced by a system that automatically resets itself because no one else in the building knew how to operate the previous one. And finally, possibly the most costly example of Mr. John's expertise when he passed away, although he "schooled" other maintenance workers, was that Mr. John had in his mind a mental picture of the underground grid of gas, water, sewage and utility lines. For this growing district, each time a new building is constructed, they mourn (according to the former business manager) the fact that the administration never had Mr. John come meet with them and map out on paper the underground grid.

All of these examples make Mr. John the controlling actor on stage, present and powerfully remembered in his passing and absence. In light of the oppression Mr. John experienced, it is likely he knew this and posthumously continues to command this power as these stories are told again and again. Especially this last example regarding mapping a grid of the underground gas, water and sewer lines, is quite telling of the “us and them” power struggle that existed between Mr. John and the administration at times. Mr. John was perhaps taken for granted, the administrators seemingly “too busy” to take time to sit down with Mr. John and map out this underground grid. Of course Mr. John realized his own power and although he verbally “schooled” other maintenance workers, he never initiated creating this written grid himself. He was certainly not a man of letters, so perhaps he didn’t initiate this map because it would reveal his lack of education – or perhaps it was solely an act of power in resistance to oppression he felt particularly from one administrator. However, in his absence, the current administration most certainly wishes someone had invested that time as the former business manager I interviewed repeated several times in our interaction. I’m sure Mr. John would have appreciated this small token of recognition as well.

*Oppression revealed in story about Mr. John*

As long as the clocks ran on time, the building was warm, machinery ran smoothly, Mr. John seemed invisible, so invisible in fact that even though he was so critical to the school’s daily functioning, Mr. John was never “invited” to a district Christmas party. In fact, one administrator I spoke with was very

“thankful” about the fact that Mr. John never complained about the extra work after one of “their” parties. Comments like these bothered me. I found comments like these very oppressive. Intrigued by Walker and Goodson’s(1997) comment suggesting that oppression is fertile ground for humor -- a light bulb went off, an aha occurred. I figured out what was going on. I figured out why a former principal would comment that Mr. John “had his little tricks for me the new principal.” I figured out why that same principal would comment that “whatever you asked Mr. John to do would get done, but in his own time, maybe two days later.” The fact that an administrator would mention this revealed to me the recognition that this administrator felt Mr. John’s reaction in this power struggle. Mr. John would do things when necessary on his own time to perhaps make a point. Blume (1998) says, “The finesse with which one enacts rebellions, of course, increases with experience” (p. 78). I got the impression that Mr. John never said anything in an instance like this but rather his message came through loud and clear. This particular administrator also mentioned (of all things with me, Mr. John’s granddaughter) that at Mr. John’s funeral, he (the administrator) had to wait -- everyone had to wait -- because a family member was late getting to the funeral. I almost laugh now when I read this. This administrator was annoyed that once again it seems, Mr. John did things with finesse -- in his own time, controlled his destiny, didn’t succumb to the immediacy of the demands of those in power, the administration, who did not always apparently treat him respectfully.

Other support staff revealed this oppression in their comments. A long-time cafeteria worker in a supervisory role, without as she put it, “the paper on the wall,” very much resented the fact that as she specifically said, “there is a very much ‘us and them’ relationship between ‘people like us’ and the administration.” She said that she finally began organizing activities like outings and Christmas parties for her staff because they were never invited to the professionals’ events. One secretary, as well, recalled extreme servitude when she first began working for the district. She said:

At that time, as a secretary, you had to do everything, pick up attendance slips, answer the phone, work for the superintendent, the principal, the teachers, because they didn’t have aides or access to a copy machine, and so by the end of the day, you know, you were barely hanging in there and he (Mr. John) would come by and brighten the day.

And so, although a number of informants with whom I spoke, particularly those who were certified professional educators, sought to create an ideal sort of view of what this school district was like making comments like, “I never heard anyone say a negative thing about Mr. John,” and gave what they considered glowing reports about Mr. John’s contributions, at least on the surface, it was the tone of what they said that revealed the “presence and importance of what is unsaid, and perhaps unsayable, in research interviews” (Rogers, et. al, 1999). The underlying meaning of what was going on included that perhaps not everyone among them, such as this cafeteria worker and this secretary and Mr. John, viewed life in this district as ideal or perfect.

*Inverting the code*

In this district as I interviewed teachers, administrators, a board member and secretaries, I initially felt an overwhelming sense that things were incredibly nice here. Everyone with whom I spoke was receptive to my research project and complimentary of my grandfather. I discerned from this that this district wished to make that impression with all of their visitors. Sociologists who study groups of people reveal that organizations, such as schools, and groups have “dominant styles that members usually try to maintain” (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003). Truly, the style of this district was obvious – convey the feeling to me that everything was nearly close to perfect here.

Of course, as I continued my research, I found that reality existed here as it does everywhere else, but, as I was analyzing the narratives from these encounters, I felt it necessary to situate responses as being either part of this school style or not. This concept of having a shared group consciousness as described by Borman (1985) as being composed of “shared emotions, motives, and meanings, not in terms of individual daydreams and scripts but rather in terms of socially shared narrations or fantasies” (p. 128), I refer to as a code this district practiced primarily through verbal communication by the professionals in that district as being one of the “ideal”. That being within this district, everything was great, everyone got along, people loved and respected Mr. John, and so forth. I propose that this code of the ideal served as the backdrop for Mr. John’s stage. I say this not because Mr. John was complicit, however, with this ideal social code and consciousness, but rather the opposite. Maybe Mr. John’s

ultimate rebellion in this “polite society,” was to invert the code -- to tease, to make jokes or to create situations and drama that were sure to offend (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003). Perhaps it wasn't even the specific joke itself that resonated with Mr. John, but the extreme discomfort he knew it would cause those that upheld this code. For example, Mr. John was considered by female co-workers such as secretaries as “helpful” and there to “brighten their day” with pleasantries. That is, when appropriate, he might react in one way to female support staff, but at other times, he might consciously or subconsciously choose to invert the code to create the ultimate rebellion by, for example telling dirty jokes. Somehow I suspect this behavior quietly got back to those with whom he only shared pleasantries, as indicated by one secretary who told me, “That's why he told his little jokes”. Indeed, she seemed on the surface to not break the code herself, but by her mildly disapproving change in tone of voice, was almost rationalizing to herself how the Mr. John, who presented himself in one way to her, was capable of this other “personality.” Mr. John obviously chose to narrate his identity (Linde, 1993) as the situation required, also known as situated responsiveness (Ellsworth & Miller, 1996) thus revealing his non-unitary self (Clark, 2001).

In a number of instances, Mr. John inverted the code by creating drama through unexpected and sometimes startling events such as the time the curb was being replaced in front of the main building and the county drilled into the gas line. Mr. John puffing on a cigarette, walked right through it (the escaping gas), and said, “Oh, we need to turn this off” and promptly used a crescent

wrench to turn the gas off. All the time, he was smoking a cigarette – a serious accident waiting to happen. Not only the situation itself, but also Mr. John's apparent flirtation with danger made situations like these become embedded in the community consciousness. Sometimes Mr. John unknowingly inverted the code, and how delighted he must have been to have a "freebie" -- like the time he was re-lighting the pilot light in the cafeteria ceiling and caught his hair on fire -- singeing it and creating the stench of burned feathers! Even I remember my grandmother telling the story of having to cut the burned part off his hair.

This was what Mr. John's life was like on a daily basis, sometimes exposed to danger, and often it seemed, Mr. John making the most of a situation maximizing impact and visibility inverting the code and abandoning decorum. However, at other times, Mr. John created visibility by doing quite the opposite, - - sometimes creating extreme adherence to decorum and ritual. For example, Friday night football games were played for decades on a well-manicured field where the lines in the grass were cut with an edging tool, not chalked. East End (pseudonym) became well known for continuing this practice long after many districts abandoned it due to the amount of work involved. But not Mr. John, he had created a tradition and that tradition reigned. By creating and maintaining that tradition, Mr. John created visibility outside of the school district as well as other schools came to play and the local paper featured this tradition several times.

*A binary code*

It seems then that there were two codes at work in the culture of this school district. One code was that of the professionals, particularly administrators, who presented life in this school community as near perfect, almost Utopian. I characterize their conversations with me as more “careful.” By careful, I mean their thoughts were more formally presented. They were controlled in what they said and how they said it. Their speech did not “flow” freely. For example, one administrator prepared in advance of ever meeting me a list of what he called terms to characterize my grandfather. By pre-paring this list in advance, he could stick to his script and not say anything out of line. Interestingly enough, this administrator further controlled the conversation in that he, in particular, was the only informant who refused to be recorded. Although his script did not “sugar-coat” his opinion of my grandfather, he took the opportunity to say some things he apparently had been wanting to get off his chest for some time, albeit he was careful to only provide a hint of what was probably the rage he truly felt at my grandfather, a custodian, being able to control, for example, what this administrator needed done and when. This administrator laughed frequently throughout the conversation – sometimes seemingly for no reason. At the time, I found this laughter somewhat charming. Knowing what I know now about humor and how it can mask what is really going on, I feel certain that this administrator was manipulating my impression and interpretation of the conversation to be something more positive than it really was.

Both of the other administrators I interviewed conducted conversations that formally followed the conventions of story. Their stories were deliberate and seldom departed mid-stream. Gee (1985) characterizes these “literate-based strategies” as more evident in middle class language. Again, by using the formal structure of story, these administrators were more able to control what they said. They were able to follow a script.

The other code in this school culture I have described as characteristic of Mr. John’s behavior at times and that was an inversion of the ideal social code practiced by these administrators with their “scripts.” Not only Mr. John, but also the other maintenance workers I interviewed found great pleasure in inverting the code. As I have described previously, their speech was less polished; they used slang; they told stories normally not shared in mixed company. The maintenance workers shared stories with me my grandfather had told that were of a mildly sexual nature. (Perhaps these stories were not so mild when my grandfather told them!) For example, they told the story of my grandfather showing a photograph he had taken of two lizards “doing it.” The maintenance workers told a story of my grandfather teasing his neighbor about “doing it with his dog” as evidenced by the puppies being bald-headed like my grandfather’s neighbor was. One teacher, who was a former student, who sat in on the group interview composed of primarily maintenance workers. He shared memories of a group of teenage boys sitting under a tree after lunch getting their “education” from Mr. John. These workers also told stories of Mr. John making wine from the fruit juices from the cafeteria and getting the teachers in the “teacherage” (a

term apparently coined by this district to describe the house next door to my grandparents where teachers could live both for convenience and to save expense since housing over the years in this small town was difficult to find and teacher pay was low) next door drunk. (My mother swears this never happened – that my grandmother would have “killed” my grandfather!) And maybe whether this event really happened or not wasn’t important; what is notable is that what was acceptable “fare” for these maintenance workers to share was quite the opposite, an inversion of, the ideal social code evidenced in the story of the administrators. Once again, I ponder whether Mr. John created this inverted code or whether it already existed among these blue-collar workers and was fertile ground for Mr. John to hone the story of this nature.

Before I conclude this section, one other noticeable characteristic of the maintenance workers interview was what Gee (1985) refers to as “oral-based strategies” at the opposite end of the continuum from the “literate-based strategies” of the middle class. Characteristic of this type of narrative is that this type of speech is more “topic associative” (Gee, 1985), moving liltily from one story to another, more a conversation of intimates. I examined an excerpt from the maintenance workers’ conversation and found that topic associative principle to seemingly be at work in how the conversation navigated from one topic to another. Below is that excerpt. The underlined portions are those that seem to carry the conversation from one topic to another. The conversation began with a response to the question, “How long have you known my grandfather?”

Informant:           Let’s see, he passed away when?

Researcher: 1993.

Informant: I came here in '85, so that would have been eight years. He worked four hours a day for the school. He was already retired. And uh, can't remember exactly how old he was but boy, he could remember exactly where things were. Like if we had a water problem. He would walk to a certain point in the ground and say, "Dig here." Yeh, he knew where things were. I guess all the years he was here.

*This conversation moves from remarking about how Mr. John's age had not affected his memory, it moves from "how old" to -- "but he could still remember", and is reinforced again by, "Yeh, he knew where things were."*

Informant: He was always messing with somebody. His favorite person to mess with was Bobby who lived next door. He used to tell him some of the craziest things. I'm not sure what kind of stories you want.

Researcher: Anything.

Informant: Stay away from the dirty stories?

*The conversation then shifts to considering what sort of information/stories I am looking for. As co-creators of information, I share my own memories of Mr. John and his type of joking perhaps being different among different groups.*

Researcher: You don't have to tell me those. I know he was a character. We would go over there (to my grandparent's house located just

across the intersection from the city block on which the school district is located) and the guys would stand out on the carport and tell dirty jokes. We'd be in the house washing dishes –boring. So whatever –

Informant: He would hide his cigarettes here because he would get in trouble from your grandma. So, he'd come and smoke in the morning and then like usually about noon, and then like about two o'clock and have another cigarette.

*Characteristic of blue-collar conversation according to Gee's continuum, the conversation makes informal associations that seem to direct the next topic of conversation. Here the conversation moves from my mention of my grandparent's house(including my grandmother), to the informant making an association to my grandmother and that is she wanted my grandfather to stop smoking. The informant shares how Mr. John continued to smoke without her supposedly knowing it.*

Researcher: Even when he was retired?

Informant: He'd smoke here so his wife wouldn't find out.

Researcher: Yeh, we thought he stopped smoking.

*Informant:* One time Bobby (the neighbor) was here and said to John, you shouldn't be smoking. Those cigarettes are such a waste of money. John said they upped it, you get fifty in a pack. You don't get just twenty. About a week or so later,

Bobby come in here all mad calling John a few names and made him look stupid because he was at the local store and some guy was in line and was complaining about the cost of cigarettes. Bobby told him quit complaining because now you get fifty in a pack. The man said, who told you that. Bobby said, "John did." (Ha, ha, ha).

*The conversation then leaped from talking about smoking to a joke Mr. John played about cigarettes.*

Informant: He just always had something going on with Bobby.

Researcher: Then he would just sit back and wait for the result.

What is significant about this type of conversation as opposed to the more structured conversation with administrators is that the speaker and participants are less in control of what is said because the conversation can take an unexpected twist or turn at any point. This gyration of speech could result in that inversion of code that I have described before that was not threatening to the maintenance workers who seemed to work from that perspective anyway. Once again, is it the chicken or the egg? Is low-socioeconomic speech/blue-collar speech less mainstream because of language development and the tendency to drift from one topic to the other, or is it the excitement of the inversion of the social code which invigorates the speech, excites the teller who ever more is engaged in "one-upsmanship" that is part of male bonding(Quinn, 2000) that causes the teller to almost lose control and tell all or tell tall?

What is important to me as researcher from this analysis is that in my critique, both codes can be suspect. Obviously, the structure of the ideal, middle class story code controls what is said; likewise, the loose, almost rambling nature of the inverted code reveals more, and possibly too much. At some point, the inverted code may turn into something more akin to tall-tales, folklore or the result of “one-upmanship.” Therefore, as reader or listener or interpreter of these conversations, there is no single truth, -- conversations cannot necessarily be taken at face value.

What I have done here is try to reveal the basis for each code and how that impacted my interpretation of those conversations that in turn impacted my understanding of my grandfather's behavior. Inherent in this discussion as well is the concept of situated responsiveness (Bloom, 1998) and that is to consider what the impact and dynamics of a group conversation such as the maintenance worker conversation might be as compared to the one-on-one conversations with administrators. I suspect that individual conversations with maintenance workers might have had less of the “circus” atmosphere, less of the fervor each participant had as he shared his story on the stage of the conversation that day. The entire concept of male-bonding and culture of story no doubt facilitated not only the degree and detail of the stories told that day. In addition, the fact that these men were telling these stories fluently eleven years after the passing of Mr. John indicates that these stories have been repeated many times over the years, a tribute to Mr. John, -- a ongoing tribute that has made Mr. John become part of the folklore in that school community.

*An important conversation*

In this next section, I share an excerpt from an administrator conversation that was likely the turning point in this project – the point at which I realized there was a rub between those in formal authority and my grandfather as facility expert possessing informal authority. For this analysis, I used Gee's (1985) discourse analysis as a basis for my examination of this particular narrative.

Gee (1985) uses for narrative analysis, a theory of the units of speech focusing on changes in intonation and pitch as well as “how the narrative is said, ...including the organization of the discourse system into lines, stanzas, and parts” (p.50). Within the following transcriptions, I attended to particularly pitch and intonation so far as determining where breaks between units of speech occurred. By transcribing in this manner, “features of the discourse often ‘jump out’” (Reissman, 1993, p.57). I reveal my interpretations in highlighted format following each set of transcriptions.

These transcriptions are from the interview with an administrator in the district whom no one directly described as having an antagonistic relationship with Mr. John, but who was the most likely recommended informant as far as “being able to tell me some stories about Mr. John.” I noted several characteristics of this conversation. For one, although this person with whom I spoke had obvious presence and was an icon himself in the community, his responses, the very speech he used with me seemed evidence of his own discomfort. This informant seemed to possess some ambiguity or ambivalence toward Mr. John. As I consider at this moment all of the nuances of that

conversation, it occurs to me, after multiple passes at this conversation already, that perhaps because this man by the nature of his responses seemed a storyteller in his own right, he had never appreciated Mr. John upstaging him with his storytelling expertise. This informant's speech was slow and thoughtful when describing Mr. John, rather than chatty and comfortable when describing himself later in the interview. This slow gait of his responses indicates to me considerable, careful thought in exactly what he was saying. He selected words carefully when speaking of Mr. John. The most often used phrase for Mr. John was that he was the janitor. And, much of the time, he wasn't actually saying much about Mr. John specifically other than he was "of course" the janitor.

*(Of course, like why am I as researcher even asking these questions, didn't I know he was "just" the janitor?)*

*Researcher:* What was your relationship to Mr. John?

*Administrator:* O, O, O, -----K

My relationship to Mr. J.....

I was an eighth grade classroom teacher when I came here in 1957

And Mr. John was the uh, janitor,

head maintenance man,

and anything else you needed done

you went to John.

As I analyzed this section, I find that the respondent does not address the question. The informant describes himself/attends to his own identity first and

separately describes Mr. John but does not describe their relationship. This was not something I noticed initially, but after careful examination, this avoidance of recognizing any identity my grandfather possessed in this informant's eyes, became a pattern.

Researcher: What recollections do you have about my grandfather in his role as custodian in this district?

Administrator: Well, uh, the first years when I ca—  
 Uh, he was here uh when I was in high school  
 And, uh, uh I graduated in '46  
 After I was in the Marine Corp and I started teaching here in '57  
 Um, he of course was the janitor  
 Uh, Mr. John, Mr. J--, uh, when he swept your classroom  
 He would sweep down this row and over  
 Then the next day, he swept that way and moved the chairs  
 back – ha, ha --

The informant again does not respond to the question but attends to his own identity as the focus. The informant also laughs at the end of this segment. I jokingly recall saying, in other words, Mr. John had his own system. The informant agreed. I surmise that in a small way, even sweeping the chairs was a power move on Mr. John's part. I asked the informant whether he ever straightened up the chairs, but he said, no, you better just leave them that way until the next day.

*On about half of the questions I asked this administrator, his first response included lines like:*

Administrator: I don't know exactly.

Um, I don't remember anything.

*And when I asked this administrator whether he recalled any specific contributions Mr. John had made, he responded:*

Administrator: Well, uh, let's see, uh I don't know,

I guess you would say it's a success

We were always proud of our buildings and our grounds

because of the work he did and keeping them in top shape.

(Figure 5)

In this section, the informant has trouble deciding whether Mr. John's contributions were a success or not even though earlier in the conversation (as I have mentioned previously in this dissertation) he regrets not mapping the gas/water lines. This sort of behavior reflects this administrator's ambiguity towards the persona of Mr. John.

My interpretation of this informant's responses as described above is that Mr. John was relatively invisible. Mr. John made himself visible by reacting to the oppression he felt and teasing this administrator about being a bachelor. School lore says that Mr. John and the former superintendent put an inflatable woman in this administrator's (then teacher's car) and sent a student to tell this teacher that a woman wanted to see him at his car. The informant refused to go out to the car. The superintendent and Mr. John were obviously yanking this

informant's chain (Quinn, 2000) and he refused to play. For some reason, this story was told. Remarkably, later in this informant's interview, he raises the issue himself of why he never married without ever referring to this incident played by Mr. John and the superintendent. The informant as you will see does



**Figure 5. The Hallway. Picture taken in 2003 of original wooden floors built in 1939.**

not mention the story volunteered eagerly by other informants about the inflatable woman in his car. Instead, I think this informant addresses the harassment with this story.

Administrator: To put a little ending tough to that

The lady I was going with was a beauty shop inspector.

They were having a deal in Austin so I went up there.

And their big deal at these meetings was to go to a card reader.

So I just had to go to that card reader.

And among other things she told me that turned out to be true....

I'm going to tell you this on me...

She asked why I never married.

I said, "Well I don't know."

So she dealt the cards.

She said, "Would you like for me to tell you why you never married?"

I said, "Yes, I would."

She said, "Well, see when you first started out, you chose the King of Hearts."

She said, "You probably don't know this but every time the cards were shuffled,

The cards around the King were Hearts.

She said, "Do you know what that means?"

I said, "That I'm a great lover?"

She said, "No, it means you love money more than you love anything else."

And unfortunately, I think it's true.

It is this particular segment of conversation where this administrator's speech flowed most freely. This was a practiced story. This is one he had told time and time again to narrate himself as a bachelor. The fact that he initiated this story and told it so well clued me in to his resentment as a storyteller that perhaps Mr. John's ability to story as well or better than this administrator was something this administrator/informant was not particularly fond of. Had my grandfather still been alive, he and this administrator were only two to three years apart in age. The animosity with this age peer was evident. I sense as a young teacher arriving from a tour with the Marine Corp, this administrator found himself superior to my grandfather, which my grandfather resented and reacted toward this man in the way he did because of this administrator's oppressive demeanor.

*I include this next section not because it can necessarily stand alone with overwhelming evidence, but I include it because I find that something is going on here. What I observe from these artifacts, secretary comments regarding those artifacts, and other researcher observations regarding the timeline and sequence of events, contributes additional tangible evidence supporting my overall premise of oppression.*

#### *Artifact analysis – a crescendo of oppression*

Forty years is a long time to work in an occupation. Fifty-three years is even longer. For nearly the first forty years of Mr. John's career, certainly I have shared that oppressive forces were at work. The oppressive climate of this school district seemed tolerable in 1941, but seemed to increase as the years

went by. Two secretaries in the district were adamant about me as researcher possessing and examining yearbook pictures of my grandfather. It seems during the early years, this small school district was more “closely knit” with many of its support staff feeling as though they were part of this larger school family.

In fact, for most of those forty years, the long-time superintendent who served thirty-nine years, seemed to share the “throne” of power with Mr. John with a sort of give-and-take relationship intact. Mr. Brahma, the superintendent, and Mr. John actually seemed to share a sense of humor and concocted several escapades together. In fact, perhaps it is because of their reasonably collaborative relationship during this period that other administrators in the district felt somewhat threatened by that relationship and felt perhaps they should be on equal billing with the superintendent rather than Mr. John, the custodian. Regardless, Mr. Brahma and Mr. John crawled under the building together to investigate termites and while doing so, Mr. Brahma became lodged in the small opening and fortunately finally worked his way out. This shared experience became one story that continued to be told and retold in the district. In another story told again and again, Mr. Brahma had Mr. John color-code with primary colors of paint the various tools because they always came up missing. The story is told that Mr. John was working at Mr. Brahma’s house one day and when they were looking for pliers, out walks Mr. Brahma with pliers with painted yellow handles. They each had a good laugh over that.

Mr. Brahma let Mr. John keep a single head or two of livestock on his place. Mr. Brahma and Mr. John concocted the inflatable woman prank together.

Mr. Brahma and Mr. John were friends.

So, at least for nearly the first forty years of Mr. John's career, whatever oppressive forces were at work, Mr. Brahma, the superintendent and his relationship with Mr. John, served to temper those.

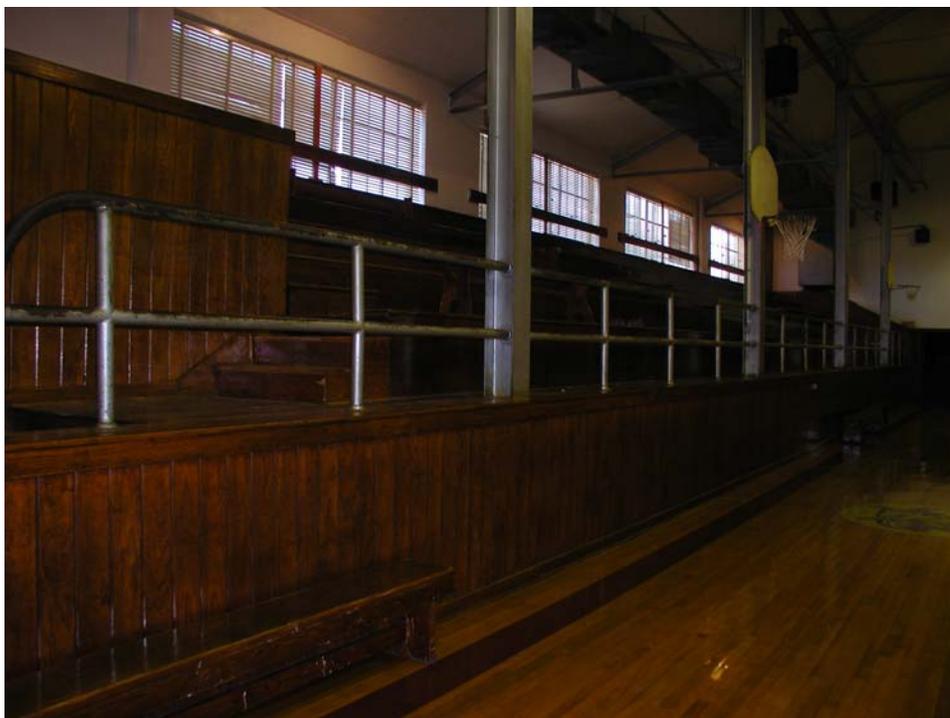
When Mr. Brahma retired in 1980 though, the climate of the district seemed to change. Actually, perhaps even slightly before that time as Mr. Brahma was tiring near the end of a long career, I observe as researcher that things were changing.

As I have mentioned, during my research gathering process, two of the secretaries gathered unsolicited photocopies of yearbook pictures and insisted not only that I have them, but pointed out a couple of things about those photos they wanted to be sure I noticed. The first thing they wanted me to notice was how Mr. John was "honored" and was by himself in photographs they gave me from 1957-1961. One secretary in particular wanted me to notice that two African-American helpers were photographed separately and she wanted me to be aware of this. Without going too far off on a tangent I didn't really explore in depth in this particular project, this particular comment along with some comments that had been made regarding the integration process in this district and some comments that were made in passing regarding the fact that there are now more of "those students" (students of color) in the district, indicated to me,

that prejudice and the oppression that accompanies that prejudice still exists in that school district. Thus, I sadly surmise that a climate of oppression not only impacted Mr. John, but also persons of color in this district. Those societal forces that allow any oppression to be acceptable allows for more types of oppression to be “acceptable” or become part of the culture.

Further, it is my observation from several venues that oppression was increasing in this district as time went on and particularly toward the end of Mr. Brahma’s career and as new superintendents entered the district. One yearbook picture from 1977 was highlighted to me by one of these secretaries who pointed out how many people were photographed on this particular page as compared to the “olden days”. In fact, not only was Mr. John now photographed as one of four custodians all in the same picture, but in all, there were twenty-five persons in this particular picture including: custodians, cafeteria workers, transportation, library staff and the nurse. It was as though these groups no longer deserved distinction and visibility as having separate and unique tasks. Included on this page was a caption granting these persons recognition as “behind the scenes” workers. Indeed, several of them were so “behind the scenes,” that their faces were not even clearly visible on this page. The fact that these secretaries “wanted” me to have these pictures without breeching the “ideal” code too much, spoke volumes to me. For one, they pushed the envelope on breaking the code, and second, they were taking a huge chance by pushing that envelope because by revealing this to me as researcher, they probably had some idea that this oppression would come to light.

In 1980, one of the teachers in this district who became an administrator and oppressor of Mr. John assumed his new position. During this year, Mr. Brahma retired. In the ten years following, two male superintendents served. One of these had Mr. John completely strip the varnish on the virtually all - wooden gymnasium. Not only the floor was wooden, but also all of the bleachers on two sides as well as the wainscoting surrounding the gym floor were wooden. (Figure 6) At least three informants I spoke with mentioned this particular incident without solicitation. They were not outwardly critical of it, but they did mention it. They all noted that Mr. John did as he was told even though that was a phenomenal amount of un-necessary work particularly for surfaces other than the gym floor. I surmise that one of these superintendents felt



**Figure 6. The Gym.**

threatened by Mr. John's presence and "power," and figured that requiring this task would force Mr. John to quit. Well, it didn't.

From what I can tell, one administrator, the one whose interview I analyzed in depth in this study, was employed throughout the superintendencies of the three other superintendents. Perhaps even he himself felt invisible in being passed over for selection as superintendent. Since he and Mr. John did not have a collaborative relationship anyway, the antagonistic oppressive atmosphere had opportunity to escalate as this administrator likely asserted his informal power to a greater degree in general especially throughout these last thirteen years of Mr. John's career.

*Writing beyond the ending – posthumous story*

Determined to complete chapter four tonight, and knowing I have yet to address one of the most intriguing topics generated in my interviews – that being evidence of the spirit of Mr. John still walking the halls in this district ten years after his death as told to me by a number of informants, I sit on my couch and open an article I've had printed for some time called, *The Cold Wind*, (Martinez, 2003), that examines various accounts of "ghost-cold". (Ghost cold refers in this article to instances of a chill effect or a significant drop in temperature – ultimately the materialization of a presence.) I toss a blanket over my knees and prop my laptop on my knees. I hear our central air conditioner cut off, and I am surrounded by a cold breeze which wasn't there five minutes ago. It is so noticeable that the hair on my arms (which I don't normally notice) feels the actual weight of the breeze. I sit for a moment and think, "This is weird, -- this is

really weird.” The cold breeze continues for maybe a minute and I am startled. I cry out to my husband dozing on the other couch, “ I don’t think I can write this tonight.” I relate what I just described to you as reader. I tell him this is too spooky. It is disturbing. It scares me somewhat.

*What I’m really thinking, is, “Oh my God. What is going on here?”*

*Obviously, at this point, I’m feeling less and less in control of the outcome of this project. And I’m thinking, if this can happen, what will happen next?*

Is it the power of suggestion brought about by reading this article about the presence of spirits becoming tangible through occurrences of “ghost-cold?” If you had asked me fifteen minutes ago how I thought I was going to begin this section, never in a million years would I have thought I would be writing what I am writing now. What just happened? Where did that breeze come from? It is not here now. As a matter of fact, I’m really getting a little too warm under this blanket on an August night in my air-conditioned home.

The fact that I printed this article called, *The Cold Wind*, months ago as a potential reference for this study relates to a couple of factors. The first of these I explain momentarily as posthumous stories about my grandfather’s ghostly presence in this district. I share some of those stories here, but part of the reason I take stock in those stories is that indeed I have experienced a very definite encounter with a spirit, my grandmother (married to Mr. John), about a week after her death and an even more tangible experience about a year later. Was it frightening? No. Was it comforting? Actually, -- yes. The fact that the

very first informant who brought me to this project, stared almost glaringly into my eyes while he talked about my grandfather's impact in this district and the informant said, "You know, people believe he is still there, " I guess really didn't surprise me based on my own supernatural encounters.

*I can't believe I just wrote that and am publishing admission of this experience. What will people I know think when they read this? I'm not sure it matters. After all, isn't this project about multiple perspectives -- about situated responsiveness? About each of us possessing multiple selves and our own non-unitary subjectivity that reacts differently to different contexts? Anyway, isn't this project about how Mr. John's non-unitary subjectivity navigated his various interactions with staff and administration? Don't I have to at least be true to the premise of my own study by admission of these occurrences?*

When I did the research for this study, I wondered whether any other informants would mention any similar occurrences. Upon my first visit to the district when I wasn't actually interviewing, but rather just trying to introduce myself and chat a bit with folks, I sat with a group of teachers in the teacher's lounge and let them talk a bit. It wasn't too long before this group of "normal" teachers began to share story after story of supernatural occurrences in this district, many of which they reference as "Mr. John." As a matter of fact, the teacher's classroom on the corner across the intersection from my grandparent's house is referred to as "spook central" because of the numerous unexplainable occurrences in that room and in that area of the hallway of the original building

built in 1939. This particular teacher working late in her classroom on numerous occasions will hear a “caretaker” walk down the hall and cut off the lights in the hallway and yet, there is no one there. Another teacher speaks of numerous instances when he has driven up and parked outside of his classroom in the main wing of this original building and before he arrives in his classroom (dark when he parked), a caretaker switches the lights on in preparation for his arrival. Toilets flush without warning, footsteps are heard, metal chairs clank in the former cafeteria now-carpeted weight room which doubles as a stage dressing room, and a heavy punching bag hangs in that same room constantly swinging from some “energy” existent in that room. The theatre arts teacher I interviewed speaks of direct encounters with the spirits and referred to my grandfather as a sometimes “persnickety” spirit, who slams doors, makes objects fall and generally makes himself present. On a three a.m. ghost hunt with students and several other staff members, special cameras reveal swirls of light caught on videotape and posted on the internet listed under America’s Most Haunted High School. A supersensitive audio recorder reveals in a whisper, “NO ONE CAN HEAR US.”

Are these stories true? Are they folklore? Does it matter, and why am I sharing them as part of this research project?

According to Delamont (1989), “educational institutions are rich in contemporary folklore: cautionary tales, jokes, urban legends, atrocity stories, and so on” (p. 191). The premise is that this folklore helps the occupants of schools levitate (if you will) above the mundane routine and ritual inherent in the

concept of “schooling.” I have made the case in this dissertation, among other things, that this school community was a storied one, and Mr. John was center stage. Is it possible, even posthumously, that Mr. John continues to create story?

*I think it is even possible that Mr. John has created story through me as storyteller. Sure, I'm an English major. Sure, I can write fairly well. But throughout this entire writing process, I many times absorb and then return to reality only to later read what I have written knowing that I alone have not written it. Call it divine intervention or perhaps as one of my committee members suggested-- perhaps even I have “channeled” Mr. John at times in this process and his invisible hand has guided these words. Or, -- maybe I can tell this story well because I understand oppression well as one female in administration who has stared through the glass ceiling for some time now.*

Whether these occurrences are actually Mr. John or not, one cannot discount the impact of Mr. John within this school district. Even in his absence, in his true invisibility, he is ever-present in the hearts and minds of the people who knew him, loved him, and, even sometimes despised him for his aura of power.

These stories are being passed to a new generation within that school district. Several students in the theatre arts teacher's class I interviewed, are in photographs she has taken of plays they have done and have gone back only later to find “energies” in the shape of spherical orbs of light that show up on

those photographs. These students have been present during play practices when metal chairs are heard to clank, and “invisible” people run up stage stairs. When one of these students met me, as Mr. John’s granddaughter in the flesh, he literally stared and stared in near disbelief.

If these stories are being passed to a new generation, exactly what is the message?

Hopefully, the message (in response and summary to my second research question regarding characteristics of Mr. John that allowed him to transcend invisibility) includes the fact that he was a simple man -- who because of his work ethic, his sense of humor (along with his ability to use it to advantage), and his apparent singular purpose in life being to humble himself with every ounce of his being to serve this school district and its students – lives on leaving a lasting, living leadership legacy in this rural school district. In our twenty-first century schools, we as school leaders would do well to take notice.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

*So what?*

*Linda Skrla, 2003*

*It depends.*

Linda Skrla, 2003

#### Summary

When I began this project a little over a year ago, I, as a first generation white female academician, was more than anything relieved that my dissertation could be the life history of my grandfather, a rural school custodian, and about how he impacted this tiny school district and the now hundreds of students who had walked those hallways over his fifty-three years of service. That sounded do-able and in light of the fact that my initial research interest -- wasn't that interesting – it was quite a gift to have this topic come to me (Cole & Knowles, 2001), and to discover that this is most desired in qualitative narrative research. Of course, the happily ever after ending received a real jolt, a veritable punch in the stomach, when I realized writing a dissertation about my grandfather wasn't as easy, or rather should I say, comfortable as I thought it would be. In fact, as I have shared, it was downright painful at times.

Along with that pain, came mourning (Lather, 1998). By mourning, I means as Lather(1998) does, that at least, “philosophically, the work of

mourning is about ontologizing what remains after the rigor of troubling or problematizing a concept” (p. 11-12). In problematizing various aspects of my grandfather’s life, there was mourning midway through the project at the loss of innocence regarding my grandfather. From that problematizing came another sort of mourning which was quite the opposite as later, most importantly, I mourned when I realized what a struggle my grandfather had lived and all the while masked it beneath humor and story. In fact, in summarizing the project, it was the process of uncovering more questions than answers about how or why my grandfather could behave one way in one instance and another way at another time and my innate need for coherence that ultimately influenced the final direction and focus of this study.

What I uncovered through narrative analysis involving months of thinking and digesting and both literally physically and mentally reviewing conversations with informants from that district for the said, the unsaid, and the silenced, (because although some may think these two latter are the same, I view the silenced as more deliberate) was that what was going on here was that my white, non-high school educated custodian grandfather had honed his ability to navigate communication with everyone in that rural school district from his maintenance peers to the superintendent to the extent that he even posthumously commands respect and is the subject of a living oral history tribute in that school district.

Conversations with informants in that district including former maintenance peers, secretaries, a board member, administrators, teachers and

former students as well as my own family members provided me with an opportunity to know my grandfather in a way I did not know him before. By getting inside his life, his head and his heart through the contributions of these informants, I truly write not only his life, but also in some way theirs. I surmise that many of the persons with whom I spoke identified so closely with my grandfather because he was able to relate to them “where they lived,” experiencing some of the same hardships, and oppressions. By his actions, his humor, he was able to “level the playing field” for them all because his voice was also theirs. His willingness to take a stand (although sublime as it was and masked in a number of ways through story and creating situations to deflect power struggles, etc.), was recognized, appreciated and revered by many of these persons. Even those administrators with whom he played a power tug-of-war still admired his status as worthy opponent.

This process has revealed that although many persons view earning a doctorate as a status-increasing venture, it is rather a process more about humbling oneself in recognition of the complexities of the world and the human condition. And, since I feel I have arrived at this place because forces beyond my control have placed me on this path, (sometimes I wonder how I really got here), I feel I have traveled it in the end without reserve, without concern for whom the story I tell might offend because I just know that my grandfather’s story as I have told it here, is one interpretation of a man’s life that can impact the way others (particularly administrators in schools) can harness all of the

human potential in schools and impact more students' lives successfully than ever before.

### **Conclusions**

As I come to the end of this project, the words of my chair reverberate in my head, "So what?" Indeed, that question and "Now what?" as I get ready to write this section direct my thoughts. So what if in this tiny rural school district, there lived, for all intents and purposes to the outside world, an otherwise nondescript man, my grandfather, a rural school custodian, whose humor became the fulcrum forging and forcing a balance in "power" between the support staff in this school district and the administration? So what if this man, who rather than find himself wallowing in his poverty, lack of education, or mired in pity over his life station of doing other people's dirty work (Meagher, 2002), instead chose to cause the oppressive societal forces at work even in this rural school district to sometimes lose their footing, to teeter-totter back and forth at times coming to rest in a balanced state by his subtle, ingenious, and even sometimes overt chain-yanking and pranks?

So what if I have gained both personal fulfillment and greater understanding through honoring my grandfather's legacy? So what if I have discovered that I enjoy this research and the creative, cathartic process of this type of research? So what if the "tectonic plates of experience" (Josselson, 1995. p. 32 ) and the "collision and contradiction that emerged in this process through the narrative dialogic process" has yielded for me greater understanding regarding organizations such as schools and the power struggles that go on in

the name of leadership within those settings? Will this project just be fodder for critics of narrative as they sling arrows accusatory of navel-gazing? Will this project offend and unsettle current administrators or university preparation programs?

I find the answer to, “So what?” most applicable to how my findings inform: the future of leadership, a greater understanding of societal and sociological power struggles, and the compelling and innate role narrative and story play in understanding the human condition.

*So what about leadership?*

What we know about leadership as evidenced in this project is that overall it is still overwhelmingly white and male and traditional. That is not to say there are not some white and male administrators out there who are visionary like the superintendent of this small district that helped facilitate my entry within his district to complete this study, and the superintendent for whom I currently work who encourages visionary projects such as our efforts to secure after-school programming for our students. However, along this path as I have shared, I have encountered others, (white, male and older) who are gatekeepers on these kinds of studies and leadership in general. Even more sadly, I have encountered white female administrators and professors who play into these patriarchal scripts coddling these colleagues to advance their own careers and interests.

What our leadership preparation programs need to pursue is creation of a climate in those programs that truly supports advancing the efforts and visions of all students, male and female, persons of color and even the “traditional”

administrator (white and male) so that this paradigmatic shift occurs in the ways we “do schools”. There are likely a number of persons who would agree with this vision; unfortunately, the “how” of accomplishing it is sometimes elusive. Although I elaborate further in my recommendations section on how the leadership program I am currently enrolled in at Texas A&M is accomplishing this, I will say here that basically, the professors I have been privileged to work with have a philosophy and mantra they profess (ever so subtly). They do not blatantly tell students what they should think – that a particular paradigm is favored or viewpoint desired, but rather, by creating situations and opportunities for students to discover, to mentally meander, and to chisel away -- until finally one day, an avalanche of recognition is revealed to those who would persist.

I’ve been thinking about their thinking and their process for a while and it’s been really “cool” to see what’s been going on here in the name of leadership. Indeed, like my grandfather, not overt with his challenge to oppression and authority, these professors have spent many hours I’m sure in conversation planning this “back-door” but infinitely more effective process of student “knowing.” These professors exemplify true leadership, serve as role models both on the administrative managerial front and also as exemplars of ways to know which are the ultimate “curriculum” for leadership. I would suggest that their model should be replicated in educational leadership programs across the nation. It is their visionary leadership that allows non-traditional studies such as mine to have a chance to be heard.

*So what about power?*

*Power has a way of defining reality.*

*Wayne Hoy & Cecil Miskel, 2002, p. 231*

Being heard is about being given power. The “us and them” relationships in this district were about power. They were about persons who possessed the formal power of authority in many instances resenting those who possessed the informal power of expertise or informal charismatic power of persons like my grandfather. Hirschman (1970, in Hoy & Miskel, 2002) cites in his classic book, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, that there are three options participants in any system possess regarding organizational power. These include:

1. Leave: find another place – exit
2. Stay and play; try to change the system – voice.
3. Stay and contribute as expected; be a loyal member – loyalty. (p. 237)

It is of course those who stay and speak out, (as my grandfather obviously did during his long career of fifty-three years) that must be “willing to expend the energy to be successful, as well as the skill to act strategically and tactically when necessary” (Hoy & Miskel, 2002, p. 237).

My grandfather refused to be silenced. He refused to be invisible. He negotiated so skillfully through humor, joking, prank - pulling and creating daily drama that he eventually commanded power to be on par with that of the superintendent. As I have already stated earlier in this paper, one informant said that indeed, “You were loyal to the superintendent, and you were loyal to Mr. John,” and although as I have shared the long-time superintendent and Mr.

John had a collaborative relationship, relationships between Mr. John and other administrators in the district were ongoing power struggles in many instances. It is likely that Mr. John's "voice" through story, jokes, etc. and his finesse in using this skill to his advantage made him popular, revered and respected by many of his co-workers (i.e. maintenance peers, secretaries, cafeteria workers, even teachers) within that district. It is likely that most of the other oppressed workers in that district viewed Mr. John as their own "voice" and enjoyed watching him employ a successful yank against someone from whom they also had experienced oppression.

In becoming "powerful," the looming question is whether Mr. John himself ever exploited that power for any selfish motives. I did not hear nor read this into any conversations I analyzed, but I did note particularly in the artifact analysis section that because the long-time superintendent retired in 1980, the ongoing system of informal checks and balances facilitated by three superintendents (none of whom "reigned" over seven years during this period) kept the balance of power nearly constantly off center.

The greatest message about power in this study is that support staff such as: Mr. John, secretaries, instructional aides, and parents, are harboring immense reserves of human potential that in general traditional administrators are failing to tap. Scheurich & Skrla (2003), cite the concept of " 'distributed leadership' " (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001), which refers to the idea that everyone can and should consider themselves simultaneously both a leader

and a follower. They suggest that even at times the principal and superintendent can be followers and that:

Teachers and other staff, including counselors, instructional aides, librarians, nurses, school secretaries, custodians, and other support staff, often provide key leadership in a school. (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003, p. 100)

Scheurich and Skrla(2003) have a couple of other suggestions about position and power and that is to “give it away constantly” and “lead as a servant” (p. 107). Finally, and I think this is key, especially in light of some of Mr. John’s retention of his expertise power because either he did not want to give up his power, so he did not teach people how to light the boiler, or draw the grid of the underground water and gas lines, or no one cared enough to learn how to do his dirty work. For leaders, the most important thing each of us can do is to teach our colleagues our jobs. According to Scheurich & Skrla ( 2003):

This helps everyone be on the same page. This helps everyone to know all areas of leadership. This builds trust. Each team member knows nearly the same as all team members, so each one will typically make nearly the same decision no matter what the situation (p. 110).

*So what about stories?*

Another means of harnessing human potential is through the power of story. As I write this chapter, I find myself wondering why I am not more “academic” about it and it occurs to me once again that praxis is occurring. I find it “easier” and more effective to relate in story, in narrative, what my recommen-

dations might be. This entire project has been about the (as much as anything), power of story – the power of the story of my grandfather’s life, and the power of how he used story to navigate his life all embedded and layered within this dissertation which is a story of this entire process to me.

Maxine Greene (1995) says:

One of the advances of our time is a (sometimes grudging) recognition on the part of many of us that those we have long categorized as other for whatever reason... share in the human condition. Every one of us inhabits a humanly fabricated world,...and can tell the story of what happens to him or her as he or she lives. (p. 3-4)

The power of story is that it is the language of the common man. Perhaps that characteristic is what has so long caused academe to suspend and inhibit its use preferring instead to rely on fact and figures, exacting data and analysis, and the rejection of outliers such as my grandfather for having the potential to inform. In the lives of everyday people, talk and story are “hot.” People love gossip; sat spellbound in front of radios before the dawn of television to listen to both fictional stories and stories of the news of the day; for years have lived their lives around afternoon soap operas, and now TIVO what they can’t bear to miss. In fact, today:

Autobiography—the relating of everyday stories—is central to day-time television talk shows....Part of the appeal of these programs is that they appear to let people speak for themselves and tell their own stories.

(Peck, 1996, p. 134)

Causing the viewer to feel an intimacy with these guests and hosts on talk shows is the desired response (Peck, 1996). In our increasingly impersonal world, people seek relationships even if they are only via satellite. I propose that those who knew Mr. John “intimately” through his publicly-created persona as this long-time rural school custodian with an attitude, long to maintain that intimacy by repeating fondly the stories he told created and lived.

### **Recommendations**

If the question for conclusions is, “So what?”, then likewise it follows that the appropriate inquiry for recommendations would be, “What if?”

*What if preparation programs responded?*

*If we wait for a solution to appear like the bursting of the sun through the clouds or the resolving of the elements in an algebraic equation, we shall wait in vain. Although college professors...perform a valuable social function, society requires (even) greater numbers of persons who, while capable of gathering and digesting facts, are at the same time able to think in terms of life, make decisions, and act. From such persons will come our real social leaders.*

*George S. Counts, 1969*

Traditional administrative preparation programs have been slow to change, hesitant to respond in practice and praxis although it is no longer a Beaver Cleaver or Bill Cosby family world, and hasn't been for some time. In fact, if indeed the curriculum of traditional administration does not change in educator-preparation institutions, those institutions and the public schools for

which they prepare leaders may find themselves in the position of having had someone move their cheese (Johnson & Blanchard, 2001), much as General Motors and IBM who were apparently blind to the fact that the competitive environment had changed. Schools and universities are organizations that can fall prey to these “competence traps” as well. By competence traps I mean those situations in which an “experience of perceived success leads an organization to persist in a familiar pattern of thought and action beyond the time and conditions within which it yields successful outcomes” (Argyris & Schon, 1996, p. 19).

Indeed, for schools, the time has come to look beyond traditional preparation programs. As Counts (1969) says above, even (and perhaps most especially), college professors must move from theory to praxis. As Scheurich and Skrla (2003), share in *Leadership for Equity and Excellence*:

The race and ethnicity demographics of this country are changing very rapidly, faster than even many demographers expected. Students of color already dominate our largest cities, where most of our people live, and are rapidly expanding into all the suburbs and exurbs....For example, the majority of students in Texas schools are already children of color, and by about 2020, two thirds of the entire Texas population will be people of color. One of every two children in Texas public schools participates in the federal free or reduced-price lunch program, and one in every seven children has limited English proficiency. (p. 5)

As a doctoral student in the leadership preparation program at Texas A&M University, the “old guard” of traditional preparation is finding itself looking in the mirror only to see a Picasso-like paradigmatic shift staring back at it. Texas A&M University as a whole has come under recent fire because of its “whiteness” and lack of diversity, but nestled away in the ivory towers of Harrington in the center of campus, lives a “radical” enclave of caring professors who are at the leading edge of building a network of change across the United States calling for “a brave new world” in educational leadership programs where ideologies that previously only gave lip-service to concepts such as creating community and diversity, now in praxis are embracing studies such as my own which seek to make visible “non-traditional” contributors to leadership and community in public schools including persons such as custodians, secretaries, and other support staff. In fact, it is because the study of one of my professors, Dr. Carolyn Clark, and her work on marginalized persons being the role and perspective of custodians on the Texas A&M campus, that the electrical circuit to the light bulb in my brain was completed, causing in effect, my life to flash before my eyes reviewing two conversations with persons who knew my grandfather and his role in that school district and ultimately resulting in my realization of the saliency of my grandfather’s story as a dissertation topic.

What if the praxis of professors in other leadership preparation programs demonstrated similar commitment to community and diversity by conducting similar studies under the watchful eye of their students who then learned by this modeling that indeed, lip-service to community and diversity was a thing of the

past? What if other professors like Dr. Linda Skrla, my doctoral chair, were also keenly aware and aggressively supportive of the activities of their doctoral students as she has been of me (and other administrators like me) who are on the front line specifically choosing to work with disadvantaged populations putting social justice into praxis by for example seeking funding for programs to enrich and improve the lives of those students?

*What if further studies were done?*

In my review of the professional literature, I found virtually no research, certainly no qualitative studies like mine, on the contributions of support staff in schools. There exists only one book on school secretaries and a single quantitative study on school custodians. In the rural school district I currently work in, there are other Mr. John's, persons with incredible longevity including one recently retired secretary who worked over the period of more than forty years for five superintendents in the district. I'm certain this is the case in other districts as evidenced through conversations I've had with friends and acquaintances in several districts, and yet, their stories remain untold, their contributions unheard although they obviously have contributed to the daily mission and culture of these districts by attending to the daily mundane routines and rituals (in essence "the dirty work") others have chosen not to do as well as having seen, heard, and maintained the challenge and professional burden of silence about the goings-on within these districts for years and years.

Consider the cafeteria worker with whom I spoke who bravely breeched the code with a perfect stranger citing an "us and them" relationship between

support staff and professionals (particularly administrators) within the district. Consider her praxis of creating activities and celebrations for her own staff in order to build community and how significant that initiative is. What about other support staff like the administrative assistant I recently hired who spent five years in the classroom with teachers and frequently says, "I think maybe they realize what I did," which tells me she too felt the oppression and lack of recognition that eventually resulted in her seeking other opportunity.

There are library shelves full of organizational theory, volumes on leadership, countless books on the analyses and interpretations of school law, even a number of books containing professors' ideologies about creating community and yet, virtually no publications on the initiative of public school administrators tapping into the power and human potential within their schools by authorizing the contributions of support staff.

In addition to these fairly logical future avenues for research, at least one tangential but highly significant (I think) recommendation is evidenced in this interdisciplinary study which cuts through barriers in sociological research once restricting these types of narrative studies. What I have discovered and elaborated here regarding how my grandfather daily defeated oppressive forces in his life with humor, lends credence and reinvigorates research on humor and how it can temper harassment in society and the workplace. The database on humor was not vast and it was not very recent. One avenue for further exploration I would suggest includes investigating the power of humor. I suspect that with the recent emphasis and realization of the power of narrative

particularly in research, that perhaps my study is the tip of the iceberg or maybe the cornerstone for an impending avalanche of realization that humor as story itself possesses potential yet untapped not only for narrative analysis, but also for sociological analysis of the use of humor.

*Some final thoughts*

Skrla (2000) writes of mourning. Others too have cited the aftermath of writing lives (Dunaway, 1992). Originally, I wondered if I might mourn what I have said here about my grandfather. Lately, I think not. What I have shared here is a celebration of his life. It is a tribute to Mr. John and what he accomplished for his own identity, but more importantly it is a tribute to the impact he had on hundreds of students that passed through the doors in that district. Additionally, the living oral tribute of story in that district (about him) shares the work ethic and a model of living that will serve future students well.

What does concern me is in writing the life of Mr. John, I have written the lives of many of those who touched him and tormented him as well. If these persons were to read this account, would they see themselves? Some of them might be amused that I discerned from their conversations what they did not directly tell me. However, others might be offended. Like in *Dear Abby*, would they, by seeing themselves, change how they live? Would they realize how oppressive they had been?

Without being too bold, if this is the only study of its kind in the professional literature (should it be published), could it become a “classic,” part of the required reading for future administrators? Would it generate

conversations in educational leadership programs that have not previously been part of the “curriculum?” In essence, could the life of one man, my grandfather, a rural school custodian for more than fifty-three years impact through the “voice” I have been afforded not only the persons that knew him, but forever change the way we “do school?”

It depends.

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## VITA

### **Gerri M. Maxwell**

5430 Hillside Lane  
 Brenham, TX 77833  
 HM 979.830.0463; CELL 979.451.3001  
 gerrimaxwell@hotmail.com

### **Professional Qualifications/Education/Certifications**

December 2004	Ph.D. in Educational Administration Texas A&M University-College Station
August 2000	State Board for Educator Certification Mid-Management Certification
July 1997	ESL Certification
December 1982	M.Ed.–Curriculum and Instruction Reading Specialist K-12 Certification University of Houston – Victoria
December 1980	B.A. – Texas Lutheran College English/HPER (Health/PE) - Double Major Secondary Education

### **Honors**

- 25<sup>th</sup> Annual David L.Clark Seminar Participant for Distinguished Doctoral Students in the United States; American Educational Research Association –April 2004
- Secondary Teacher of the Year – Region VI – Finalist 1994
- Brenham Middle School and Brenham ISD Teacher of the Year – 1994
- Published two articles in *Reading Teacher* based on post-graduate work 1982; article reprinted in *Teacher to Teacher: Strategies for the Classroom* 1993

This dissertation was typed by the author.