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Jessica Marie Lombardi

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**The Thesis Committee for Jessica Marie Lombardi  
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**Power to the Pupil: The Implications of One School's Bridging of  
Pedagogy and Place**

**APPROVED BY  
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

**Supervisor:**

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Christina Bain

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Paul Bolin

**Power to the Pupil: The Implications of One School's Bridging of  
Pedagogy and Place**

**by**

**Jessica Marie Lombardi, B.S.**

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, whose encouragement and support have given me the confidence to achieve whatever I set out to do. I owe my work ethic and perseverance to them. I also dedicate this thesis to my sister and my boyfriend, who have had the unfortunate burden of receiving the brunt of my stress and fatigue during this entire thesis process. Thank you for keeping my life entertaining outside of graduate school. I love you all!

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## **Abstract**

# **Power to the Pupil: The Implications of One School's Bridging of Pedagogy and Place**

Jessica Marie Lombardi, M.A.

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Supervisor: Christina Bain

As an art educator, it has been a personal struggle of mine to motivate students in an academic setting, and to empower them within and beyond school walls. I believe that those schools walls are more than just physical boundaries and borders, but are an integral factor in how and what children can learn. Literature has given a broad view of the relationship between a school's architecture and its pedagogy, identifying how paint colors or the arrangement of desks can influence student actions. Although these studies provide relevant information for educators and architects, investigation that reports from the student's perspective are lacking in number. This thesis explores the impacts of the participatory design strategy of a newly renovated high school. Through active and often artistic involvement, students contributed to the appearance of their learning environment. This resulted in a tight-knit community, a boost in self-esteem, a sense of ownership and a source of empowerment. The findings of this study add to the body of resources aimed at child-centered pedagogy, and aim to serve as a model for empowering students through the arts.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Architects and builders have the task of designing spaces and structures with the goal of operations in mind. While the processes of some of these building strategies have been documented, it has occurred mostly through the eyes of adult professionals. What research that does exist on the strategic designing of school buildings shows a pattern of disconnect between the form and the function. In many cases this has led to a misunderstanding and misuse of the learning space by all of its inhabitants, leaving the students at a gross educational disadvantage.

This study follows the rebuilding activities of a private arts high school named The Griffin School in Austin, Texas. It documents the reconstruction process through the perspectives of fifteen participants who will potentially benefit from the careful design of the new school building. Through observation and interviews, the voices of Griffin students tell the story of the impact of their contributions to the physical learning environment. I believe there is a reciprocal relationship between the form of this school and its function. I investigated whether putting the hammer and nails into the hands of the most important clients, the students, ownership of their educational domain and empowerment through artistic means occurred.

## Central Research Question

How does the participatory rebuilding approach of The Griffin School contribute to its overall learning environment, and how can it serve as a model for empowering students through the arts?

## Problem Statement

The purpose of this study was to shine light on how one Austin area arts high school has given their student body an emphatic voice through a participatory curriculum and governance system, essentially focusing on their encouraged involvement with the visual design and appearance of their school.

I recognize that today's students possess strong, independent voices that are too frequently suppressed by the structure and limitations of the traditional school model. The immense bodies of knowledge and skills students carry with them and practice in their daily lives are often ignored in order to stick to a determined and highly rigid educational agenda. Children are regularly reduced to passive puppets that come to sit in a desk, listen to a teacher, and regurgitate the words read in a textbook. Students have so much more to offer and gain from their educational experience; they just need to be given the opportunity to activate and exercise their personal perspectives. Herein lies a catch: opportunity alone does not make for empowered students. A participatory approach to pedagogy and environmental design at The Griffin School offers a possible solution to rote models of teaching and learning.

## Motivations for Research

### Personal

I was fortunate enough to learn about this progressive arts high school, commonly referred to as Griffin (See Chapter 3) through a friend during my first semester of graduate school. Subsequently, I completed many hours of observations there. The biggest news floating around the school at the time was the possibility of a new school site and building, and there was a strong force pulling me towards further investigation in this area. That pull is my love of architecture and interior design. Architecture and interior design are long-standing passions of mine, and I have stumbled across a new chapter of my interests with this research: the architecture and design of schools, and the role this plays in the school's functionality. The educational philosophy and practices of The Griffin School are profoundly inspiring to me, and I could not pass up an opportunity to experience and learn from this rebuilding process.

### Professional

My limited teaching experience comes from student teaching visual arts classes in a rural South Carolina high school. I completed a semester long certification program as part of my undergraduate degree. It was during this period I found myself in a situation no college course ever mentioned or attempted to prepare me for: the students were mercilessly unmotivated in their school environment. With a graduation rate below 60%, improving test scores and Annual Yearly Progress ratings trumped the need for a curriculum that students could connect with (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2004), perpetuating

the vicious cycle of an uninspiring education. In this community, art as an academic endeavor was seen as a fruitless labor. Because I had little time and a minimal educational background, I struggled greatly to meet the needs of the administration and to light a fire within the art students.

The school building itself, inside and out, was also short of inspiration. Faded, old brick walls surrounded the structure with no character and no sense of welcoming. Windows were sparse and revealed uncontested views of the anemic town beyond the high school fences. Like many schools I have seen, it resembled a prison with washed out walls of beige and gray, as well as isolated classrooms, and tightly controlled superintendence. To me, there is no coincidence that with the drab learning environment, students had little or no interest in what the school had to offer them.

There is one aspect of my philosophy of education that seems to stand out from any that I have encountered, and has become the most important, driving force behind my purpose for teaching. I firmly believe that educating people and making art should stem from the canon that knowledge, in any form, is power. Every academic endeavor should provide the learner with ample opportunity for self-empowerment and self-esteem. Throughout many classroom observations I have seen students who have been sadly disenfranchised by their education; an education that was not germane to their lives and that did not encourage any more than rote regurgitation of what the teacher had said was important. In all my graduate work thus far, and in all my work to come, finding a way to combat this epidemic and empower students through art is my principle goal.

I believe that the mission and everyday practices of The Griffin School (See Chapter 3) have provided me with a key to discovering possible means of motivating high school art students like the ones I taught in South Carolina. As a teacher, I desire to give students the opportunity to be in the driver's seat of their educational and artistic car. I want to figure out ways to empower students from all backgrounds and circumstances, and spark a confidence within each one through art. Investigating further into this issue will hopefully uncover many possible roads to achieving this goal. The biggest obstacle is the easiest to detect yet, perhaps, the most difficult to overcome. The students must want to be in the school. I am dedicated to finding multiple strategies to make this a reality.

#### Speculation about this Investigation

During my first semester in graduate studies, I visited The Griffin School in Austin, Texas, on numerous occasions to observe for a class. I decided to write my final paper for the class on my examination of the role the physical space plays in regards to its current popularity and educational success with the students and the community. This paper was titled "Student Ownership: The Success of The Griffin School" and it was a mini pilot study for my thesis topic. I contend it has given me great insight into the many positive outcomes of performing this case study. Through my previous analysis of this arts high school, I found an involved and motivated student population who felt very passionate about their school community. All students were given a personal space and a chance to impact their learning environment through any chosen artistic means on the "Art Wall" located in the main hall of the school. With a small student body of less than

60, this tight-knit group of teenagers in grades 9-12 was able to have their voices heard and their art appreciated by their peers and mentors. The sense of community and ownership has seemed to notably empower these students in an educational setting where this level of investment and respect for the school is rare. I predict that the same pedagogic and operational strategies which contributed to the culture and empowerment at the old Griffin campus will be carried over to Griffin's new building. In turn, I believe that students' will continue to feel a sense of pride and ownership regarding the new Griffin space through the participatory rebuilding approach.

### Research Methods

For this research, I performed a single, descriptive case study involving the Griffin School. In order to ensure the information gathered was valid and fair, I employed the use of multiple data collection sources and analysis methods. During the construction process and spanning the first few months of the new 2011-2012 school year, I was on site every few weeks to directly observe the activities, processes, and general reactions of students and an administrator to the school building. My level of observation ranged from a complete outsider taking notes, to a volunteer participant in the relocation and reconstruction processes. I drew on previous experience and relationships in order to conduct semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, and administrators. One tool that helped to yield accuracy in the processing of my entire amount of interview data was an audio recorder. Personal accounts of differing experiences provided the investigation with multiple perspectives and helped to reduce my personal biases as a researcher. After

transcribing interviews, I compared the textual information with personal observations and to help me understand patterns in the data. I then used those patterns to formulate answers to the research questions that motivated this investigation.

### Definition of Terms

I used the term “learning environment” in this study to define the space within which the children gain knowledge and experience as a result of The Griffin School. I adopted the description of Aledajana and Aderibigbe (2007) as the space is more than the visible and tangible environment, and that it incorporates “the variety of tools and information resources, the interactions, the relationships between and among students and teachers, as well as the expectations and norms for learning and behavior” (p. 501). All of these factors, with their many complexities, contribute to establishing a learning environment.

The “rebuilding” of a school can refer to a wide range of activities from curriculum redevelopment to shifts in faculty and staff. Because The Griffin School was not reconstructing programmatically or ideologically, my focus was the investigation of the physical rebuilding.

### Limitations of the Study

I would argue that the limitations I set for this study made it well defined and achievable. I conducted research through a single case study involving one specific arts high school in Austin, Texas. The period of time for this study began with observations in

June 2011, and continued through the first year of school for Griffin students in their new building. Thus, the study began in late August 2011, and concluded in early June, 2012. This length of time gave me an opportunity to see how the physical structure of the school was transformed, to capture student planning sessions, and also allowed the students and faculty some time to adjust and reflect on the implications of their new learning environment. Helping to make my study more manageable is the small student and faculty population at Griffin. With fewer than 60 students, I was able to interview a small sample of the Griffin community in an achievable period of time.

Because The Griffin School is an institution focused on the arts, there is an abundance of artistically and design-oriented data to gather that offer useful details for this study. The extensive list of elements and factors to consider when dealing with the construction of any large physical structure, such as funding, zoning laws, physics, etc., would produce an entirely separate research agenda, if I were to include them all. I focused my study on the physical aspects of the building, the organizational structure, and the individuals had affected by the fusion of the two on a daily basis. However, it is unavoidable that I had to bring light to and explain some of these other elements that had a weighty influence on the students' choice, or lack of choice, of the appearance of the school. Many design decisions were made along the way from the size of tile for the bathroom stalls to the kitchen appliances selected for the cafeteria. However, my primary areas of concentration were directed toward projects and decisions that were student-initiated or student-constructed, and the impact of these designs that influence and were reciprocally influenced by the learning environment.

Another limitation to this study is my personal relationship with The Griffin School. Long before the inception of my thesis topic, I became involved with special events and volunteer work associated with The Griffin School. I participated in community affairs held by Griffin teachers, lifted boxes during move-in day, assembled teachers' desks, and picked up a paintbrush to bring life to a new "Art Wall." My relationship with Griffin enabled me to be more of an insider, a part of their community, rather than a stranger performing research through a two-way mirror. On numerous occasions, I was invited to talk about my research with new students, returning students, faculty, parents and close community members. These opportunities made me feel supported and trusted in my research by the Griffin community. I was ultimately looking for positive outcomes of the newly constructed campus of The Griffin School, and for empowering strategies that are applicable to other environments. My own concern for the success of the Griffin community has the possibility to skew my outlook, but awareness of this subjectivity forced me to keep check of my judgments and to help me in creating a holistic portrait.

### Benefits to the Field of Art Education

I believe most educators struggle at some point during their career to motivate and enable young students to voice their opinions, beliefs, and passions, and to articulate them with vigor. At Griffin, I saw students contribute to policy making, collaborate with teachers on curriculum making, and invest greatly in personal and collaborative art making. Ideas and enthusiasm poured out of them. In my own experiences, this was

highly uncommon. Fortunately, the arts have inherent characteristics that give a time, a place, a reason, and an authorization for students' individual ideas to be explored and executed in the school setting. Given the opportunity, children can discover relevance and empowerment in their own education through individual and collective creative problem solving which, as I have witnessed at Griffin, has the potential to benefit the overall school.

I am aware that my thesis focuses primarily on the construction of a new learning environment, and the impact it has on only one school. However, the applications of this study extend far beyond The Griffin School, and beyond Austin, Texas. One does not need to be starting from scratch, transitioning from one physical structure to the next, or be a teacher in an art school to find commonalities. The underlying mission of the research was to describe the implications of one particular group of students who are highly involved in their educational environment, so that others may discover possible connections to empowering people in alternative situations.

Something that could be learned and applied in any classroom is the benefits of student participation in the physical and philosophical planning of their learning environment. As I have previously witnessed at Griffin, students hold a great sense of ownership over their education when they are given the opportunity to actively contribute their ideas. With commitment to organizations as the Student Quality of Life Committee, and the Creative Spaces Committee, decisions that would traditionally be made by a few at the top of the authoritative pyramid were discussed and debated by the student body. Because the students at Griffin have personally left their mark through a multitude of

artistic means, they feel comfortable, at home, and appreciate being an important part of their school. I am not advocating all schools need to paint a monumental mural, build significant edifices, and remove all control from the administration in order for every student to feel validated, but some ownership over the direction of their learning and the creation of their environment can lead to wonderfully motivated scholars and artists.

Inclusion in school decisions may help students feel empowered and encouraged to engage in the role of leader and contributor to their school, their education, and their society. This may motivate students to contribute beyond the classroom walls, which Wilson (2005) refers to as the “third pedagogical site.” The Griffin School takes pride in being devoted community members, expanding their resources to connect with the neighboring areas, and emphasizes that all students be involved in community volunteer projects. Reaching out to the broader community of Austin and operating as part of The Griffin School, students experienced how their combined efforts can directly affect others.

As a result of this research, art educators may gain design projects or lesson plans based on The Griffin School’s construction and governing approaches. Giving students the task to re-imagine their learning environment into a space that is suitable for them not only involves practical and real-life situations, but could also give the teacher insights into what their students would like to undertake as significant art ventures. Because the discipline of art often results in the production of tangible items, a sense of self-identity is easily observable. But regardless of the subject, teachers could start small, giving students an opportunity to take ownership of their surrounding learning environment by

making their own posters, decorations or bulletin boards. Students may feel a sense of pride or comfort that can open up more doors than would be possible if they felt disconnected and underrepresented within the classroom.

Olivia Gude (2009) addresses the significant role of art in the broader context outside of the classroom walls:

The artistically engaged individual couples intense awareness with a strong sense of agency, a belief that he or she can shape the world. This belief in the average person's creative power lies at the root of any democratic society. As democratic citizens, we must believe that what we do affects the world around us, that what we do makes a difference. (p. 1)

Not just advocating for the arts, this research has the capacity to show that the value of any form of education is found within the students, who are the primary sources of this case study. If we support a truly child-centered system of education, then the physical environment where the learning occurs cannot be ignored. As Doust (2010) offers, "investing in our school buildings, and involving pupils and teachers in the process, is an investment in education that has the ability to demonstrate huge social profit for societies all over the world" (p. 4).

### Summary

It does not need to be scientifically proven that the way a place looks — the quality, the color, the lighting, the arrangement of objects, the student presence — has definite reverberations on the way that a person or whole community thinks, feels, and acts within that space. We experience it on a day-to-day, minute-by-minute basis.

Schools are no exception. The Griffin School has embedded the designing and planning

of their visual surroundings right into the foundation of their educational philosophy. Like myself, they are of the mindset that the form and function of the school are not independent from one another. They have a direct correlation; one inspires the other. I believe that the stronger the relationship between pedagogy and place, the more successful the environment is for the community, the faculty, and most importantly the students. Doust (2010) agrees:

The success of their buildings and spaces is dependent on how well they relate to their users: pupils and teachers. Good education isn't exclusively linked to good design; leadership and teaching are fundamental to the school ethos, however the school environment has the power to have a significant impact on the way in which pupils connect with their education. (p. 1)

A culmination of my personal experiences, passions, and hopes for education, this research endeavor aspires to demonstrate how one school's physical and organizational structure has impacted their student body in optimistically positive ways. I have come to know that while schools possess an innately high degree of variability, there are aspects of what The Griffin School has developed that have the potential to positively impact other educational environments as well.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Environmental Psychology

The implications for Griffin students regarding their co-created learning space ultimately fall under the umbrella of ecology, the study of the interplay between living things and their natural environment. More specifically, the study of how human beings interact with their surrounding environment is known as environmental psychology. It holds the belief that attitudes, emotions and behaviors are influenced by different types of environments such as the natural environment, the built environment, social settings, and learning institutions (Al-Eisa, 1985; Craik, 1973; Heyman, 1978). While environmental psychology is a science typically concentrated on problems associated with humans and the global, biotic environment, other fields of profession have picked up on its significance. Due to its multidisciplinary core, architects, economists, product designers and educators have all been known to use the theory as a lens for research in and across their scholarly fields.

According to one expert interested in educational environments, “One way to study environmental psychology is to analyze well-known instances where the physical environment has obviously influenced the attitudes and behaviors of the people involved” (Heyman, 1978, p. 7). The view of architecture as informative and reflective of its purposes is not new, and one does not have to look far to witness this parallel. Churches were built with symbolic forms. Soaring ceilings were a gesture to the heavens above,

and ornate decorations mirror the spiritual ceremonies that take place within its walls. Libraries, with their tall bookshelves and narrow aisles, suggest an individual and quiet place for study. Children's playgrounds have traditionally been designed with bright colors, bold shapes, moving parts and interactive features. Their appearance alone attracts children to play, explore, and interact. Similarly, one should also be able to make viable judgments about the operations and success of a school building upon first glance. It is critical for physical and visual characteristics to communicate that not only is a place of learning of great import, but also that the learning within that place is highly valued.

### Place and Pedagogy Intertwined

With students and faculty spending such a large percentage of their time in the academic setting, the understanding of the high quality of the built environment around them is growing increasingly important. Because the structural setting is linked to the operations that occur within its walls, such things as student and teacher morale and academic success are partly dependent on the building; therefore, environmental characteristics should be a major consideration.

The awareness and intentionality of the construction of the physical learning environment in a school or classroom is not a modern development. From eighteenth century monitorial school halls that lined children up in mechanical rows to merely listen, to Montessori schools with stimulating embellishment and hands-on exploration, the space and place where learning occurs has been a reflection and a result of the society, the pedagogy, and even popular culture (Farber, Provenzo, & Holm, 1994). In looking

back through the evolution of education in America, noted education specialists, such as Horace Mann and John Dewey, wrote prolifically on the societal forces that shaped our schools. In 1916, Dewey recognized the inability to separate the two: “This unconscious influence of the environment is so subtle and pervasive that it affects every fiber of character and mind” (p. 21).

In their book, *Art, Culture and Environment: A Catalyst for Teaching*, McFee and Degge (1977) discuss the importance of a space’s physical aspects point to three major categories of how a place can be self-informative:

The way spaces look is important because it tells us what activities can be done there, how important the place is, and how much people care about it. The way spaces look affects the way we feel about a place, and in part, how we enjoy or dislike being there. (p. 229)

Another perspective on the correlation between aesthetics and attitude identified within the school setting is offered by Dudek (2000), in his book *Architecture of Schools: The New Learning Environment*:

There is no doubt that the physical environment in general and in specific ways is deemed to have an effect on the success of the children both academically and socially. Where the school buildings are not well maintained, they tend to encourage vandalism and ultimately a spiral of declining morale amongst the staff and pupils. (pp. 42-43)

Experienced architect and student, Dudek (2000) offers personal testimonies of the effects that his schools’ architecture had on his student life, as well as examples of schools across the United States who have incorporated innovative and purposeful ideas and concepts into their educational spaces. He mentions other pioneers who influenced

the architecture of schools, such as John Dewey, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Maria Montessori.

While academic achievement is a long-standing symbol of a successful school, it is a peripheral concern of this study. The social and emotional responses of the student body are as appreciated as achievement in terms of educational success. In accord, Glass, Cahen, Smith and Filby (1982) believe that “attitudes and feelings help sustain inquiry and learning; they indicate that learning has been accomplished; and they are themselves part of a good life in school and outside them” (p. 52).

### School Planning and Design

When considering the weight that our society places on the education of our children and the seemingly intricate planning and design involved in school construction, there exists an increased need for scholars who have researched the implications of human relations through the built school environment and the potential benefits of student involvement in the school transformation process (Brubaker, 1998; Craik, 1973; Doust, 2010; Dudek, 2000; Goldberg et al, 1991; Sleeman & Rockwell, 1981; Stevenson, 2007; Tanner, 2000; Vea Vecchi, 2010).

Craik’s (1973) article addresses the complexity of the built school environment, especially when it comes to the planning stages of environmental decision-making. One problematic issue when constructing a space for a wide range of people and functions, is that it presents a large gap between professional decision-makers and the lay clientele.

Fortunately, Craik senses that laymen participation in the designing processes of architectural transformation is beginning to gain momentum.

Sleeman and Rockwell (1981) prescribe that in order for the school system and societal needs to be moving simultaneously in the same direction, a reexamination and “rehabilitation” of the designing of educational systems must take place (p. xiii). Like others before them, Sleeman and Rockwell believe that traditional concerns of strategic school planning, such as traffic flow and allotment of square footage, are still relevant and rudimentary. However, they go on to include contemporary concepts like an intentionally stimulating design and student involvement, which should go hand-in-hand with the curriculum. Intelligent design, derived from learner-centered ambitions, will produce positive outcomes for both the teacher and the student: “Learning is, and will continue to be, influenced by its physical environment. To ignore the importance of this concept is to ignore the learner, and the purpose of learning” (p. 74).

Tanner (2000) explores the impacts of seven design factors on academic student achievement, focusing his study on elementary school students. Since technology progresses increasingly faster than schools have the time, money, or ability to keep up with, it puts schools at a disadvantage when it comes to strategic design, and poses disparities between physical structure and the curriculum. With assumptions that “bad school houses are silent killers of teaching and student learning,” Tanner calls for an immediate proliferation in research evaluating design patterns and student achievement (p. 312).

One strand of research that investigates design patterns and achievement in schools looks at participation by the school community, as opposed to relying on the outside opinion of an architectural firm. An advocate of laymen or client participation in the planning and designing stages of a specific space is author and professional architect, Brubaker (1998). He sees the power of direct client input, which supplies the architect with an agenda of their “ideas, understandings, and dreams” (p. xii). Brubaker goes further to detail specifics of the effects of some of those “ideas, understandings, and dreams,” which are manifest in physical form. For example, through collaboration between students and designers, a color scheme can be decided upon that reflects the school’s identity and influences certain feelings. Different obstacles afflict elementary, middle, and high schools, so in order to ensure the longevity of each, Brubaker argues that flexibility of space and function is paramount.

The task of designing a learning space is unquestionably perplexing. Any time one is designing for mass education, issues of past, present, and future, in addition to indeterminate populations, arise. Not only is a student-involved process valuable to the function of a school, but also to the architectural product (Dewey, 1916; Goldberg et al., 1991; Lamm, 1986; Smith, 2005; Woolner, Hall, Wall, Higgins, Blake, & McCaughey, 2005). In their comprehensive review of the effects of school building programs, Woolner et al., conclude that while simple solutions to successful pedagogy and place are indeterminate, the physical structure is still vital in many ways.

Convinced of the synthesis of educational theory and the built environment, Lamm (1986) identifies three ideologies of pedagogy and their corresponding forms. In

an ideology that professes socialization as its objective, the blueprints for that building would suit a mass production factory line. A second ideology with the goal of a classical curriculum in culture might take architectural cues from the original buildings of classic Greece, but would not impede on the instruction itself. Lastly, Lamm prescribes the physical representation of an ideology rooted in individuality and authenticity. These educational aims would be best executed in an open space, welcoming exploration and collaborative activity.

A trusted and experienced source on pedagogy and environment, Dewey also speaks of the reverberations of aesthetic appreciation.

If the eye is constantly greeted by harmonious objects, having elegance of form and color, a standard of taste naturally grows up. The effect of a tawdry, unarranged, and over-decorated environment works for the deterioration of taste, just as meager and barren surroundings starve out the desire for beauty. (p. 21)

In a particular case that Doust (2010) worked on with an educational charity in the U.K., the design team, along with the aid of the school pupils, was able to successfully “design out” certain unwanted behaviors in an elementary school. While consulting with students during early planning stages, a group of males presented the fact that the school bathrooms were an area highly vulnerable to bullying. As a solution, bathrooms were designed with exits at both ends to minimize the possibility of being trapped and tormented. This presented a great opportunity for architects and students to ensure that the form of the school building not only aligned with, but improved its function.

One established learning organization that incorporates the physical environment directly into their educational philosophy is the Reggio Emilia schools. This approach

celebrates emergent curriculum, theme-oriented projects, community involvement, and a unique view of the environment as the “third teacher.” The dubbing of the physical and visual surroundings as a “third teacher” by founder Loris Malaguzzi speaks to the understanding of an environment’s power as a pedagogic instrument. According to a Reggio school insider, Vea Vecchi (2010), “built environments are always windows for ideas” and in ways a mirror reflecting its relationship with its inhabitants (p. 82). Much like Montessori classrooms, the interior space of a Reggio Emilia institution is designed to enhance and encourage independent discovery, harvesting divergent thinking and spontaneous activity. In order to make these features possible, spaces are intentionally colorful, versatile, neat and orderly to invite exploration and interaction between students, teachers, and also visitors.

Another current and ongoing study pertaining to design in educational programs centers on the repair of a school district in Bertie County, the poorest community in North Carolina. Spearheaded by design activist Emily Pilloton, Project H was created to reengineer the physical and academic conditions of the county’s high school through innovative design. In her presentation at the 2010 TED conference, Pilloton described the goal of Project H to not only “redesign for education,” but also to “redesign as education.” Her work with the high school included a year-long course in which students were given the task of conceiving and executing a major design project in the community. Project H’s view on collaborative creation proved successful as students expressed an increased desire for further education as a result of their course experience.

There is also evidence of the power of design on curriculum in schools in Pilloton's most recent publication, *Design Revolution: 100 Products that Empower People* (2009). Amongst the empowering products is a section specific to educational concepts and tools. Piloted in Uganda, Learning Landscape was constructed as a hybrid of a playground and math classroom. Through the outdoor, interactive environment, students were able to engage in learning in a new and mobile fashion. Learning Landscape is globally adaptable and is one example of child-centered action research that realizes the importance of transforming the physical space to better suit the educational needs of students.

“Schools are not only institutions for instruction, but at the same time visible symbols of educational concepts of their time. To plan schools, then, it is necessary to become acquainted with questions of education and pedagogy” (Dudek, 2000, p. 45). Up to this point, I have established the purposefulness of the physical form and its bearings on the everyday functions of a learning institution, but what is lacking is the platform from which these two concepts can be implemented.

### Democratic Schools

The definition of education as a means to transfer knowledge and skill from one entity to another has long-lasting the times. However, the systems of education have fluctuated and molded into a multitude of shapes since antiquity (Marrou & Lamb, 1956; Tyack, 1974), often revolving back and recycling past models of learning. The idea of passing ideas and information to another entity naturally evokes the duty of educator;

therefore, a role of authority is assumed through the practice of teaching. This authoritative, hierarchical conflict has been a significant determinant of the shape of the pedagogical system, and continues to be a hot-button issue in the rhetoric of school reform today.

One approach to pedagogy that gained impetus in Ancient Greece and has resurfaced as a contemporary educational topic is the ideal of the democratic school (Apple & Beane, 1995; Dalin & Rust, 1996; Dewey, 1900; Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970; Gude, 2009; Hammond, 1996; Kilgore & Reynolds, 2011; McLaren, 2000; Quicke, 1999). In its original form, democratic curriculum was used as a strategy to train armies, but this faded from conversation as individual, intellectual achievements rose in import (Marrou & Lamb, 1956). A later resurgence in an egalitarian form of education was again silenced. This time the silencing occurred by political efforts embracing a national curriculum and increased achievement on standardized test scores (Quicke, 1999). This organizational structure positioned the teacher as the chief source of knowledge and the students as voiceless, empty vessels. Dewey (1900) contradicts the mode of education by declaring, “The center of gravity is outside the child. It is in the teacher, the textbook, anywhere and everywhere you please except in the immediate instincts and activities of the child himself” (p. 34).

### Emancipating the Oppressed

In the view of an authoritative relationship between the educator (the oppressor) and the student (the oppressed), Paulo Freire (1970) is the expert voice. The foundation

of a democratic education is the principle that students should be liberated from a one-sided flow of knowledge and emancipated from passivity (Apple & Beane, 1995).

Learners must be granted equal opportunity to express their thoughts and beliefs as active contributors to their personal education: “The moment children act they individualize themselves; they cease to be a mass and become the intensely distinctive beings that we are associated with out of school” (Dewey, 1900, p. 33).

Freire believes there is great danger in suppressing children in institutions of learning, especially if a confident and freethinking citizen is to result from the educational system. The misguided thought that the student is a problem to be solved must be amended to permanently recognize students as “part of the solution” (Kilgore & Reynolds, 2011, p. 98). If we are to achieve a truly democratic learning environment, the student must be yanked from the bottom of authoritative ranking structure and rearranged in a more “horizontal” delineation (Freire, 1970, p. 91). There is a need to vouch for students and their right to have healthy and personal interactions with their school environment. Further research and implementation of empowering strategies will ultimately profit the learners in direct and momentous ways.

### School Governance

Even today, despite the abundance of research on the unfavorable bureaucratic school model, most learning institutions still function in a hierarchical pyramid (Hammond, 1996). A few, disconnected elite at the top of the authoritative pyramid typically make consequential, whole-school decisions, while peripheral decisions trickle

down to the masses “where teachers and students form the lowest tier” (Dalin, 1996, p. 103). A democratic education seeks to inspire a more balanced approach to decision-making and school governance; participation is the leading solution (Apple & Beane, 1995; Dalin & Rust, 1996; Freire, 1970; Gude, 2009; Hammond, 1996; Kilgore & Reynolds, 2011; Mahlomaholo, 2012; Smith, 1992).

The opportunities for students to think critically about their learning environment, and the platform for them to contribute, should be engrained in the school’s programmatic infrastructure. Schools may integrate students into the governance through small, focused committees, which are concentrated to specific tasks or responsibilities that affect their individual and collective school identity. For the most productive results, governance needs to be commanded by students, but informed by teachers, administrators, parents, and members of the surrounding community.

Kilgore and Reynolds offer an instructional guide to “reframing” and reforming the traditional school model to better suit the needs of today’s learners and tomorrow’s citizens:

Researchers find that a positive school culture is most likely to exist where norms and signals make students feel respected and safe, where rules are clear and fairly enforced, and where students are . . . attached to the life of the school. (pp. 86-87)

These authors highlight the importance of school attachment through responsibility, recognition, service learning, respect for diversity, and a manageable student population for equitable participation opportunities. While Griffin is a small school and small schools have shown to provide more and favorable opportunities for students to

contribute (Glass et al., 1982; Strike, 2010), a democratic approach to school governance can be implemented in any school, regardless of size.

The body of research dedicated to examining the human effects of a specific environment signifies its prior relevance and conveys that it is a continued human concern. I have found some research that specifically investigates behavioral and psychological outcomes as a result of design in learning environments (Brubaker, 1998; Doust, 2010; Dudek, 2000; Heyman, 1978; Lamm, 1986; Pilloton, 2010; Smith, 1992; Tanner, 2000; Vecchi, 2010; Woolner et al., 2005), which is in the same vein as the focus of this study. Unfortunately, I believe that most existing related research is not told through the most important perspective: the laymen, the clientele, the students. The literary evidence supplied in this chapter helps to establish a reference point and a foundation for my research with students at The Griffin School.

## CHAPTER THREE

### MEET THE GRIFFIN SCHOOL

There are many facets of The Griffin School that make it stand out in an already eclectic Austin community. For one, Griffin is a small, private high school offering a rigorous college preparatory curriculum. With fewer than 60 students enrolled in the program, ranging from grades 9-12, personalization and individualization on many levels are paramount to the school's foundation. After recently wrapping up its sixteenth school year, Griffin continues to spread originality and artwork within and beyond the school walls. As with any institution, its storied past adds character and personality to its buildings, and its history helps to shape present day operations. Knowing how the seeds of The Griffin School were sown enables one to fully envision the hard work and motivation behind its daily achievements. Its unorthodox launch provides the first clues to the unique learning environment of The Griffin School.

#### Humble Beginnings

In 1995, a group of Austin area teachers, with varying measures of teaching experience, decided to band together in hopes of creating a learning environment that provided something different than the traditional school model. They had all been frustrated with “what was wrong with the system” at the time and were hopeful that a new system and a different type of educational framework could benefit some of the

students who were falling through the gaps. Co-founder and current school director, AW<sup>1</sup> identified these children in such a way:

We were trying to serve a population that needed a more personalized environment. . . . It's not that they weren't capable of doing the work. It's that they were just not engaged in school. So the personalized quality was a big part of that. (AW, personal communication, June 26, 2012)

A personalized environment meant keeping class sizes small and student-teacher ratios high. A densely populated student body was not conducive to this newly conceived educational system. Having a creative outlet was also one of the key components. At the time when The Griffin School first launched, few specialized private and charter schools existed in the Austin area; so this group of teachers who founded Griffin felt it was very important to accommodate learners that were disenfranchised by the limited schooling options available to them. In other words, they were welcoming the “square peg” that simply did not fit in the “round hole” ([www.griffinschool.org](http://www.griffinschool.org)).

Amplifying the distance of this school from the “traditional” school model, The Griffin School taught their first classes on the second floor of an office building in the heart of downtown Austin. Occupying two large suites, Griffin students joined lawyers and social workers in the elevators and took advantage of downtown opportunities. Public libraries, coffee shops and art museums were easily accessible and added to the “fun,” “funky” and “strange” contrast to a suburban school setting (AW, personal communication, June 26, 2012). As the Griffin population began to grow, Griffin relocated to its second campus in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Austin in 1998. It was

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<sup>1</sup> AW is a pseudonym for the school's co-founder and director. See Chapter 4 for full pseudonym table.

here that the artistic mark of Griffin students began to dominate its reputation, which carried over to the current campus.

The goal of The Griffin School being an arts-based institution was not part of the founders' initial blueprint, but quickly rose in priority when it became apparent the type of students Griffin was attracting. "We started seeing how important it was in terms of the kids, in terms of their engagement in school, and in terms of just their motivation and sense of self and sense of identity," the school director acknowledged in our interview (AW, personal communication, June 26, 2012). Soon after 2000, The Griffin School adjusted its curriculum and expanded their course offerings to provide a wide variety of art electives. During the 2011-2012 school year, students could choose from over thirty different media outlets, giving them reign to essentially customize their own artistic, high school education.

### Accreditation

While the facade of The Griffin School, from office space to a renovated church, has been drastically different from many traditional high schools, it adheres to state regulated policies and certified college preparatory procedures. The standard of education at The Griffin School is upheld through a curriculum that is based on the "Recommended High School Program" for public schools mandated by the Texas Education Agency. It is fully accredited by the Texas Alliance of Accredited Private Schools also in accordance with the Texas Education Agency ([www.griffinschool.org](http://www.griffinschool.org)). All educators and administrators are held to the same level of excellence with similar public institutions,

meaning that the quality of the curriculum and resources accessible for students and teachers must at least be on par with state standards in the eyes of the school board ([www.griffinschool.org](http://www.griffinschool.org)).

### Admissions

Griffin is a private, tuition based institution, with a select student body. With its relaxed atmosphere, The Griffin School attracts many types of learners, but not all who are interested in attending this school are well suited for the high academic standards and graduation requirements. In order to maintain the authentic culture that is the bedrock of the Griffin community, prospective students must undergo a rigorous admissions process.

Held periodically throughout the year, Open House at Griffin has proved to be an effective way for potential newcomers to tour the campus and learn about the education provided. Enrollment is granted upon a multitude of facets, beginning with an application process. Once the school receives the confidential application, and official transcripts are submitted, the candidate participates in individual meetings with the administration. Student candidates then tour Griffin for an entire school day as they shadow a current member of the Griffin student community. The Admissions Committee, comprised of both teachers and students, schedules a formal interview in order to understand the applicant's concerns and motivations to attend their school. While the Admissions Committee does not have the final judgment on admittance, their advice and opinions are highly valued by the administrators as they strive to uphold the creative diversity and sense of community that makes Griffin so prosperous.

International children are also welcomed to attend Griffin as the institution has the ability to grant I-20 student visas. The application process is slightly altered for international candidates, but the personal, student interaction with the candidate remains of the same quality.

Tuition for this private academy costs over thirteen thousand dollars per year, a price tag that indeed narrows the prospective student field. Careful not to be classified as an exclusive, boutique school, financial assistance is available for those who qualify, and aid is received by roughly twenty five to thirty five percent of Griffin students (AW, personal communication, June 26, 2012).

When the school began in 1996, student enrollment could be counted on two hands. As the space permitted and as popularity grew, The Griffin School admitted more and more students each year. The student body enrollment steadily increased to approximately 60 boys and girls currently, still significantly smaller than the average school enrollment in Austin, which is 579 students (Texas Education Agency, 1999). The founders of this private arts high school wanted to keep the number of students per class intentionally small, so that “students and teachers develop genuine relationships that form the basis of the learning experience” ([www.griffinschool.org](http://www.griffinschool.org)). The student-to-teacher ratio is approximately 11/1 in the core classes, which provides for plenty one-on-one educational opportunities and chances for students and teachers to connect beyond the school curriculum.

## Mission Statement and Essential Values

Just as the durability and stability of a building depend upon the construction of its foundation, so too does the impact and success of a school depend upon the guidelines set forth as the basis of everyday procedures. A shaky foundation of a home can lead to collapse, as the entire weight of the building rests on top. A weak, organizational backbone of a learning institution can also lead to destruction, because the values of the school are there to support the biggest weight of all: the goals and needs of the students.

In true Griffin form, the school's operational and governing foundation was a product of collaboration between students, parents, and teachers. It was not an exclusive administrative decision. The mission statement and "Essential Values" that govern Griffin are more than words printed on a forgotten piece of paper with a hurried, student signature. The mission statement is a stamp of character and a mantra that students are proud to claim: "Educating the future leaders of the creative class" ([www.griffinschool.org](http://www.griffinschool.org)). In my many visits to Griffin I have witnessed the "Essential Values" reiterated over announcements, advocated by teachers, and enforced by students. Those at Griffin "make a commitment to embody these values in their involvement with the school community" ([www.griffinschool.org](http://www.griffinschool.org)), and recognize that they are vital to the unique culture of the high school.

As previously mentioned, the "Essential Values" are highly influenced by student opinion. At the beginning of each year, teachers and students discuss the statements in depth, analyzing what each statement declares and tweaking or amending the list to be

most congruent with the current student body. Griffin administrators give final approval.

For the 2011-2012 school year, the “Essential Values” were as follows:

- We take responsibility for our actions and our education.
- We commit to active involvement in The Griffin School community.
- We treat one another with respect and tolerance.
- We honor one another’s right to learn and teach.
- We communicate openly and honestly.

([www.griffinschool.org](http://www.griffinschool.org))

#### Authentic Customs

Many other customs of this school contribute to its special environment and are as vital as the philosophy and Essential Values, but evade the official rulebook. These unconventional traits may seem trivial, but from observation I can validate that they are indeed at the heart of this school culture. At Griffin, students and administrators address teachers on a first name basis, fostering a setting with equal respect and personable relationships. The educators themselves are not placed on an omnipotent pedestal with higher appellations, presumptuously putting their knowledge above the knowledge of the pupils. A constructivist notion, the simple change in calling teachers by their first name levels the playing field. It infers that student and teacher roles are closely related and not based on traditional hierarchical systems of authority.

When I was a student in high school, the cue that class was over sounded as four monotonous, yet obnoxiously loud beeps. Roughly ten times a day, the beeps herded

masses of students from one room to the next, startling them out of their seats and returning shortly to warn for tardiness. Beeps and sirens are absent from Griffin speakers. Instead, students are encouraged to be expressive through music; they personally select the “school bell.” From Beethoven to techno, when class time has concluded music fills the Griffin classrooms, flooding the hallways with new, melodic sounds every day. If a student or teacher wants to bring in a between-class soundtrack, they simply submit the tunes to the designated teacher for consent. The “school bell” is just one way that Griffin seizes the moment to bring life, spontaneity and personality to a traditionally regimented day.

As part of the Griffin adventure, seniors are obligated to develop and present a “senior project” as part of their graduation requirements. This project is intended to exemplify “their accumulated academic skills and interests” ([www.griffinschool.org](http://www.griffinschool.org)) revolving around a topic of their own choice. Giving students a chance to explore a particular passion of theirs outside of the classroom curriculum, the topics are virtually endless and range from history to fashion. The senior projects involve students in research design and execution, preparing them for college and employment situations.

Another feature of Griffin that provides its distinctive character is the dedication to participatory leadership. “We emphasize community development, and engage all students in school governance, whole school activities, and service both to the school community and to the larger community of Austin” ([www.griffinschool.org](http://www.griffinschool.org)). School governance for students is organized in the form of small committees, most with a teacher supervisor. Each student at Griffin is required to serve as a member of a self-

selected committee each year. With a wide variety of committee responsibilities, the high schoolers have an opportunity to choose a team where his or her aptitudes can be exercised. Among these teams are the Student Quality of Life committee, the Activities Committee, the Creative Spaces Committee, and the Admissions Committee. Once a week, committees meet during school hours to discuss their respective duties and complete any required tasks.

For instance, the Creative Spaces Committee for the 2011-2012 school year consisted of three female students and two of Griffin's art teachers. Their principle role in the management of their school focused on school site improvement and projects that affect the physical appearance of Griffin. Individual and group generated ideas were brainstormed, debated, refined, and oftentimes executed quickly. Additionally, any proposals from other pupils or clubs wishing to impact the look of the school were passed through the Creative Spaces Committee first, where they were approved or vetoed. The final verdict on these matters is determined in this committee.

One main undertaking of the Creative Spaces Committee was the production of an "Art Wall." A mainstay in the halls of the previous Griffin school buildings, the "Art Wall" highlighted student artwork. It gave artists a free space to voluntarily display their two and three-dimensional creations. For these reasons, it was one of the items on the top of the priority list for the committee to complete in the new school building. Taking an artistic and democratic approach, the members, including the instructors, each jotted down thoughts, sketched mock-ups of their favorite ideas, and presented their designs. After conversations focusing on practicality, longevity, and location, the group voted.

Ultimately, the group drafted a blueprint for a magnetic, vintage-inspired refrigerator. Within a couple of weeks, the committee members cut and painted the large metal structure and the “Art Wall” came to fruition.

Whichever committee one serves on, however big or small the project might be, what matters is that the students have a platform to speak and their voices are heard. They see that their actions as part of a governing committee make a direct difference in their school.

### The Physical Space

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the buildings that house The Griffin School have never been conventional. From a downtown office suite rental, to a sprawling one-building campus, and finally to a renovated Methodist church, the exterior appearance of the high school has long reflected the student-centered pedagogy that lies at its core. I find it important to describe the aesthetics of Griffin’s current campus as well as its previous one to gain a better understanding of how the co-created space has inspired the students and how students continue to breathe life into the atmosphere on which they leave their indelible mark.

With all forms of art, including the art that comprises The Griffin School, there is room for interpretation. In the next two sections, I illustrate the visual aspects of The Griffin School through my experience and firsthand perspective at its last two properties.

## Griffin's Past

From the fall of 1997 to the spring of 2011, The Griffin School called a large, barn-like structure perched atop a hill on the 41st Street campus its home. Located just North of downtown Austin in the Hyde Park district, Griffin fit in amongst the eclectic bungalow homes and locally owned shops that define the historic neighborhood. It was not long before The Griffin School began contributing to the surrounding landscape through its artistic expression and community service, yielding a lasting partnership with Hyde Park constituents.

When I pulled up to the front of the old Griffin School building for the very first time in 2010, my initial reaction was that of intrigue and delight. A decorative, wrought iron gate with yarn-bombing detail opened to a long, uphill pathway leading to the front doors of this odd, almost warehouse-like building. On each side of the yard, metal sculptures, a wooden xylophone and trees wearing knitted sweaters peppered the grass (Figure 1). A tree swing swayed next to colorful picnic tables in the shade. As I approached the doors of the building, a bright blue sky motif with sun and clouds greeted students and visitors with a



Figure 1. Front entrance and knitted trees in yard.

cheerful image. My initial reaction was that the decor was more of what I expected at an elementary school, not a high school, but there was definitely no denying that this was an art school.

Inside the old school, one lengthy corridor stretched directly through the center, opening up to small classrooms on either side. While the building may have been simple and slightly run-down, it was full of life and charisma. Each door was swathed in a different, vibrant hue. A large mural of the surrounding community of Hyde Park covered the closet doors immediately to the right. Normally bland lockers were painted, drawn on, and adorned with student creations as they lined the hallway with personality. Hand-made cubbyholes and an “Art Wall” flanked the other side of the hallway, providing even more space to display student artwork. Creative expression was lush and grew out of every corner.

Classrooms at Griffin were small in size, but high ceilings and plenty of windows gave the impression of more volume. Most of the desks in the classrooms were large tables for group seating, as opposed to individual workstations, and the chairs that encircled them were upholstered in bright, patterned fabric. Each room in The Griffin School put off a different vibe. The art classroom had a black and white checkered wall with colorful stools, and the English classroom was painted a bright green.

Being that it was an older building with years of wear and tear, Griffin teachers and students faced many functional challenges. The windows were drafty, the air conditioning was sub-par in the Texas heat, and bathrooms were not up to date. Because many pieces and parts of the 41st Street Griffin campus were past their prime and most

likely unsalvageable, it invited students to personalize and “tag” those pieces and parts without inhibition. Despite the structural shortcomings, the outward appearance of Griffin proved one thing for sure: students claimed ownership of their school environment.

Some visitors to Griffin might have walked in the old school building and felt overwhelmed with color, artwork, and distracting pattern. On the flip side of that same coin, others might argue that beige walls and sterile halls of many prison-like schools take away from the freedom and comfort that students at Griffin are granted. I, personally, found it refreshing, entertaining, and inspiring for students to have the power to express themselves in their learning environment.

### Griffin’s Present

With a move to a new location, concerns of losing the liberty of expression and personalization were mixed with excitement for an upgraded space and the possibilities of a fresh start. After careful consideration, The Griffin School chose their new campus and relocated from one address in the Hyde Park area to another, maintaining the same neighborhood vibe and

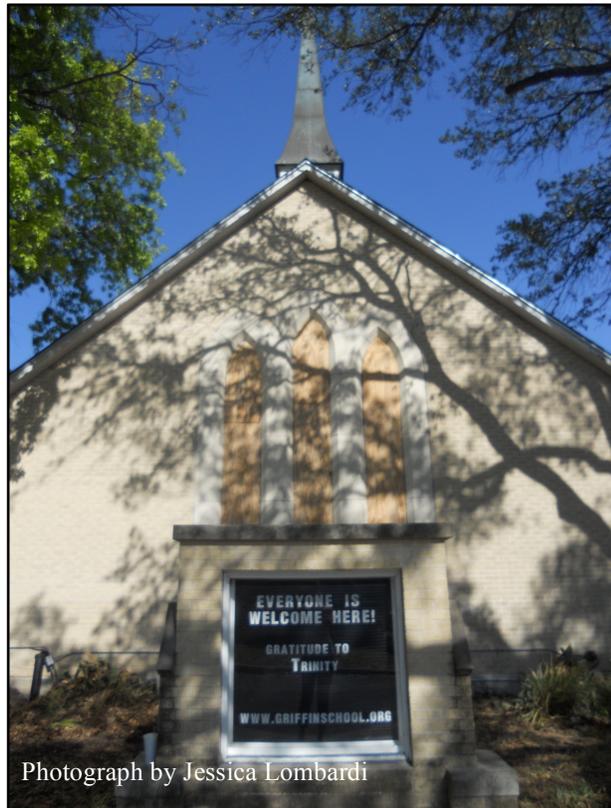


Figure 2. Facade of Griffin’s new school building.

community support. Once a Methodist place of worship, the structure of the new property came equipped with characteristics atypical for secular learning environments, such as stained glass windows, a crucifix-topped steeple, and an empty nave (Figure 2). Also on the premises, Griffin gained a considerable amount of green yard space, as well as an adjacent two-bedroom house. The new buildings became a blank canvas to morph, remodel and update to best fit the needs of this arts-focused high school, and also emerged as an opportunity for students to get their hands dirty and help in the construction process of their own school.

In partnership with a local architecture agency, The Griffin School's new shape was put to paper (Figure 3), and as the 2010-2011 school year came to a close, demolition



Figure 3. Architect's rendering of Griffin's new campus.

and rebuilding on the new campus commenced. With the aim of involving Griffin students in the process, many meetings took place during the 2010-2011 school year to explore

their thoughts and opinions about how the new space should function. The Creative Spaces Committee, made up of teachers and students, convened once a week to review such issues as how the school bell should be installed, the importance of certain

technologies, the colors of the exterior walls and how artwork should be displayed. Other details of the interior where students provided their input included the countertop color and materials for the kitchen area.

While the initial planning and construction process called for collaboration between students and the design team, ultimately time and money got in the way. With an extensive list of things to accomplish before the beginning of the 2011-2012 school year, action had to be taken and the amount of student participation was abbreviated during the summer months. However, this is not to say that their impact was reduced. When the first school year at the new location began, the buildings on the campus were structurally complete and fully functional, but parts of the school were intentionally left undone. There needed to be room for personalization; The Griffin School could not be whole without the touch of the students. As the student body changes with each passing year and the needs of the school progress, the learning space must also evolve. The present Griffin grounds were designed to do so.

The dominant feature of the current Griffin estate is the revamped and redeveloped church. Because the infrastructure of the building was in working condition and the exterior in good shape, the appearance of the old church remained almost unchanged. The stained glass windows and pews were kept by the Christian organization, and the cross on top of the steeple was removed, but most of the renovation was done on the interior. From floor to ceiling, the space was upgraded, modifying every square foot to fulfill Griffin's needs.

All the essential elements of a common school building were considered first. New and efficient windows were installed throughout the hallways and classrooms, bringing in plenty of natural light. The individual rooms were set up with modern classroom supplies specific to each discipline. Paint colors and surface materials were carefully chosen by a design team, which consulted with students. In keeping with their old custom of colorful doors, each door in the building was painted a different color. Also equipped with office space for administrators, a large library with computers and plenty of locker room for the students, The Griffin School was complete with all the practical necessities.

As the 2011-2012 school year kicked off, students and teachers gradually adorned each structure on the campus with projects and artworks, ushering in the signature Griffin vibe. Much like the sights of the past Griffin campus, the new campus boasted eye-catching curb appeal. Many of the students' yard art pieces were transplanted to line the sidewalks and pathways, and Griffin's plaques for awards such as "Best Place To Be Yourself" were hung outside of the front door. A student-made griffin statue was perched on top of the school marquee. Inch by inch, pipes, poles and gutter drains were wrapped in multicolored, knitted sleeves as student artists took the opportunity to do some gentle graffiti. Both pragmatic and whimsical landscaping was executed as a school-wide effort as the community worked together to plant trees for shade and the gardening class designed flowerbeds to mimic shadows.

A newly constructed art studio, a lived-in bungalow and an empty lot filled in the rest of the sprawling property that covers two corners of the neighborhood block. Blue

corrugated steel sheets cover the walls of the fully equipped art studio giving it an ultra-contemporary feel. Built from scratch, the space contains separate areas with state-of-the-art supplies. An outdoor classroom attached to this studio allows for different kinds of art making and learning to be possible. The adjacent two-bedroom house is now a three-classroom extension of the school (Figure 4). With the same bright colors and student inspiration, these quirky classrooms seem like a



Figure 4. Colorful, adjacent house for additional classrooms.

fresh and interesting place to learn. Being new to that particular part of the Hyde Park district and in the middle of a residential area, The Griffin School upheld its community outreach mission by transforming the large, empty plot on the campus into a shared, community garden.

Many operational traditions at Griffin were carried over into the new space and are reflected in its physical appearance. One of these traditions was the painting of the lockers each year. At the previous school, the lockers were repainted over a few years, and layer upon layer of paint covered up the original metal. Inside the present-day main building, brand new, vibrant red lockers were installed. With sustainability as a main goal for the new space, Griffin administrators urged students and faculty to devise



Photograph by Jessica Lombardi.

Figure 5. Sustainable solution to Griffin’s tradition of students painting their own lockers each year.



Photograph by Jessica Lombardi.

Figure 6. “Snug Mug Spoon Wall” in the Griffin hallways to decrease waste from disposable cups.

a strategy that would allow students to continue to personalize their lockers without damaging the original surface. The accepted proposal was to attach Masonite panels to the front of each locker with Velcro strips for easy and harmless replacement every school year (Figure 5). Other student-initiated projects were also saved and reintegrated into the new building, such as the “Art Wall” and the “Snug Mug Spoon Wall” (Figure 6), a mug holder created to cut down on disposable cup waste. These not only provide functional qualities to the school hallways, but also add to its funky complexion. Even the

hanging of some posters, signs and additional student artwork was left in the hands of the students themselves or with the Creative Spaces Committee.

While it may seem like some of these elements are simply material decorations, they have proved vital to The Griffin School culture. By illustrating the similarities between the past and present Griffin campuses, it is easy to see the foundational roots on which The Griffin School stands. Highlighting the contrasts reveals the direction that the school is heading and points out the goals for the future. Even though it is the same school with the same governing principles, the same faculty and the same art-filled quest, the physical setting is still an active force in the equation. The way in which a space looks and functions impacts everyday operations and influences how and what students can learn. For example, given an unfinished school building, students can learn the importance of democratic decision making as they collaborate on design and construction. The building is a physical representation of the pedagogy within a school and I have found that very apparent at The Griffin School.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to provide multiple perspectives on case study methodology and how they apply to this particular investigation. I will outline the plan of action for data collection, describing the techniques and tools I exercised and how I strived for ethical research practice.

#### Case Study Research

There are a multitude of articles, books, and ultimate guides that outline the purpose and characteristics of case study research methodology (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2005; Creswell, 2007; Prosser, 1998; Yin, 2009). Many of these texts have points of exact agreeability, but it is rare to find consensus when discussing every detail in the process for the investigation of a particular case. The following discussion addresses how these sources informed this qualitative case study and supported my research with The Griffin School.

One universal thread I have found throughout the body of case study literature is the first step in the process as recognizing that there is a specific problem or issue that needs to be examined. While Stake (2005) contends that a case study “is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied” (p. 443), others believe that case study is a procedural decision on how to collect and analyze data (Creswell, 2007). The “case” in a case study can concentrate on a specific person, a group of people, a geographic or relative place, or a phenomenon (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Stake 2005). In

agreement with Stake, Creswell (2007) talks about the importance of identifying what the case or issue is and that it must have clearly defined boundaries. While Griffin was the specific school that sparked my interest, the school itself was not my main concern or the case being examined. My efforts were focused on the students' perceptions of their physical learning environment in correlation with his or her active school involvement, specifically during a time when the school underwent a transformation and redesign process on the new campus.

### Descriptive Case Study

There are many case study strategies that a researcher may utilize, and each offers slightly different criteria for case study work. Yin (2009) describes purposes for three types of case study conditions: explanatory, exploratory, and descriptive case studies. While explanatory and exploratory methods are typically used for generating theories, descriptive methods focus on illustrative and data-driven outcomes (Yin, 2012). Often what draws a person to look further into a situation is an extraordinary quality, extreme instances, and abnormal or even very normal conditions. For a multitude of reasons, I believe that The Griffin School is one-of-a-kind and its extraordinary quality is worth sharing. Its uniqueness became the focus of this research and descriptive case study methods led to insightful explanations.

Griffin stands out from other high schools I have personally seen and experienced in a positive way. Its small size, unconventional campus, and rigorous yet highly individualized curriculum distinguish this arts-centered school from crowded, cookie-

cutter, public institutions. As a student of arts education and certified arts instructor, I have spent a lot of time visiting schools across the country. In my experience, Griffin is the only example of a high school I have encountered that boasts personality, pride and excellence in such a distinctive way. It was my mission to tell its story through illustrative and descriptive means.

### Data Collection

The case study methodology is adaptable to qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Yin, 2003; Yin, 2009). It is highly popular in the fields of education and the social sciences where qualitative research and data gathering trump empirical systems, which are many times incongruent with the purpose of educational investigation such as my own (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009). My particular undertaking is a weaving of artistic, educational and psychological threads, using close observation and interviews with students and administrators to garner the study findings.

Most of the data for this case study was collected in the form of conversation, and the nuances and subtleties in the responses of the participants are most useful through qualitative means: “People almost always talk about their experiences in a storied form. Thus, qualitative research is based on textual data rather than quantitative data, on stories rather than numbers” (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 24). A quantitative approach would result in useful data, but would omit circumstantial and emotional interpretation that is vital to understanding how the Griffin population interacts and connects with their

learning environment. Frequency and repetitiveness of responses might show consistency regarding feelings towards the school, but the significance of those words would be diluted. Indeed, qualitative measures would produce results that paint a contextual image of this rich experience.

According to Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), Bogdan and Biklen (2007), and Coffey and Atkinson (1996) data gathering for a qualitative case study can be executed in a variety of ways. These include, but are not limited to observations, surveys, questionnaires, interviews, participant involvement, physical and cultural artifacts, and archival data. In my study, observations at The Griffin School as well as interviews with students and administrators were the tools I used to collect data. For a balanced and valid narrative, it was important to accumulate data from more than one perspective.

### Observations

I periodically observed the operations and impacts of the newly constructed Griffin School over a span of roughly 12 months. I began visiting the school site before the academic year started in June 2011, and continued to revisit Griffin until the academic year ended in June 2012. Gillham (2000) strongly asserts that observations must take place where the action happens because “human behavior, thoughts and feelings are partly determined by their context” (p. 11). I actively tried to pay attention to both the human behavior and the context in which they were occurring during my observations at The Griffin School.

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) also discuss the importance of performing observations on site: “If you want to understand the way people think about their world and how those definitions are formed, you need to get close to them, to hear them talk and observe them in their day-to-day lives” (p. 35). Because I was highly familiar with Griffin, my role as a researcher ranged from trying to be a fly on the wall to active participant. During my visits to the Creative Spaces Committee meetings, I wanted to blend in and not influence the natural behaviors of the group. On other occasions such as moving day, I observed through active participation by joining Griffin community volunteers and experiencing the move as they did. Creswell (2005; 2007) and Kawulich (2005) both provide a continuum of the extent of the researcher’s observation from outsider to insider and contend that using a multitude of observation strategies strengthens the data collection.

Some important days and instances of my observations at The Griffin School included moving day (June 2011), the first day of school in the new building (August 2011), Creative Spaces Committee meetings (September-November 2011) and casual observing between interviews (April-May 2012). The mix of participatory to non-participatory and formal to informal occasions gave me an in-depth view of The Griffin School and community at large. My familiarity and prior knowledge of the school led me to focused observation, which “emphasizes observation supported by interviews, in which the participants’ insights guide the researcher’s decisions about what to observe” (Kawulich, 2005, The processes of conducting observations, para. 1).

Also a part of the observation process was my personal perspective. In performing qualitative research, complete objectivity is impossible because everything that the

researcher witnesses is from their own standpoint. Due to my existing relationship with The Griffin School, I could not suppress my subjectivity. This undoubtedly had an effect on what and how I observed. When I was on site at Griffin and shortly afterwards, I recorded details I may have missed and ideas for additional consideration as I reflected on the field notes, providing another reference point: “Qualitative researchers believe that their own subjective experience can be a source of knowledge about the phenomenon they are studying. Examining the way one’s own subjectivity influences one’s research is called reflexivity, and is a goal of qualitative research” (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 27).

### *Observation Tools*

With each visit to The Griffin School, I brought a notebook with which to record what I physically saw and heard, as well as to record any mental thoughts and further explorations. In most categories of scientific and social research, these textual or visual records of data collection are referred to as field notes. While there are discrepancies as to what researchers technically classify as a field note (See Sanjek, 1990), for this study I adopted the definition that a field note includes anything visually recorded by the researcher. In DeWalt and DeWalt’s comprehensive guide (2002) they state that “observations are not data unless they are recorded in some fashion for further analysis” and that we quickly lose detail by relying on memory alone (p. 142).

I kept a semi-structured field diary in that sections were divided for specific observation tasks. For example, notes during Creative Spaces Committee meetings were

jotted down in one section while notes during interviews were collected in another section. This helped to organize my field notes for reflection, review, triangulation, and analysis. Also, because a large part of the research was dependent upon the physical environment, it was important to write down and document the appearance of The Griffin School. To supplement my notes, I took photographs with my personal camera to capture missing detail and ensure accuracy of my descriptions.

### *Ethics*

Moral and ethical issues arise when performing research at the place where one works, or is closely associated with, due to personal biases, established relationships with colleagues, and a shift in identity from coworker to researcher. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) point out these risks and advise on how to remain just and truthful throughout the process (See also DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). In dealing with human subjects like I did, the study must first be approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure the well being of the research participants. It is ethical practice to obtain informed consent prior to research interaction, so that participants are aware that they are being studied and informed on what the research entails. On multiple occasions, I introduced myself and my research objectives to students, parents and other Griffin community members. I also reiterated these objectives to each research participant before all observations and interviews.

Because I held no authority at The Griffin School, did not manipulate the participants' behaviors and followed all the prerequisite steps, I believe that these ethical issues associated with this study were minimal. As a student of The University of Texas

at Austin, I was completely independent from The Griffin School and performed my research as an outsider, even though I was beginning to be a familiar face around campus.

## Interviews

Because there are many ways to conduct qualitative research, there are also variations on qualitative data gathering techniques including interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Gillham, 2005; Seidman, 2006). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007) the interview process can function in two ways: as the dominant data collection tool or as support for participant observation and content analysis. For this study, interviews with members of the Griffin community were my primary source of information and provided expert testimonials.

I conducted only one interview with each participant. I would have liked to conduct at least one follow-up interview with each, but location and time constraints prohibited me from doing so. Nine of the 15 interviews in this study were private, one-on-one conversations. On one occasion, two students, who were close friends, chose to talk with me as a pair. The one group interview that I conducted was due to convenience of location on the part of the participants. The six students were eating lunch together in a separate room down the hall, so I thought it would be favorable for them to enter into a group dialogue about their school experiences rather than one at a time. In an effort to make participants feel as comfortable and relaxed as possible, I welcomed all types of interviews with students.

The structure of an interview can range from highly rigid questioning to loosely guided conversation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007, Gillham, 2000) and are employed for certain purposes depending on the nature of research. My goals for this study were to better understand the relationship between the student and physical learning environment at The Griffin School. Creswell (2007) prescribes how to approach such investigations of human understanding:

To study these topics, we ask open-ended research questions, wanting to listen to the participants we are studying and shaping the questions after we “explore,” and we refrain from assuming the role of the expert researcher with the “best” questions. Our questions change during the process of research to reflect an increased understanding of the problem. (p. 43)

While the interview strategy used in my first interview reflected the more open-ended questioning that Creswell speaks of, it evolved into a semi-structured format as the direction of the research narrowed over time. The semi-structured format allowed for the interviewee to lead the dialogue but be guided by the researcher through focused inquiry. In all fifteen interviews conducted, I recognized that I was not the expert as the researcher; the students and other members of the Griffin School were those with the knowledge (Creswell, 2005; 2007). Because of this, I treated the interviewees with respect and questioned them as such by asking about their personal experiences directly. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) assert, “It encourages researchers to focus on learning from the people they study” (p. 27).

Pinpointing the roots of this study, I resolved to anchor my interviews with the current Griffin students using two concise, yet overarching questions. I based them on previous visits and experiences at Griffin, applying what I observed through interactions

with students and teachers as a guide. Unrehearsed and off-the-cuff follow-up questions moved conversations along while trying to extract examples and probe further elaboration from each interviewee. The two central questions were:

1. How have you personally contributed to the physical appearance or feel of your school, either individually or as a group, permanent or non-permanent?
2. How has your work or seeing the works of others throughout your school impacted the way that you act, feel, or learn at The Griffin School?

All interviews took place between June 2011 and June 2012. I chose to conduct the bulk of the interviews with the current Griffin students and with AW, Griffin's administrator and co-founder, towards the end of the first complete school year in the new building. I chose this time to allow for students to become familiar with their new setting, to develop informed opinions and to be able to experience the full scope of the academic year.

### *Interview Tools*

With their permission, I recorded each one of my interviews on an audio recorder. This provided for the highest level of transcription accuracy, and for the ability to revisit the recordings throughout the data gathering, analysis, and writing processes. The audio recorder was used only for this research project and was able to capture clearly both one-on-one and group interviews. As standard practice, I took field notes during interviews in order to structure the dialogue and record non-audible descriptions. Creswell's sample interview protocol (2005) calls for the interviewer to write down specifics such as: the time, date and place of the interview, the names of the interviewer and interviewee, the

position of the interviewee, description of the project, and intended questions. I followed this protocol for each interview and documented everything in the interview section of my field notebook.

### *Ethics*

Patton (1980) discusses ethical challenges associated with interviewing human subjects: “Interviews are interventions. They affect people” (p. 405). Because the process of direct questioning may bring emotions, values, and beliefs of the interviewee to the surface that may not have otherwise been reflected upon, I demonstrated sensitivity and respect (Babbie, 2010). Many of the ethical issues linked to qualitative research involving human subjects center around being as truthful and informative as possible. One step I took towards these principles was requiring that each participant sign an IRB-approved consent form, detailing the procedures I followed and the potential benefits and risks to the interviewee by volunteering for the study (See Appendix). Most of the participants were under 18 years of age and required parental consent as well.

Anonymity and confidentiality are also integral components of ethical research conduct and are exercised with this research endeavor for the protection of The Griffin School participants. Spelled out in the consent form and reassured by myself, any and all parts of the individuals’ contributions to the study were confidential. This confidentiality established complete privacy and allowed all Griffin participants the opportunity to speak freely about their school environment, whether good or bad, without fear of being judged or ridiculed (Babbie, 2010; Oliver, 2010). As laid out in Chapter Three, participants were

permitted to choose their own pseudonyms so that their real names would not be mentioned. Any and all identifying information was destroyed immediately after the final document was written.

Another step in ensuring ethical behavior on my part and informing the participants, I let each of the current Griffin students know that my goal during their one-on-one interviews was to ask two main questions and that it should not last more than ten minutes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

The setting for my interviews took place in three separate locations, but were all contained within a space that the interviewee was familiar with, or had personally chosen. I interviewed JT at his family's home, the current Griffin students in the school's meeting room, and AW at a neighborhood coffee shop. Conducting interviews at the school site helped to minimize researcher manipulation and coercion of participants answers because the students and faculty were in a setting in which they were comfortable and relaxed (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2005). With no provided incentive or deliberate benefits to be a participant, it was important to choose a neutral location where the participants did not have to travel or put in extra time and effort to contribute. I also was respectful of the students' school priorities and did not want to be a distraction or a burden, so I planned to be available at the school during the school-wide study time and lunch hour.

## Sample Selection and Participant Recruitment

Given that there are only approximately sixty students enrolled in the school, I felt fifteen was a comfortable sample selection. Dawson (2002) spells out two different techniques for determining an appropriate number of research participants: probability and purposive sampling. Purposive sampling, which is the type of sampling I followed, is preferred if “description rather than generalization is the goal” (Dawson, 2002, p. 49). A completely voluntary process, I had no control over which students would be included in the sample group and which ones would not. Another step I took in regulating the participant pool was to ensure that participants were not offered extra school credit or supplemental benefits of any kind.

Interviews with JT, a 2011 Griffin graduate, and AW, the school administrator, were sought out for specific reasons due to their activities and integral positions with the school. JT’s senior project, a giant, metal griffin sculpture, caught my attention and begged for further exploration because of its impact on the new school’s landscape. The interview with AW was very important because he was one of The Griffin School’s pioneers and his insights were vital to understanding the history of the program. While both these testimonials were also voluntary, I recruited these two participants in a different manner by personally setting up a scheduled and private meeting time.

## Griffin Research Participants

Table 1 shows a graphic depiction of the research participant demographic. It indicates their pseudonym, grade level, gender, and occupation. There were five male and

ten female interview participants for a total of fifteen. Thirteen of the individuals were current Griffin School students. According to grade level, there were six juniors, four freshmen, two sophomores and one senior.

<b>Participant Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Grade Level</b>	<b>Gender (M/F)</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
<b>JT</b>	Recent Alum 2011	M	College Student
<b>Alias</b>	Junior (11th)	F	Current Griffin Student
<b>AT</b>	Sophomore (10th)	F	Current Griffin Student
<b>Brice Baxter</b>	Freshman (9th)	M	Current Griffin Student
<b>Carson</b>	Junior (11th)	F	Current Griffin Student
<b>Cat</b>	Junior (11th)	F	Current Griffin Student
<b>Cecelia</b>	Senior (12th)	F	Current Griffin Student
<b>Couch Potato</b>	Freshman (9th)	F	Current Griffin Student
<b>Damien Noble</b>	Freshman (9th)	M	Current Griffin Student
<b>JAM</b>	Junior (11th)	M	Current Griffin Student
<b>Optimus Prime</b>	Junior (11th)	F	Current Griffin Student
<b>Skye</b>	Junior (11th)	F	Current Griffin Student
<b>Tacocat</b>	Sophomore (10th)	F	Current Griffin Student
<b>Vermelda</b>	Freshman (9th)	F	Current Griffin Student
<b>AW</b>	N/A	M	Administrator/Co-founder

*Table 1.* The participants' pseudonym, grade level, gender, and occupation.

Because the participants of this research project provided all the expert knowledge about their Griffin School experience contained in this study, it is integral to understand a little about each individual and their relationship with Griffin. While the

group of participants is small, there is great diversity in the students' stories of their involvement. These stories are given in no particular order. The descriptions are based on information revealed about them through the interview process.

JT is a student that I had the opportunity of getting to know in the course of my early observations at Griffin in 2010. Being a senior during that school year, he stood out as a leader in the art classrooms and had an outgoing spirit. JT shared the plans for his senior project with me and I immediately took an interest in it. A goal to construct a giant metal griffin to represent the mascot and decorate the building coincided with my initial thoughts for this research. At the time of the interview in September 2011, JT was a recent Griffin graduate with plans of attending the Savannah College of Art and Design to major in sculpture. An intelligent speaker and wise for his age, JT was more than willing to share his positive experiences at Griffin and supplied immense insights regarding how his involvement with his high school impacted him.

Alias is a female student at Griffin who was completing her first year at the school as a junior. While mentioning some differences between her time at a public school and her current situation at Griffin, a private arts school, Alias pointed out some aspects of the school in which she played a part, such as helping with prom decorations.

AT is a female student at Griffin and an active member of the Creative Spaces Committee. As a sophomore, AT has attended Griffin during her entire high school career. She is soft spoken and reserved at first, but once asked about how she has impacted the school through art or other means, the tone in her voice picked up with excitement. With enthusiasm for the arts and her involvement with some decision making

around the school, AT expressed how “comfortable” she felt in that environment (AT, personal communication, May 1, 2012).

Brice Baxter is a freshman student, whose familiarity with the Griffin high school stems from his previous enrollment at the neighboring private school. The only student to sign up for an interview, Brice Baxter was eager to talk about his Griffin experiences. He and a fellow schoolmate chose to participate in the interview together because they were friends and shared similar stories from their previous institution. Brice Baxter and his pals were responsible for planting many of the new trees around the campus, and while humorously acknowledging that it was strenuous labor, he also commented on the relationships and attitudes that come of a co-created environment.

Carson is a junior who has been a Griffin student since the start of her freshman year. An active member of the Student Quality of Life Committee (SQOL), Carson is very familiar with the functions and demographics of The Griffin School. She interviewed as part of a six-person group made up of other SQOL members and friends. Being part of Griffin for a few years, Carson was able to provide perspective from the old school building in comparison with the new.

Cat is a junior at Griffin, completing her second year. Transferring to Griffin after her freshman year at another school, Cat took a liking to the gardening classes and also briefly commented on her award-winning locker design. She interviewed as part of the six person group, which I think made it more difficult to share all of her opinions.

Cecelia is a senior at Griffin, attending the school for her first year as a full time student. Enrolled in the neighboring private school near the old Griffin campus, Cecelia

was very familiar with the Griffin School and its quirky personality, and was happy to make the switch when her old school closed. Not a self-proclaimed artist, Cecelia left her mark by helping to shape the structure of the AP programs at Griffin and liked that she is “taken seriously” (Cecelia, personal communication, April 26, 2012).

More entertained with the prospect of self-appointing an alias than any other participant, Couch Potato, a first year Griffin student, conveyed her thoughts about how the arts at Griffin affect student relationships with their peers and their teachers. She chose to focus more on the academic rigors at Griffin rather than on the production of the arts, but has still found her niche at the school.

Damien Noble, who chose to go by his gaming name, is also another first year student at Griffin. A calm and Zen-like personality, Damien Noble exercised his artistic side through music and impacted the school through a daily embodiment of happiness. He has come to find that the many creative outlets available to Griffin students are a fantastic and necessary way to relieve the stresses of high school.

JAM, who walked into the interview donned in a cool denim jacket, talked to me about his involvement with the Griffin School revolving around being the guy that moves stuff around. “They get me for all the heavy lifting,” he said (JAM, personal communication, April 26, 2012). This task, combined with the display of a cow sculpture outside of the school, made an impression on this Griffin junior.

A third year junior at Griffin, Optimus Prime was highly vocal in the group interview. Also a member of SQOL, Optimus Prime seems to have her finger on the pulse of The Griffin School and has strong opinions about the transformation of her

school from the previous and comfortable campus to the newly constructed space. She pointed out many aspects of the high school that both positively and negatively impact the student body.

Skye is a blue-haired and expressive student completing her second year at Griffin as a junior. With experience at public schools, and experience at the old Griffin campus, Skye was also strongly opinionated, which revealed that she cares about the school she spends so much time in. As a SQOL member, Skye recognizes her responsibilities but speaks modestly about her impact on the Griffin community.

Another member of SQOL, Tacocat is a sophomore who has attended Griffin for both of her high school years. This seemingly reserved student cleverly named her alias Tacocat because it is the same word forwards and backwards. Tacocat's awareness of the "casual" student-teacher relationships allowed her to speak about the school's atmosphere on a personal level.

Vermelda is a smiley and friendly freshman at Griffin who was not shy to answer any of my questions. As a member of the Creative Spaces Committee, Vermelda had a hand in many projects around the school including Prom set up and helping to organize school-wide art shows that are open to the community. Her experiences at Griffin have made her feel like she is influencing the world beyond The Griffin School campus.

AW is the co-founder of The Griffin School and the current director of school operations. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Mathematics from Vassar College in New York and moved to Austin where he worked as a high school mathematics teacher in a private school for a few years. Frustrated with the conventional school system and hoping

to “fill a need in the community,” AW, along with a handful of colleagues, established The Griffin School in 1996 (AW, personal communication, June 26, 2012). A part of the Griffin community for well over a decade now, AW still has the same central goals and sharp focus, but always keeps an open mind for progress.

In conducting a qualitative, descriptive case study, I was alert to my surroundings and considered all visual cues and interactions with Griffin members as possible sources of information. Because the scope of my investigation at The Griffin School began with a broad outlook and narrowed over time, the design of the data collection needed to follow certain steps. Through ethical practice supported by literary references, I gathered contextual data that explored the primary concerns of this study. The next phase in the process was to organize the raw material from observations and interviews and begin to formulate answers to the central research questions that initiated and motivated this investigation.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data analysis can be daunting for novice researchers as myself, considering the types and amount of data collected through a descriptive case study. Extending the challenges at this stage, the procedures for data analysis are diverse and present the researcher with many options. Experts propose numerous strategies for how to dissect and present raw data depending on the desired outcome, and devise tactics to ensure that the written report is ethical (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Creswell, 2005; 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 2005). In this chapter I elaborate on how scholarly sources informed my choices for data analysis and present the results of my research.

#### Data Preparation

It is important to note that even though data collection and analysis are discussed independently in this document, the actions themselves are concurrent (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Creswell, 2007). Coffey and Atkinson (1996) agree that “such a divorce of collection from analysis is an artificial and not altogether desirable separation” (p. 6), and that reflexivity should be exercised throughout all phases of the analysis. Organization and arrangement of textual information starts to take shape during collection by means of certain protocol spelled out in the previous chapter. It is further refined when the body of data can be viewed as a whole. Before interpretation and

analysis can begin, raw data must be converted into a structured format, i.e., organizing fieldnotes and transcribing interviews.

### Transcribing Fieldnotes and Interviews

The immense amount of raw material gathered over the period of the research project can be intimidating for researchers to handle. An entire year's worth of information recorded in my fieldnotes and over five hours of interviews on audio tape needed to be transformed from scribbles and sounds to easily accessible computer files. In order to start the transformation from audio recordings to text, I downloaded the files from my personal recorder onto my laptop where it was converted into an MP3. By doing this, I was able to easily play back, rewind, and pause the file in the iTunes application while transcribing. As a form of backup, I typed out all transcripts on my personal laptop as well as on a secured, Internet database. Each day of observation and each interview were rendered in a separate, labeled document with room in the margins for additional comments. I copied all materials verbatim, including pauses and other nonverbal actions (Creswell, 2005).

In the process of translating data into textual versions, I was personally able to relive the data and the moments when the interview took place. Through personal transcription, as opposed to outsourcing the work or using a computer program, nuances and subtleties of each conversation with the interviewees call to mind contextual information that might be useful to the research (Creswell, 2005). Also, my experiential

knowledge as the researcher conveyed my own understanding of my accounts at The Griffin School (Stake, 2005).

The point where converting fieldnotes and interviews into a systematic written form overlapped into the realm of data analysis ensued when I italicized relevant thoughts and quotes as I typed, thus evaluating and somewhat interpreting the abundance of information (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). These pre-coding steps helped me to sift out the generally germane statements from the ones that did not offer applicable evidence.

#### Approaches to Analyzing Qualitative Data

Analyzing data is multi-faceted and requires knowledge of the steps associated with disparate forms of qualitative research. For example, ethnographers and social anthropologists might embark on qualitative research with the aim of building a theory; therefore, their strategy would revolve around testing a hypothesis. Phenomenologists typically pursue an investigation to gain an increased, general knowledge of a case; therefore, their strategy would be more holistic. Although some authors spell out formulaic approaches, researchers can pick and choose ingredients from the pool of options to satisfy their individual goal: “Data analysis is not off-the-shelf; rather, it is custom-built” (Creswell, 2005, p. 150). Acknowledging the complex nature of analysis, Miles and Huberman (1994) divide the process into three topics that I found very useful: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

## Data Reduction

Data reduction implies a holistic approach in that the researcher starts out with multiple and precise vignettes that are then examined for universal themes. This is called induction, or as Bogdan and Biklen (2007) interpret it, a “funnel” system:

As a qualitative researcher planning to develop some kind of theory about what you have been studying, the direction you will travel comes after you have been collecting the data, after you have spent time with your subjects. You are not putting together a puzzle whose picture you already know. You are constructing a picture that takes shape as you collect and examine the parts. (p. 6)

Creswell’s (2007) “spiral” construction to data analysis achieves a similar reduction effect, but as the name suggests, it happens in a cyclical, “loop”ing pattern (pp. 150-154). “One enters with data of text or images (e.g., photographs, video-tapes) and exits with an account or a narrative. In between, the researcher touches on several facets of analysis and circles around and around” (p. 150).

Regardless of which process one champions, the first task was to keep only the applicable text and eliminate the superfluous remarks and phrases. This leaves the researcher with only data that is in context to the research goal. For example, in one of my interviews, the student participant went into lengths about his previous school experience. Despite the fact that some of his comparisons were revealing of his regard for The Griffin School, much of the account was peripheral. After this initial reduction phase, I was left with what Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) denote as “relevant text” (p. 37).

It is imperative that the large body of untreated data be reread and reflected upon numerous times in order to become familiar with the general ideas it presents and to

discover its subsequent orientation. Creswell (2005) refers to this as “preliminary exploratory analysis” (p. 237). In narrowing the mass of data, I started with dozens of computer documents and electronically copied and pasted the valuable concepts into fewer and fewer concentrated files. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, I highlighted significant quotes and ideas while transcribing the raw data, and continued gradual reduction with each review of the text. Thus, I took steps towards drawing relevant themes or coding necessary information.

## Coding

The definition of coding is less controversial than some other steps of data analysis; rather, it is a matter of wording and semantics. The coding process aims to “make sense of the text data, divide it into text or image segments, label the segments with codes, examine codes for overlap and redundancy, and collapse these codes into broad themes” (Creswell, 2005, p. 237). In other words, coding is a way to think systematically about the raw data in a step-by-step manner. Computer programs exist to aid in coding (Ethnograph Version 5.0, HyperResearch, Atlas.ti, NUD\*IST), but Creswell (2005) suggests that analyzing data by hand is more favorable for researchers who have little or no experience with computerized analysis software. In dealing with qualitative data involving human behavior for the first time, I preferred to personally code the information with the contextual details in mind.

Once I had copied and pasted the pertinent text segments from the observations and interview transcripts into condensed files, I raked through every single word and

phrase, jotting down general comments along the way. I recognized that each participant had a special story worth sharing, but I paid little attention from whom the quote came because I was mainly concerned with content analysis. My mission was to explore the collective learning environment: “Sometimes, we will find significant meaning in a single instance, but usually the important meanings will come from reappearance over and over” (Stake, 1995, p. 78).

## Results

This following section presents the results of my coding process. The participants’ responses are combined according to their context and are retold to give a better understanding of the participants’ overall experiences. The results were categorized as follows: (a) student contributions, (b) consequences of contributions, and (c) references to the culture/small school environment.

### Student Contributions

#### *Visually*

The first question for the student interviewees undoubtedly yielded similar talking points. I asked each one how they contributed to their physical learning environment, which unsurprisingly steered many responses towards concrete events and tangible objects. One student explained her impact on the rebuilding process of Griffin: “Being in Creative Spaces, I’ve made a lot of decisions about the changes, like the Art Wall” (AT, personal communication, May 1, 2012).

Brice Baxter, a Griffin freshman, joked about one of his physical contributions to the school campus saying, “We walk around a lot so our footprints are in the ground” (personal communication, April 26, 2012). While it may seem trivial to view each footstep as being powerful, the new campus was designed with this exact experience in mind. Sustainability and reducing Griffin’s carbon footprint were major factors in its rebuilding.

JT, the recent Griffin graduate, made a sizable and unprecedented contribution (as a student) to the school, which was in the form of its mascot (Figure 7). When I asked him why he dedicated his senior project to his high school, he proudly claimed, “Because I wanted to leave my mark on the school that left its mark on me. . . and hopefully encourage art students to follow the same path!” (JT, personal communication, September 4, 2011).

A few students discussed their involvement with the school’s Prom, whether making artistic pieces to decorate the building or just arranging the party accessories. Another commonality amongst the



Figure 7. JT’s senior project; a giant metal griffin located at the front of the new school building.

examples of visual transformation stemmed from the school's need for landscaping. Students planted trees, rolled out sod, and seeded flowers in cleverly designed flowerbeds.

Most of my observations at The Griffin School also emphasized visual features. On numerous occasions when I waited for classes to change or for interviews to begin, I took note of how Griffin teachers and students used all of the campus for various activities. Every inch was planned with intentionality. A project largely backed by the student population, the commons area was spacious enough to accommodate small, group learning as a classroom alternative as well as provide a comfortable, informal gathering place. I also observed how the colorful palette and abundance of student artwork gave students and teachers a means to interact outside of the classroom.

### *Conceptually*

Although the visual contributions to The Griffin School were easily recognizable and gave opportunity for instant feedback, other student accomplishments and efforts helped to shape the school conceptually. As a musical artist, Dakota Dively focused on generating good vibrations throughout the halls and classrooms of his high school. Whether it is from a guitar or his singing voice, he understood how contributions of different sorts added to the Griffin energy.

The 2011-2012 school year marked the first time that Griffin offered AP courses to their students and, in keeping with their foundational beliefs, the future organization and running of the AP courses took student opinions into account. Cecelia, who modestly

spoke of her contributions to the new AP program, was one student who had a hand in the structure of Griffin's curriculum.

## Consequences of Contributions

### *Encouraging/Accepting*

The second question inquired about the repercussions of the co-created learning environment at The Griffin School. When I asked students how their work or the artwork of others impacted the way they acted, felt, or learned in their school, the responses were overwhelmingly positive. One word that appeared more than any other in response to this question was “encouraged.” As a former public school attendee, Alias was able to compare her previous experiences with her life at Griffin. She attributed much of the acceptance of individuality on the ample amount of opportunities for self-expression:

Like how it affects the way that you learn at this school and everything? It creates a more positive environment, I think. It's more encouraging. And it kind of creates this feeling that you have a more personalized education because the school is more open and accepting of self-expression. Like with art, and other things, they don't have an extreme dress code or anything. (personal communication, April 26, 2012)

A small sign hung up near Art Wall by AT, a Creative Spaces Committee member, and the donated senior project by JT are both examples of students purposefully encouraging other students. JT said of his metal griffin:

I wanted to set the bar. . . . Part of the purpose was to encourage future students and show them what's possible. That if they try hard enough, they can actually achieve things that they never thought they could. So, go big or go home! Encourage them to go big! (personal communication, September 4, 2011)

### *Confidence/Pride*

Traits that are often gained as a result of an encouraging and accepting environment are confidence and pride. While every school comes with its fair share of wallflowers; many Griffin students seemed to radiate with an honest sense of self-assurance and dignity. AW stated that the regularly scheduled art shows and performances have been an important factor in building the students' self-esteem. The chance to display work is an opportunity in itself for positive feedback and attention. Not that the chance to display or perform personal works is the only opportunity for rewarding reviews, but fewer opportunities means fewer circumstances for reflection and growth.

In discussing his cow sculpture located around the perimeter of the new school building, JAM told me of how adding artwork to the environment has boosted his confidence and opened his eyes to things he never thought he could accomplish. He said, "It's given me more oomph to go after stuff!"

A reference to the impacts of the bond between students and teachers, Cat noted that the extension of their academic relationship into a more personal one has made her take pride in all the work she does. Tacocat also credited the "casual" student/teacher relationships with being confident to voice opinions and feelings in and out of class.

### *Home/Comfort*

Another common reply about how students felt at school metaphorically compared Griffin to "home." Brice Baxter attributed his sense of home to the fact that it

was custom-built, created with the help of each student. He also discussed how being in a place with peers that have similar interests would make a person feel a sense of safety and belonging, similar to how one feels at their own house. Senior student participant, Cecelia, mentioned student/teacher relationships and everyday objects as a source for comfort. She goes on to explain:

You see the colors and you see the senior legacy boards up on the wall and your lockers and it just feels like our place, you know? Like it feels like we made this place our own, in this class, this year. . . . It honestly just kind of makes us feel safe. (personal communication, April 26, 2012)

Optimus Prime, who was cautious of the ever growing and changing Griffin population, affectionately used the term “family” to describe the school community. While her feelings towards the progression of the new school building were influenced by her fondness of the previous campus, to imply that fellow students, teachers and administrators are close enough to be considered family is a powerful response.

#### References to Culture/Small School Environment

While student participation in the physical construction of their school is a component of Griffin’s beliefs, there were also other references to its unique culture that were beneficial in interpreting the story of The Griffin School. A major talking point in both my interview with AW, the administrator and co-founder, and in his speech on the first day of class was the importance of “recreat[ing] the culture” (personal communication, August 23, 2011). With a blank slate of a structure, AW reminded the

students that a culture is built not only with tangibles but with everyday interactions, classroom participation, and even smiles.

Its people, its customs and traditions, and its moral beliefs determine the culture of any institution. As I have previously spelled out, the students at The Griffin School have had a huge hand in developing and carrying out the culture of their high school. From the governing committees to the encouragement of self-expression, students at Griffin have been and will continue to be the x-factor in the school's culture. JT's experience and tenure as a four-year student at Griffin revealed deep insights as he thought about the future of the new campus. JT claimed, "I'm sure a seasoned teacher could probably tell you better, but a school doesn't change very much usually from the students; at Griffin, it does" (personal communication, September 4, 2011).

School administrator, AW, knows the importance of the culture and the students' role in creating it. Over the past sixteen years he has seen students come and go, each one leaving their impression on Griffin: "Decisions are often really meaningful and have a long term impact on not just the student, but the school as a whole" (personal communication, June 26, 2012). And still, after all this time, he and the rest of the administration feel confident in the atmosphere created by a new group of children each year.

Other elements of Griffin's culture include its participatory governing system, small class sizes, a commitment to serving the surrounding community, a plethora of art electives from which to choose and an all-around collaborative effort to transform their

learning environment. In talking with students and observing their school lifestyle, I believe that the small size of the student body is the largest influence on the culture.

When The Griffin School began, only 17 students were on its enrollment list. With a goal of educating those who were disenfranchised by the traditional school model, Griffin attracted children with creative inclinations that were often suffocated in a standard class of 30 or more students. Many of the students could not talk about their contributions to their school environment without bringing up the small size of the overall student body and the school as a whole. Aware of both the positives and the negatives, Skye talked with me about the level of trust that students are able to earn with only 60 students in the school. Carson also mentioned that knowing everyone in your classes is sometimes a lot to handle and comes with a lessened sense of privacy, but likes the strong friendships she has built.

One of the advantages of a small school environment is the amount of opportunities for personalization and getting to know all those involved in the school. On numerous accounts, students alluded to their artistic contributions as a way to show their personality and originality: “I guess it’s just. . . a nice environment to be surrounded by all these creative things, creative art projects. It makes it feel a little more personalized” (AT, personal communication, May 1, 2012). Their co-created environment gave students a space in which they could call their own; something concrete with which to connect. Due to so much individual input into their school environment, Griffin encouraged students to foster their own identities. As JT said, at other schools that he has been to if a student did not blend in, then school life would be difficult. “You couldn’t break the

mold. You just wouldn't fit" (personal communication, September 4, 2011). The great amount of opportunities for personalization at Griffin works to shatter any possible "mold" that one could prescribe for the student demographic.

### Data Display

The organization of this coding process is represented in an outline format in Figure 8. In the figure, segments of data from the interviews were used to verify my coding outcomes. This arrangement helped me to visualize the groups of data in way that was more conducive to a cogent narrative.

- I. Student Contributions
  - A. Visually
    - 1. JT's giant metal griffin statue
    - 2. Well being in Creative Spaces, I've made a lot of decisions about the changes, like the Art Wall.
  - B. Conceptually
    - 3. I'm a part of the music ensemble class, and being a singer I actually have to help put together the band and make sure people are on top of things.
    - 4. Three of us have kind of shaped how they're going to do AP next year because we've had a lot of opinions about it.
  
- II. Consequences of Contributions
  - A. Encouraging/Accepting
    - 1. We put up a little sign to encourage people to put up their art there.
    - 2. It's very different than a big high school where you don't even think to voice something.
  - B. Confidence/Pride
    - 3. It's made me a little more confident, just in general. Showed me I could do stuff I didn't know I could. Given me more umph to go after stuff.
    - 4. I felt like they were really like supportive and kind of proud of us that we did that. So it felt good.
  - C. Home/Comfort
    - 5. You all get to feel like you helped create this, so you feel more at home.
    - 6. I've seen so many kids just like blossom! Really just become themselves. Because when you feel at home, you feel safe. You can do more things, you know? Like you can really be your full potential.
  
- III. References to Culture/Small School Environment
  - A. Culture
    - 1. Decisions are often really meaningful and have a long term impact on not just the student, but the school as a whole.
    - 2. Everyone has their unique thing. That's what you share in common.
    - 3. It's definitely more of a group feeling than like other schools that I've been to because we're all contributing to it - the look of the building and the feel of the building.
  - B. Small School
    - 4. I think we were immediately drawing kids who had really strong artistic skills and it just kind of went along with that's why they didn't succeed in a class of 32 students.
  - C. Ownership/Identity
    - 5. That was a big part of what we hoped would create a sense of ownership and engagement because I think a lot of students kind of coast through school feeling really disconnected.
    - 6. I guess it's just. . . a nice environment to be surrounded by all these creative things, creative art projects. It makes it feel a little more personalized.

*Figure 8.* Repeated ideas and beliefs are classified into three groupings: how students contributed to their school environment, references to the school culture, and emotional responses to the students' participation in their learning environment.

As a result of the coding steps, data was cut up, separated and shuffled around (See Figure 8). The entire collection of reworked material needed to be “recontextualized” so that it may be read easily without searching through heaps of single documents (Stake, 1995). Displaying data in a graphic or textual structure enables the researcher to view it through a new conceptual and organizational perspective. Examples of five different ways to present data are shown in Creswell’s (2005) research guidebook. They are to (a) create a comparison table, (b) develop a hierarchical tree diagram, (c) present figures, (d) draw a map, and (e) draw a demographic table (pp. 247-249). Bogdan and Biklen’s (2007) “funnel” analogy and Creswell’s (2007) “spiral” analogy similarly reflect the figurative analysis effort. I configured my coded data into a format similar to Creswell’s (2005) hierarchical tree diagram, where I began with specific segments and worked toward “broader levels of abstraction” (Creswell, 2005, p. 245). This process also revealed relationships between the categories as well as minor themes.

Figure 9 illustrates the results of my mental and visual mapping. The flow of the diagram correctly mirrors the sequence of steps I took in narrowing the data. However, the shape of the overall picture is slightly misleading. As the information gets further processed, the amount of data gradually gets compressed and arranged into fewer, yet more abstract notions. Codes rise out of raw data; themes rise out of codes; analytical narratives rise out of themes.

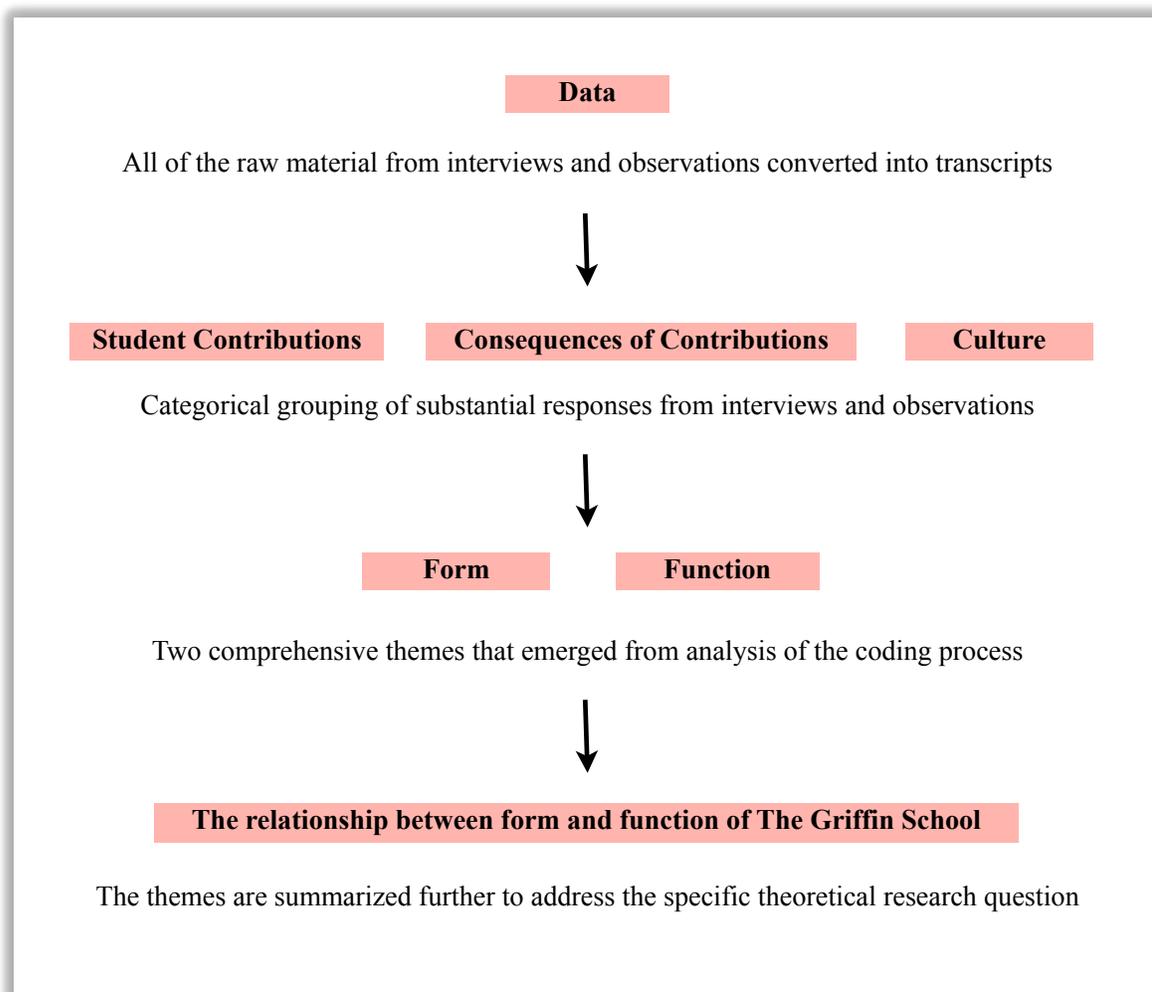


Figure 9. The process of displaying data in a visual format to clearly see the relationship between the data and the findings. Diagrams also help to shape a mass of data into a narrative. Adapted from “Layers in the Qualitative Gunman Incident Study,” by J.W. Creswell, 2005, *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.), p. 245. Copyright 2005 by Pearson Education.

This chapter presented multiple literary views on how to approach data analysis in a qualitative case study. Reinforced with diagrams and figures, each clearly defined step I took in interpreting the mass of raw data from The Griffin School was to discover the broader themes linked to student participation. In the final chapter, I explore the dance between Griffin's form and function, and what that means for its students and beyond.

## CHAPTER SIX

### RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

So far in this thesis, I established my goals and motivations for investigating this case at The Griffin School, reviewed a vast amount of literature to give my research a backbone, and introduced the history and personality of the Austin-based high school. A thorough description of the qualitative case study methodology and the data analysis processes that I used showed how I ethically arrived at my authentic findings. With the interview questions answered and arranged into theoretical constructs, I then had to summarize what it all meant. What does form and function have to do with students participating in the appearance of their learning environment? How does it affect their everyday outlook on school? Are students empowered through this involvement? And if so, how can these findings serve as a model for empowering other students through art?

This chapter aims to explain what I learned as a result of this research by bridging the gap between the data and my initial research proposal. The narratives of the fifteen Griffin participants acted as the beacon, giving light to the conclusions and providing a 360° view of their collective experiences. This process is what Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) term a theoretical narrative: “It uses your theoretical constructs to organize people’s subjective experience into a coherent story. It employs people’s own language to make their story vivid and real (p. 73).

## Themes Revealed

At this point in the analysis, as Figure 9 demonstrates, I began to see how the responses of the Griffin participants and my observations were connected. Through fleshing out the codes, their individual narratives were combined to produce a broader explanation of their The Griffin School experience (Bruner, 1991). By targeting pivotal words in the phrases that were often repeated, two clear patterns, or themes, were revealed. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) define a theme succinctly as “groups of repeating ideas that had something in common” (p. 38). These core patterns contained two analogous bodies of information that, through my analysis, were strongly correlated to the form or the function of the school.

While these themes were not predetermined, they did not develop without subjectivity (Creswell, 2007). My research had a built-in focus; I was trying to explore a specific domain. However, this focus did not control how the main classifications materialized. The two themes were also not entirely independent of one another as there was plenty of gray area. Explaining the overlap and its significance in a “theoretical construct” was the succeeding step.

## Drawing Conclusions

Although transcribing and coding an abundance of information to analyze and develop into themes was a major feat in the entire research process, drawing conclusions based from those themes seemed like an infinite task. The chopped up codes and lists of key phrases were meaningless without description. At this stage, I found it important to

revisit my central research question to regain the focal point: How does the participatory rebuilding approach of The Griffin School contribute to its overall learning environment, and how can it serve as a model for empowering students through the arts?

From the evidence collected in studying Griffin's physical learning environment, I reflected on the data through the lens of the thematic analysis. How do the students' contributions, their implications, and the school culture correlate with the rebuilding approach of The Griffin School? What are the implications of form and function on the overall learning environment?

In interpreting the case to build an argument, the researcher yet again reaches a crossroads. Two options present themselves for the resolution of the research: (a) generalize and establish a universally applicable theory based on the case study, also known as grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), or (b) provide an increased comprehension of the specific case and recognize it as idiosyncratic (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Gillham, 2000; Stake, 2005; Thomas, 2010). Stake (2005) contends that case study is designed to manifest "understandings of what is important about the case within its own world," and not the world of theorists and philosophers (p. 450). In his article "Doing Case Study: Abduction Not Induction, Proneis Not Theory," Thomas (2010) explains that generalization is an "unrealizable" goal. Gillham (2000) champions evidence as the acclaimed objective of qualitative research. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) also see that deducing a universal statement based on the one case study as "undermining their ability to grasp the basic interpretive nature of human behavior and human experience" (p. 43).

I, too, deem theorizing and generalizing from one particular case to be a misdirected interpretation of the information gathered from a descriptive, qualitative case study. There are vast amounts of specifics and variables unique to an exact time, place and population. To infer the same outcomes will occur in all comparable conditions is to disregard the distinct and special experiences of the case study participants. A goal of this study was to explain the special relationship between the Griffin students and their school, and I was careful not to disregard the individual testimonies through summarization. With their stories in mind, I built an argument for The Griffin School, not for all schools. Schools involve an exceptionally high degree of variability, which makes broad theorizing more difficult. As Brubaker (1998) eloquently remarks, “schools are like snowflakes. No two are exactly alike” (p. 42).

#### Verification

I am aware that my narrative of The Griffin School is not the only narrative to be told. My findings are one interpretation of the data collected. They are expressed through my personal point of view, but are animated through the words of the participants. By means of the write-up, the reader should be able to experience the data “vicariously” (Stake, 1995), and not solely consume the researcher’s argument. Consequently, the same body of evidence may be looked at to produce different results. That another researcher may look at the same data and deduce different results does not necessarily mean that the contrasting outcomes are unreliable: “If your interpretation is supported by the data, then it is valid” (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 32).

While repeatability of study findings is a sign of accuracy, it is only one component of the litmus test of validity. Sources in literature offer an array of terms used to describe what verification is, as well as different ways to achieve it (Creswell, 2007). Conclusions in a qualitative study are subjective and often abstract, so speculation alone does not make for a trustworthy report. Conclusions need to be strengthened through the use of multiple methodologies, referred to as triangulation. Triangulation implies the use of three reference points, which “helps to identify different realities” (Stake, 2005, p. 454). If there are two points of contention in the data, a third serves to locate some point of intersection or overlap in the phenomenon.

A final product of the research may be deemed invalid if there is too little data to back up the findings. In an article concerning nursing methodology research, authors Breitmayer, Ayers, and Knafl (2007) go a step further in saying that triangulation includes not only “confirmation” but “completeness.” It is not enough for the data to be truthful, there also has to be a sufficient amount. This case study examined data from recorded observations, interviews with fourteen students, one administrator and personal experience, all reinforced by photographs of the school and pertinent literature.

Creswell (2007) also recommends the use of a member check, which is “a process in which the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account” (p. 252). Although audio recordings helped to minimize mistakes during transcription, member checks are a way for participants to clarify their remarks and add more insights, if necessary. I strived for an accurate and reliable representation of my research findings, and it was in my original plan to carry out member checks. However,

due to time constraints and the school's academic schedule, I was not able to review the dialogue with Griffin students and administration. In the future, this is something that I will conduct in research with human subjects.

### Form and Function

As I reviewed in the previous chapter, many aspects of The Griffin School are attributed to its physical form and many aspects are attributed to its function. But examining the relationship between the two is like pondering the proverb about the chicken and the egg. The popular slogan that form follows function was a functionalist approach to architecture adopted as the mantra of modernists and industrial design at the turn of the 20th century. Coined by American architect, Louis Sullivan, it was the belief that the way a building looked should be entirely directed by its purpose, and little more. The other half to this modernist theory was the notion that ornamentation and decoration were criminal and had no bearing on functionality.

The accounts of participants and my own observations at The Griffin School have sincerely proven otherwise, and more closely fit the modified theory of Frank Lloyd Wright: "form and function are one" (Buhro & Colvin, 2003, p. 138). As I have discovered through this case study, form and function at The Griffin School are hard to distinguish. In theory and in practice, they are often so closely intertwined that they seamlessly blend together.

In my own words, I would describe the relationship between the place (the form) and the pedagogy (the function) of The Griffin School as reciprocal. The possible

functions that can occur within a space are inevitably determined and limited by its form, especially when it is a preexisting building, as was the case with Griffin. Through a high degree of student involvement, which is a result of the governing structure, the form, in turn, was also a reflection of its function.

An example of the connection between the physical class size (number of students) and the way in which students and teachers communicate was given by Cecelia: “They just have a way of making it more interesting for us because they do know us and they can . . . connect with us on our level a lot more than if it was a bigger class” (personal communication, April 26, 2012). Student/teacher relationships were mentioned frequently. The ability to have more one-on-one time with a teacher due to the school’s smaller size was impactful on student morale and academic achievement. The construction of an outdoor classroom, a community garden and even outdoor benches extended the learning places, therefore expanding the types of teaching and learning that can transpire at The Griffin School. On the other side of that same coin, a few students also pointed out the negative consequences that a small school can have on inter-student relationships, such as limiting the potential friend pool and lack of privacy (Carson, Optimus Prime, Skye, personal communication, May 8, 2012).

An argument against the Modernist notion of ornamentation being irrelevant to functionality was presented by JT when he talked of the intended effects of his senior project as a means to encourage future students. Teacher and student made projects around the school, such as the Art Wall, the Snug Mug Spoon Wall and decorated lockers, are sources of pride and inspiration for the Griffin community. JAM also recalled

how seeing other students' work throughout the school opened his eyes to what he thought was previously beyond his ability. The decorative elements in The Griffin School far surpass their passive, visual qualities and act as a catalyst for creativity.

The personalization of the school by students was an ideal that started when Griffin first opened its classroom doors in 1996, and continued to be a cornerstone in the transition to the new building. In his first day speech, AW addressed the issue of recreating the culture in recognizing that it's not solely the job of the principal or the teachers, but a group effort that takes time: "If I was to. . . wave my magic wand and make some kind of culture, there's no way I could do it as well as we could all do it together" (personal communication, June 26, 2012). Throughout the duration of the school year that I observed at Griffin, students and teachers alike made strides to leave their mark on the campus.

While not all participation was necessarily "artistic" (i.e., Cecelia's impact on the AP Program), it was the act itself that was meaningful. Another result of the customized learning environment, students expressed a feeling of comfort, safety, and home. One student explained how being surrounded by the student artwork made him feel a sense of "Zen," which allowed him greater focus in his classes. So, not only did a customized physical environment help to shape the way that students felt about their school in general, but it percolated into the academic setting as well.

In his postgraduate reflections, JT realized the significance of the senior legacy boards, Griffin's alternative to a yearbook. Each year, seniors are given a square plaque to manipulate and decorate in a way that represents themselves. At the end of the school

year, the legacy boards of the graduating class are added to the wall of legacy boards from previous classes located in the commons area. The individual creation of visible legacy boards “helps to have something you can identify yourself with and you can express yourself. You can be like ‘This is how I want to be thought of. . . . This is how I want to represent myself’” (personal communication, September 4, 2011). A sense of identity and ownership gained through material constructs gives students a sense of importance.

Optimus Prime strengthened the argument that being involved in the rebuilding and reforming of the school makes students feel that “you actually have some sort of place in the school where you’re attending; like you’re actually important in it. It can impact, like, how you work in that environment” (personal communication, May 8, 2012). A feeling of importance often resulted in higher self-esteem. I believe that increased self-esteem is the first rung on the empowerment ladder, and that Griffin students have been given an inspiring boost through artistic allowance.

My interpretation of the connection between the form of The Griffin School and its function revolved around the idea of reciprocity, subscribing to a give and take relationship. But one student participant worded the interactions between the student body and their environment with a brilliant analogy. She believed that the community effort to impact the way the school looked engaged everyone in a “visual conversation” (Skye, personal communication, May 8, 2012). Teachers and students alike experienced and absorbed the art-filled space and continually acted and reacted with their encompassing surroundings. This view suggests that she saw the physical building as

more than a pile of bricks and mortar, but as a tool for communication, information and education.

The previous testimonials from the case study participants demonstrate implications of the close correlation between The Griffin School's form and its function. It was the weaving of the two that made the fabric of Griffin strong and unquestionably colorful. I believe that when the students in a school are the main contributors to their education, or are at least part of the conversation, they become invested and empowered. The authorization to make decisions through art has proved to played a large part in the empowerment students:

With the art electives combined with the other classes, it kind of like mixes in the academic stuff with things that we're actually making and putting out into the world. So it makes you feel. . . like what you're learning is going to turn into something big that other people are going to notice. . . . We're just, outside of school even, just being more open to contributing to the city and to the community around us. (Vermelda, personal communication, April 26, 2012)

### A Model for Empowerment

Qualitative research does not typically aim to produce unconditional theories and guidelines. Such outcomes never ensue, however, without motivation and a hope that the findings can improve on some aspect of life. The Griffin School represents one instance of an empowered student population, and it should not be assumed that implementation of Griffin's exact culture-building framework will result in the same level of confidence and self-identity for students at every learning institution. In his book *Planning and Designing Schools*, Brubaker (1998) agrees:

A single solution to school design is neither possible nor desirable. We have mentioned a number of times. . . the fact that the U. S. and Canada are large and diverse nations geographically, socially, and culturally. The need is for many solutions to teaching and learning. It is most desirable to have multiple criteria for success at all levels. (p. 192)

Certainly, one cannot deny the value in the stories of the Griffin participants. Their testimonies are proof of a successful school, but that is not to say that schools cannot be successful through other means. In this way, the participatory rebuilding strategies of The Griffin School serve as only one model for empowerment, and the arts serve as only one vehicle for accomplishing this.

#### Implications for Future Research

As a novice researcher, performing my first research project of this magnitude, I became absorbed in the process and the data surrounding my particular case. The experiences of The Griffin School students provided me with a new perspective on art and participation in their learning environment. My findings satisfied one of my personal and professional concerns about student motivation and empowerment. After this specific research question was answered, more and more questions arose.

There are a lot of variables at play when dealing with a pluralistic construct such as schooling; not only in how to investigate a phenomenon, but which phenomenon to investigate. I have reviewed an abundance of literature pertaining to the ecological scenarios in learning environments. Some discussed the history of the appearance of schools in correspondence with its educational aims. A few detailed the business of planning and construction of a school. But I found even less literature that examined all

these factors through the eyes of the students. While this study was an exploration of only one school, I believe that research extending to comparable and diverse schooling situations would be an invaluable resource for educators in determining how to empower students.

One variable in this study was the classification of Griffin as a small, private institution. These two factors imply a small student body with families willing and able to afford the yearly tuition of over twelve thousand dollars. With limited enrollment space and a high price tag, The Griffin School's population is very specific. The participation levels at a school with 60 students would be difficult to match at a school with 3,000 students. Future studies could examine the impacts of the physical surroundings on students in larger private schools, charter schools, magnet schools, and a range of lightly to heavily populated public schools. It would also be beneficial to survey schools with varying sources of funding and economic statuses. For example, Emily Pilloton's, Project H, has added to the body of knowledge about the power of design in a rural school in need of repair, but the amount of research in this vein is lacking. Because Griffin is located in the heart of a historic neighborhood in the capital city of Austin, Texas, further attention could be paid to different schools with different economic, social, and cultural backgrounds across the country.

The population of this study was young adults in high school, grades 9-12. I believe that the idea of the entire school community physically contributing their surroundings can be initiated in middle and elementary schools as well. Further exploration of the impacts on students of all ages could supply a well-rounded picture of

the relationship between a school's form and function. It might also encourage a researcher to investigate different types of influential participation with a range of age groups.

Another defining characteristic of The Griffin School is its emphasis on the arts. While artistic students might have a greater enthusiasm for the visual appearance of their school building, I would be interested to find out the implications of a co-created learning space in non-arts based program such as a technical institution. Future studies could examine the consequences of involving students with different inclinations other than visual arts in decisions about the way their school looks and/or functions.

### Closing

In conclusion, I am optimistic that this project with The Griffin School has provided a powerful narrative of a unique learning environment. I believe that it has added a new perspective on how to motivate, inspire, and empower students, not only through form but also through function. The lessons that I have learned as a result of this experience have given me a key to open up more doors for further exploration. As long as education persists in a physical place, it is beneficial to research the implications of that place on the pedagogy, and more importantly on the learners. May we continue to examine educational settings from every possible angle, always with students at the heart, and may we feel empowered to participate in the ongoing conversation of pedagogy and place.

## Appendix

IRB APPROVED ON: 07/01/2011

EXPIRES ON: 06/30/2012

IRB PROTOCOL #: 2011-05-0070

**Title:** “Power to the Pupil!: The Implications of One School’s Bridging of Construction, Curriculum, and Caring”

**Conducted By:** Jessica Lombardi

**Of The University of Texas at Austin:** Department of Art & Art History

**Telephone:**

**Email:**

You are being asked to allow your child to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. The person in charge of this research will also describe this study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can refuse to participate or stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can stop your participation at any time and your refusal will not impact current or future relationships with UT Austin or participating sites. To do so simply tell the researcher you wish to stop participation. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this consent for your records.

**The purpose of this study** is to discover and explore the implications of the unique rebuilding approach of The Griffin School on the educational environment of the school by obtaining stories of the process and aftereffects from those most closely involved and impacted. Approximately 70 participants will be sharing their experiences with the reconstruction of The Griffin School.

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask your child to do the following things:

1. share experiences and any stories your child might have about the Griffin School
2. participate in group or candid interviews
3. possibly have some work photographed

All participation with this study will take place on site of The Griffin School.

**Total estimated time to participate** in study is dependent upon the length of the interview. Time may vary from 5-60 minutes, and may take place periodically from June to December 2011. Total time is ultimately determined by the participant.

**Risks of being in the study** - This project may involve risks that are currently unforeseeable. If psychological trauma occurs due to sharing information and experiences, resources for dealing with that trauma will be discussed. If you wish to discuss the information above or any other risks you may experience, you may ask questions now or call the Principal Investigator listed on the front page of this form.

**Benefits of being in the study** - There are no direct benefits for participating in the study; however, researchers may gain knowledge of the implications of the unique rebuilding approach of The Griffin School on the educational environment of the school.

**Compensation** - There will be no compensation provided for participation.

**Confidentiality and Privacy Protections:**

The data resulting from your participation may be made available to other researchers in the future for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will contain no identifying information that could associate you with it, or with your participation in any study. The records of this study will be stored securely and kept confidential. Any audio recordings will be destroyed after transcribing and coding have been completed. Authorized persons from The University of Texas at Austin, members of the Institutional Review Board, and (study sponsors, if any) have the legal right to review your child’s research records and will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law. All publications will exclude any information that will make it possible to identify you as a subject. Throughout the study, the researchers will notify you of new information that may become available and that might affect your decision to remain in the study.

**Contacts and Questions:**

If you have any questions about the study please ask now. If you have questions later, want additional information, or wish to withdraw your child’s participation call the researchers conducting the study. Their names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses are at the top of this page. If you have questions about your child’s rights as a research participant, complaints, concerns, or questions about the research please contact Jody Jensen, Ph.D., Chair, The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at (512) 232-2685 or the Office of Research Support at (512) 471-8871, or email: [orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu](mailto:orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu).

You may keep the copy of this consent form.

You are making a decision about allowing your (son/daughter/child/infant/adolescent youth) to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to allow him or her to participate in the study. If you later decide that you wish to withdraw your permission for your (son/daughter/child/infant/adolescent youth) to participate in the study, simply tell me. You may discontinue his or her participation at any time.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of (son/daughter/child/infant/adolescent youth)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent(s) or Legal Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

“I have read the description of the study titled “Power to the Pupil!: The Implications of One School’s Bridging of Construction, Curriculum, and Caring” that is printed above, and I understand what the procedures are and what will happen to me in the study. I have received permission from my parent(s) to participate in the study, and I agree to participate in it. I know that I can quit the study at any time.”

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Child

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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