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## Curriculum of Control: Stories from the Student Perspective

Ryan Anderson

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# *Curriculum of Control:*



Brunswick East Primary School, 1954

## *Stories from the Student Perspective*

Ryan Anderson

Senior Capstone

Creative Writing and Social Action

Creative Project

Dr. Lee Ritscher

School of Humanities and Communication

Spring 2023

*For My Grandma.  
Thank you for making me feel loved every single day.*

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## Capstone Proposal: Creative Project

1. **Name:** Ryan Anderson

**Concentration:** Creative Writing and Social Action

2. **Project Description:** My project will be a collection of short stories, from the perspectives of students, exposing the authoritative and divisive environment that is our public school system. Through the craft elements I have learned, I will showcase how the structure of public school (its setting and characters) is not designed to create community-oriented, complete citizens, but dependent, competitive, and divided individuals. This collection will focus on different students facing different, but intertwining challenges in each story.

3. **Alignment with Common Theme:** My project aligns with the theme “Hidden Histories” because I will be diving into issues that I’ve yet to see addressed from students’ perspectives. Public schools make headlines when there is a mass shooting, or movement to ban books, but the stories almost entirely focus on police, school officials/board members, or legislators. These events get quickly politicized, becoming matters about subjects like gun rights or free speech, and leave out the conditions students face each and every day that actually fuel the discussion in the first place.

4. **Purpose:** My purpose is to enlighten the students, parents, and educators to the reality that we have designed an education system that mirrors our society, and all its problems. Our students are conditioned to maintain a passive role in their lives, receiving directions that are suited towards a privileged group of people, and just like in our society, this format creates social division that is not addressed in society or school.

5. **Format Rationale:** My format will fulfill my project's purpose because it will showcase the diverse problems different students living in different circumstances face, and how they connect as well. Characters will have expected and unexpected differences and similarities, all meshed together in the one location they intersect each and every day.

6. **Capstone Title:** Curriculum of Control: Stories from the Student Perspective

7. **Working Summary:** "Curriculum of Control: Stories from the Student Perspective" will be a collection of short stories, from the perspective of multiple students, diving into the realities students currently face in contemporary public school systems. The subjects of the stories will be as follows:

- a) The dismissiveness of the student's feelings about school
- b) A curriculum designed through the white, patriarchal lens
- c) The conditioning of the 'normal' and 'abnormal'
- d) The view of learning as 'a switch' to turn on and off

The purpose of uncovering these dynamics and their issues is to highlight how formative the period of public education is in each of our lives. The conditioning we undergo during our school years numbs us to the same issues that plague our society at a much larger scale.

"Curriculum of Control: Stories from the Student Perspective" aims to raise awareness about *how* children are being introduced to society, and how they aren't being equipped to make the changes necessary to our collective society moving forward.

8. **Expectations:** The expectations of my project are to unveil the day-to-day lives of various students to get a clearer picture of the systemic factors that breed the hatred of school and excruciating isolation so many students silently face. I expect to show problems like under

performance of certain racial/ethnic/socioeconomic/gender groups and declining mental health are products of the current style of education in our country. The misery revealed to have lived within students who resort to such awful measures, such as suicide or committing violence towards their peers, comes from the feeling of powerless this system instills. Through research I will draw from facts of past stories to craft narratives that place my readers in the shoes of students living through these various traumas.

9. **Specific Skills and Tools Required:** In choosing to complete a collection of short stories, the skills that are required of me are related to incorporating craft elements such as tone, characterization, world building, and plot. I have developed my skills in such areas through my completion of courses such as Intro to Creative Writing, Social Action Writing, and Fiction/Nonfiction. I am also currently learning specific skills of observation in a class called Creative Publishing and Critical Storytelling. These observational skills will come in handy as I will be conducting primary research to compliment my imagination and my previously built foundation of knowledge in order to craft these stories.

10. **Next Steps:** My next step is to complete research to familiarize myself with the specific problems that various students face during their time in the public school system. Then, once I have enough concepts and theories I will begin to craft and weave them together into a collection of stories that showcase the hidden

11. **Timeline:** I plan to have all my preliminary research done by March 13<sup>th</sup>. Next, I will have all of the first drafts of my stories completed by April 10<sup>th</sup>. Lastly, I will have all of my editing and revisions completed by May 1<sup>st</sup>.

## I Hate School

“Hello. Please come in and take a seat,” instructed a faceless voice.

“And close the door behind you.”

Isaac guided the heavy door gently into its frame. *Click*. As he swung back around, he noticed the walls of the office covered in decor of affirmations. Squirrels and alligators with toothy grins. A sun in sunglasses. Self-care instructions. A mirror with benevolent “I am” statements:

*I am kind.*

*I am strong.*

*I am fearless.*

Yada yada yada.

Isaac scanned all the thumbtacked emotional support posters scattered around the office. He shifted his head down to the floor, careful to step around the plastic bin of fidget toys as he shuffled into what he foresaw as the interrogation chair. Standing before him, a towering fortress of a desk, armed with a stack of referrals and a phone loaded with parent contact information. At the front edge of the desk was a decoy, a brown crochet blob holding a sign that read: *I may be a tiny potato, but I believe in you. Go do your thing!*

“I’m glad we have a chance to talk today...” announced the shielded voice, surfacing among a sea of keyboard clicks.

“Isaac. Isaac Campbell,” Isaac uttered into the void while shifting into an innocent position.

“Yes! Hi, Isaac,” said the woman as she swiveled out from behind the monitor on her desk, “My name is Ms. Hansen, the school counselor. I’m very happy to meet you!”

She locked eyes with Isaac. From her side of the desk she looked into the kind, light brown eyes of an ordinary seventh-grade boy. Curly dirty blonde hair draped the sides of his



face, just touching the shoulders of his Ramones t-shirt. The first word that came to her mind was gentle; as if he was considerate of how much weight he pushed into the chair he sat on—for the chair’s sake. The information she had received about Isaac, making him a ‘student of concern,’ didn’t add up now that she was inspecting his puzzled, pale face.

In between the two of them was the cluttered mess of Ms. Hansen’s desk. Sprawled out along the top were scribbled-on legal pads from the four previous meetings she had that day and the new addendum to the “Risk and Referral Program,” which had been dropped on her desk this morning. Student mental health, specifically depression and anxiety, was steadily rising across the country. In response, a new procedure had been passed for Creekside Middle School. This procedure, the “Risk and Referral Program,” included ten-minute assessments of any ‘students of concern.’ Today, Ms. Hansen had a list of six students. After her initial impression of Isaac passed, the next words that came to mind were *watch the clock*.

“So, Isaac, the reason I called you in here today was because I have been informed of some statements you may have made yesterday,” Ms. Hansen queried, her smile straightening.

“...” Isaac stared back, his leg bouncing in his seat as if he were packing down the dirt of a buried secret.

“You were heard saying you *hate* coming to school? And that you wish this school *didn’t exist*? Did you say these things, Isaac?” Ms. Hansen asked, both of her hands flat on her desk.

“Well.. I mean.. yes. But I didn’t mean anything serious by it.”

“What *did* you mean by it, Isaac?” Ms. Hansen leaned forward during her line of questioning,

“Are you having any trouble at school? With class? Other students?”

“No, no troubles in class or with other students.” His foot ceased tapping.

“That’s good to hear. I have another question to ask you, and I need an honest answer. But before I ask, I have to tell you that I am required to report any answers that I feel pose a danger to your safety or the safety of others.” Ms. Hansen now had her keyboard in her lap.

“Okay...” Isaac agreed, gripping the arms of the chair.

“So, Isaac, have you ever had thoughts of harming yourself? Or harming other students at this school?”

“What? No, of course not!” Isaac pleaded in his cracking pubescent voice.

“You haven’t thought about taking any action towards the school you wish ‘didn’t exist?’ Ms. Hansen suggested with her raised, thin eyebrows.

“No! I wish this school didn’t exist because it is so boring. I come to class and sit in the back and don’t do or say anything. And no one notices. I don’t have any friends because we are barely allowed to talk in class. I just think it’s pointless.”

A pause hung in the room, muffled yelling and laughter from outside was barricaded by the window. Ms. Hansen typed on the keyboard, a few chunks at a time, then checked the clock.

“Okay, Isaac, I see you are frustrated. More engagement in your classes might make you feel more involved. As for friends, break and lunch offer plenty of time for you to get to know your classmates,” Ms. Hansen calmly retorted with a performative smile that her dimples pushed back against.

“The only engagement I’m allowed to have is to repeat answers back to teachers. And we are forced to play outside during break and lunch. I don’t want to play sports,” Isaac went on, his voice gaining annoyance-fueled confidence, “I just want to stay in my garage and practice songs on my guitar.”

“I hear you, Isaac. But learning is essential to life and our world. Without educating children, who then become educated adults, we wouldn’t have all the necessities and luxuries we do,” Ms. Hansen explained, creating space by pushing her keyboard against the legal pads on the desk.

“I love learning. That is *not* what school is for. The public education system we have today was taken from Prussia in the 1700s. The same system that created a population who voted in the Nazi party. School is about obedience. Its purpose is to separate children from their families and condition them to depend on authority.”

Ms. Hansen sat in her chair, her head tilted and her mouth open, “Where did you learn all this, Isaac?”

“Youtube. When the public school system was first implemented in Massachusetts in 1850, it was resisted by 80% of the population. You work for the same system and you didn’t know this?” Isaac sat so far up in the chair he was hanging off the front edge.

Ms. Hansen stared blankly back at Isaac. Her eyes then darted up and to the right. Isaac’s head followed her line of sight to the clock mounted at the top of the far wall, right above the poster of shooting stars, which stated: *Amazing things happen here.*

“That is very interesting, Isaac. Just be careful what you find on the internet. Not everything is reliable. Our school system benefits a lot of students who aren’t quite as proactive as you.”

“Is it benefitting them? Most successful people in this country aren’t academics. When this system was put in place children were *literally* marched to school by the government. I doubt that was for their benefit,” Isaac continued, his foot tapping had picked back up at double the tempo.

“Without school there would be no base level of knowledge. People wouldn’t be able to communicate with pre-established, shared understandings,” Ms. Hansen retorted, her attention now shifted back to her computer. Her tone, now lifeless.

“Then maybe it would actually be interesting to talk to one another. Academic subjects are all connected anyway. I learned about the difference between the Enlightenment and Baroque periods by looking into different composers. I do more counting and basic math on my fretboard than I do in class.”

“Okay, Isaac. I get it, you are very bright. I am not here to debate the history of the public school system with you. You are frustrated with school, that’s okay. It is only a small portion of your life, and you will get through it before you know it.”

Ms. Hansen swiveled back behind her monitor. She typed in silence. Now a completed form was before her on the monitor, under the heading “Measure for Adolescent Potential for Suicide.” She exhaled, smoothly and quietly once again, and smiled out and around the monitor at Isaac.

“Great news, Isaac. It has been determined you do not qualify for follow-up services.”

## ***That Won't Be On the Test***

Review day. Before each unit exam, Mr. Gamble holds a ‘class review day’ before the big test. He assures all his students that he will provide *everything* they need to know in order to ace the test. Anything from important historical figures, events, locations, technological innovations, political movements, structures of government, or cultural developments could end up as key terms to know for the test. The test assesses students’ understanding of these terms through short answer, multiple choice, matching, and true or false questions. Review day is a vital tool for Mr. Gamble’s students, in his eyes, because he generously provides them with the correct definitions of all the terms he plans to test them on.

He writes each definition on the board.

Then erases. One by one.

For the hour-long class period that takes place the day before the test.

Today is no different. With a smirk residing inside his scruffy silver goatee, Mr. Gamble, once again, writes: “REVIEW DAY: ANCIENT GREECE” on the whiteboard in his favorite indigo dry-erase marker, confident that his meticulous planning will keep the necessary information fresh in his students’ minds long enough to pass their tests. And maintain his class average test scores.

Turning back around to the class, Mr. Gamble slowly rubs his glasses with the polyester fabric of his polo shirt. He waits a moment, giving his students enough time to pull out their marble-patterned composition books. The flipping open of books and the turning of pages begins to fill the empty air, and Mr. Gamble looks up and down the single rows of desks that his twenty-six students occupy. As the students’ heads erratically lift up from their composition books, with blank stares and anxious eyes, Mr. Gamble turns to write the first key term:

Alexander the Great – King of the Macedonian Empire from 336 B.C. to 323 B.C. One of the greatest military strategists in history. Led a conquest that spanned from Greece to India.

Pencils scribbled in unison just behind the smooth strokes of Mr. Gamble’s dry-erase pen. Word for word, the class repeated the definition curated for them by their teacher. Jalen Jones, who sat in the row of desks closest to the window, and one seat from the last row, mechanically copied down the definition without any recollection of the apparently revered Macedonian ruler. Jalen thought to himself that this must have been the lecture from Monday’s class—the class he had missed. That Monday morning Jalen had reasoned with his mom, using the irrefutable logic that missing class would actually *help* his grade.

“If I have an excused absence today, I can still turn in last week’s homework tomorrow!” he pleaded, hanging over the arm of the couch.

“I don’t got time for this, Jalen. Do whatever you need to do. Next week, just do your homework *on time*,” his mother hollered back, one foot out the door to her own responsibilities.

The disappointment in her voice always stayed with him. He didn’t want to let her down, and aimed to make it up to her on tomorrow’s test. *Alexander the Great... another white guy trying to conquer the world. Remember the dates and remember “from Greece to India.”* Jalen looked around the room to assess his pace among his peers. His gaze landed on Sonia Hernandez, who sat towards the front of the class and nearest to the door. She sat fiddling with the gold rings on her fingers. Jalen knew she had been done writing before anyone else in the class. She probably wasn’t even waiting to use Mr. Gamble’s words.

Democracy – A system of government originating in the city-state of Athens. Majority vote from adult male citizens

decided laws and policies. Father of the modern democracy we live in today.

At the beginning of the school year, Sonia and Mr. Gamble's relationship did not get off to a good start. Mr. Gamble *clearly* listed on the class syllabus that a "composition book" was the required notetaking material for his class, yet on the first day of the school year Sonia pulled out a colorful spiral-bound notebook, eager to continue another year of her education. That day, Mr. Gamble, wearing his polo shirt and cargo shorts back in the warm month of August, which he hasn't strayed from for a single day since (and it is well into winter), stood over Sonia's desk with his eyes wide, and pointed at her attempt of individual expression.

"I see *someone* didn't read the syllabus," he announced, looking to the class for validation. Mark Folliard, laughing loudly and obnoxiously, gave Mr. Gamble exactly what he was looking for. (Of course Mark not having a notebook at all was not addressed.)

"No, I read it. But I already had this notebook, and it is much cuter," Sonia shot back, smiling first at Mr. Gamble then at the swirls of color on her notebook. Mr. Gamble's face flushed crimson.

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you. One day, not following directions will *really* cost you. And then you'll think back to where it all started. Back in Mr. Gamble's class." Sonia continued to smile at her notebook, which infuriated Mr. Gamble even more.

A few days before today's Ancient Greece review, Sonia and Mr. Gamble clashed once again during a lecture on the Trojan wars. Mr. Gamble was praising the legendary strategy of the Spartan soldiers, calling their ploy to hide inside a wooden horse ingenious. He raved with vigor

in his voice, pacing back and forth between his computer and the projection screen to detail the pictures of battle he had arranged. Sonia raised her hand.

“So what were *the women* doing while the men were fighting each other all the time?” she asked in her sweet and soothing tone, knowing that the timbre of her voice couldn’t hide the piercing and provocative nature of the question. The class fell silent.

“Probably laundry.” A few of the boys, Mark most prominently, laughed along with Mr. Gamble.

“Sorry, sorry... but it’s probably true. I’m sure the women were running the households during these times of war,” he replied to Sonia, who had already stuck her head back in her notebook in disgust.

“We are going to be talking about the civilizations as a *whole* on the test, not *ordinary* members of the population,” Mr. Gamble added, “So let’s keep that in mind when asking questions.”

Parthenon – A temple in Athens. Built by Pericles around 438 B.C.  
A shrine that honors the Greek gods, specifically Athena, and is a symbol of democracy.

School was a place of comfort for Mark Folliard. When he walked through the hallways he kept his shoulders back and his head tall, like his father had taught him. “Eye contact was something to seek out,” his father would say as they played catch at the park across the street from their house.. Teachers gave him nothing but warnings when he acted out, and students stepped aside when Mark walked through the hallways. Mark ruled the sports games during P.E. and lunch. He understood that confidence was the key to middle school. And he had loads of it. He had no doubt a successful future lay ahead of him. All the evidence pointed to it.



Mark sat in the middle of the classroom, copying every *other* definition that Mr. Gamble wrote. He didn't need an 'A' on the test. He wasn't an 'A' student. Mark glanced around the class watching everyone scramble, making sure not to miss a single word, and this made him chuckle. Everyone was too serious. Mark wrote the terms down that were completely foreign to him, but he was also in the middle of a Pokémon GO raid that required his attention. As he tapped the screen concealed under his desk in a fury, dealing massive damage to a lightning type he was dueling, Sonia glanced in his direction and rolled her eyes. Mark scoffed. *So uptight. She might be pretty if she smiled more.*

Phalanx – Greek battle formation. Soldiers stood close together, often armed with shields and spears, forming unified rows nearly impossible to penetrate.

Near the back corner of the class, Jalen continued his campaign to catch up in time for Friday's test. The words "shields and spears" were looking back at him flatly from behind the college-ruled bars of his composition book. Jalen shifted his eyes from the two-dimensional, wholly graphite world on his desk to the window beside him. The sun had made a surprise appearance during the breezy, February afternoon. Its shine accentuated the green of the grass field just past the basketball courts. Pine trees surrounded the field, forming their own impenetrable walls. Jalen imagined squeezing between two trunks, and escaping. He would run all the way back home, past the shopping center and across the town expressway, where his brother Sam would be waiting.

Sam had recently been laid off. He would be home, still right where Jalen had left him in the morning—on the couch playing Smash Bros. Jalen would give anything to be back home with his older brother Sam, instead of with Mr. Gamble and his ‘key terms’. Sam had been living with his girlfriend for over six months now, moving out after he and their mother had one too many disagreements about Sam’s life aspirations. Home was a lot different for Jalen since his brother had left; so when Sam showed up this last weekend, ready to take his mother’s advice seriously, Jalen barely let him out of his sight.

They played Smash Bros all weekend, and when Jalen moaned about his homework assigned by Mr. Gamble, Sam grinned in reminiscence of a teacher he himself moaned about years before.

“You mean Mr. Mii?” Sam questioned with a wide smirk, “let’s see how he handles himself on the stages!” Jalen exploded in laughter at the thought.

Thanks to Sam’s brilliant idea to create a character based on Mr. Gamble’s square, video game-like features, Jalen spent his weekend spiking Mr. Gamble’s animated avatar into oblivion instead of answering the chapter review questions assigned to the class.

Between the couch-held tournaments, Sam decided to go to a nearby convenience store for a snack run. Jalen jumped up at the suggestion, remembering how long it had been since he rode shotgun in his brother’s junker of a Honda Accord.

During the ride over, Jalen rolled down the window to escape the pungent smell that stained the upholstery, a smell that Sam attributed to ‘oregano’. Apparently he and his girlfriend had seriously taken up cooking. Or so he claims. Cruising through town, Jalen noticed all the

houseless people scattered at bus stops, parks, and alleyways. Most of them slept, a few with signs pleading for food, or money—*anything* helps. And Jalen believed them. Sam noticed Jalen’s fascination.

“So what have you been learning in school this year?” Sam questioned, after turning down the volume dial to his blown-out speakers.

“Umm, we learned about Ancient India last semester...” Jalen answered after a few moments.

“Ahh! The famous caste system. Well, little bro... you are looking at the modern-day ‘untouchables’ right now.”

Jalen was stumped by Sam’s comment. Mr. Gamble had been very clear about how the caste system was a *uniquely* Indian implementation. It was a result of their distinct culture and religion. But he couldn’t help but think Sam was right. Untouchable was the perfect word to describe how the houseless were treated in their town.

“Earth to Jalen...”

Hearing his name dissipated his daydream. Jalen turned away from the window he had been gazing out. Mr. Gamble was locked on him from the front of the room.

“If I were you, Jalen, I’d be paying attention. A lot of this is *brand new* for you.”

Jalen broke the gaze he momentarily held with Mr. Gamble. He returned to his composition book—Phalanx, still the last term he had written down. He wondered if this term could also be found in the present day. Sam would know. The idea sat with him, particularly the word ‘shields’. What came to mind were Black Lives Matter protests. Police riot shields aligned

in a comparable formation to the tactics originating from Alexander the Great and his armies.

The police hurled canisters of smoke to subdue their resistors, rather than spears extending from the shields of the past. Jalen's face flushed, his teeth tightened together—the resistors, now, and probably back then—those were his people. He raised his hand.

“What happened to the people who lived in the conquered cities?”

Mr. Gamble hesitated for a moment, then replied, “They were absorbed into the Macedonian Empire and taught the Greek way of life, like the beautiful ideas of democracy and Greek theatre.”

“Were they treated like any other Greek person?” Jalen followed up.

“Interesting question, but once again, we will be covering the history of the Greek civilizations as a *whole* on the test, not *ordinary* members of the population.”

## Team Captains

I stood alone now. The entire class divided into two teams, all facing me, their faces painted over with pity—for the last pick. The one who doesn't fit the label of sporty boy or delicate girl. One by one everyone else was picked, given validation, for belonging and behaving where and how they *should*.

According to who?

Mark and Jalen?

Coach Darren chose the two most athletic boys as the team captains, his choice under the guise that they 'compete the hardest'. Not all of us have developed the second nature of catching and throwing, or have every rule of the game ingrained in us because we have been playing since we took our first steps. Not all of us are encouraged to dress for play. Some of us didn't have a ball, or a bat, placed in our hands as soon as we could grip them. Some of us were handed dolls. We were told to make them pretty—for practice. Practice that would translate into making ourselves just as pretty.

For a game? Maybe some of us didn't want to play *that* game.

While Mark and Jalen were chauffeured to team practices I had to persuade my mom to buy me a pair of gym shorts. After years of arguments, tears, and slammed doors I found myself wearing nylon shorts and a baggy t-shirt. I was finally comfortable. Until the stares.

Today, the second period P.E. draft is what led to the culmination of my isolation. Mark and Jalen, rewarded for what they were always groomed for, ro-sham-boed to decide which of them would draw the first pick. Mark edged out Jalen, playing scissors to the other's paper. One laughed and the other playfully sighed, while the self-esteem of the rest of the class lay before both of them. The power to place value on their peers now resided in their callow hands.

First round: Johnny, Carlos, Angel, and Erik

The four of them, along with Mark and Jalen, rounded out the top tier of athletes in the class—the ones that exhaled at the thought of P.E. It was the class period they were born for; their sweat treated as a badge of honor. ‘The Naturals’ as they were perceived, led the way in whatever game we played: basketball, soccer, field hockey, or capture the flag. The Naturals engaged in P.E. with a bravado that took shape through yelling for the ball and hurling their bodies through classmates as if they were bowling pins. They held the freedom to be uncensored. The freedom to be a boy.

Second round: Oliver, Josh, Brandon, and Isaac

The second tier of boys went next. ‘The Outcasts’. They didn’t fit the preconception of the athletic build, or know the nuances of the game, and some—especially Isaac—didn’t care about performing well. Unfortunately for The Outcasts, P.E. was a school subject requiring that abilities and interests be put on full display. Efforts weren’t recorded in notebooks or worksheets then handed in for the teacher’s eyes alone. Nothing but the breeze was in between one another: their histories, their confidence, their bodies.

Oliver went first among The Outcasts because *at least he hustled*. His coordination was a little off; he bent his elbow too early before achieving the full extension of his throwing arm, and led with his head while running like Looney Toons’ Road Runner when speeding across the desert. The Naturals often parodied Oliver’s form, his uncensored expression of being a boy was apparently not correct.

Josh and Brandon followed, reluctantly joining their respective sides who spoke their names with an air of indignity. They were overweight for their age; “fat” or “chunky” being the more common terms mumbled under the breath of The Naturals. Josh and Brandon were

consistently slower to the play, secretly hindered by the mental block around worrying about their clothes hugging their bodies in unflattering ways. To Josh and Brandon being a boy in P.E. did not mean what it meant to The Naturals. It included censorship.

Last was Isaac, who couldn't be *more* disinterested in sports. Comments like "I am not a dog who mindlessly chases a ball" or "sports only push us closer to a Hobbesian demise," only caused The Naturals to roll their eyes at him. They all knew: he *only* acted disinterested out of incapability. That disinterest, coupled with his long hair and painted nails, triggered the fatal shot to the boy he was sanctioned to be. Isaac was the poster child of The Outcasts.

Third Round: Jessica, Diana, Sonia, and Simone

Worse than the outcasts, moving to the girls was like moving to a subspecies, determined at birth to be inferior. During games they were simply run around by the boys, as if they were specters. Conditioned that the physicality of sports and competition didn't include them, they associated their values elsewhere. Jessica and Diana would let balls sail over their heads to avoid the risk of breaking nails. Sonia and Simone stood static in the corner to avoid sweating in their nice clothes. Their mornings consisted of aesthetic concerns, just like the lives of the dolls they were given. It made no sense to put all that aside for a P.E. class—for the girls, learning only existed *in* the classroom. And all the while during this morning makeup, all the boys were still fast asleep, recharging for another day of freedom.

Last Pick: Serena

Then there was me. I too was handed the fate of not having the freedom of a boy at birth. But I am different. I am a fighter. Through appeals to my parents I had little victories, like the clothes I wore, and to play soccer and softball. I had to fight for those things. I spent my free time outside, the dolls I was *still given* remaining in my closet. Their flawless faces collecting

dust, the only foundation they'll ever need. The only thing worse than having to argue for my freedom was that my yearning was mistaken for wanting to be a boy. I was the only one who could see that those two things were *not* the same.

Now, at school, when I expressed my freedom through the clothes I wore, or my innate competitiveness, the other girls scrunched their noses at me. They looked me up and down. I was fighting for my freedom and I was winning, and to them that was wrong. To the boys, I was 'trying to be one of them' and the normal acknowledgement of a high-five or fistbump they gave each other, could not simply be carried over to me. No matter what I wore or how I acted, to them I was still a doll. Boys and dolls only interacted one way, and I had no interest in playing *that* game. A doll, porcelain and fragile, dressed in boy's clothes, and ugly, is how Mark and Jalen saw me.

And that is why I am the last pick.

But that is P.E. *today*.

I'm going to teach P.E. the right way. Where the central lesson is freedom, *for everyone*. I will make sure P.E. isn't a period where sports are a tool to order students into tiers. P.E. will actually be physical *education*. Where kids learn things like: body types aren't 'right' and 'wrong'; nutrition and exercise are easy, healthy habits, not a regiment for sculpted bodies; exercise is not synonymous with competition; and that freedom isn't something doled out, or taken away, at birth.

And finally, I will never choose students to be team captains.



## A Child of Pavlov

The sound of the school bell is a sound every child knows. Above all it is a sound that interrupts. Stop what you are doing. The conversation you are having. The problem you are working on. The lecture you are listening to. When the bell rings you belong in the classroom. Don't be late. When the bell rings again, you may leave. Within these two bells is when learning takes place. *Only* within these two bells.

*Dingggggggggg!*

At 8 a.m. first period begins. My eyelids feel like the garage door to my dad's workshop in our backyard. The door we prop up with a stick; the stick bending to an almost cartoonish degree. That stick is ready to snap at any moment, and in first period math, that stick is my will. The classroom is silent except for the chewing of cheez-itz by Oliver in the back row. Above us is a paneled ceiling with fluorescent squares that use brightness to hold our attention hostage.

Ms. K starts writing sample problems on the board. She wants us to multiply and divide numbers with letters. *What kind of language is this?* Before I can even copy down what she has written, the board is erased. Fine by me. In their place, Ms. K draws a rectangle on the whiteboard; on both the short and long sides of the rectangle she writes in her foreign math language.

“Okay, class, we are still solving the same algebraic equations we have been learning, but now in order to find the lengths of this rectangle.” she says in her plain, bowl of oatmeal for breakfast voice.

The rectangle on the board looks familiar. It reminds me of the opening to my dad's workshop. He has always said he wants to put french doors in, maybe he just doesn't know the lengths of the opening. I quickly flip to a new page in my notebook and start drawing the

workshop: the slanted roof, the front wall, and even the oak tree next to it that's in the corner of our backyard. I draw the rectangular opening, then look up to the front of the room to copy the equations Ms. K had written. The whole board was erased.

*Dinggggggggggg!*

Second period P.E with Coach Darren is my favorite class. We play all kinds of sports, and my team always wins. I hate it when I have girls or uncoordinated kids on my team because they make it harder to win. Today we played capture the flag (even though we use footballs for the flags) on the big grassy field on the edge of campus.

Near the end of the game I stole the other team's flag (football), and ran it all the way back to our side, juking out like five kids. Serena was wide open on our side for me to throw to—I looked right at her and faked like I was going to throw it to her. As if. It was so funny! When I won the game for us, she came over to me and asked me why I didn't throw it to her, but all I could do was laugh.

*Dinggggggggggg!*

After P.E. is break, which is great because then I get to see my friends. My best friends are Brian and Pete. We usually sit at the blue, metal-netted picnic table overlooking the quad and talk about whatever awesome fights happened in WWE over the weekend. Or about Isaac's girly painted nails. He always sits at the tables at the bottom of the stairs, under the overhang of the cafeteria entrance. He sits alone, writing or tapping his girly nails on his notebook. Today we sat next to him, Pete and I grinned at each other knowing we were probably bothering him.

“Hey *buddy*. So what'd you think of the fights this weekend?” I asked, sarcasm shooting out of my nose in puffs of laughter.

“I assume you mean WWE since you are wearing an Undertaker shirt. I don’t watch WWE, it’s so staged and commercialized,” he retorted, his head still in his notebook.

I looked down at my shirt. *I was wearing an Undertaker shirt.* Whatever. Isaac thinks he is so smart, but he just uses his fancy words to hide from the fact that he could never win any fight that found him.

*Dingggggggggg!*

The bell rings again, telling us to go to third period. The middle of the day is always a blur. It starts in Mr. Gamble’s class. Mr. Gamble is funny sometimes, but his class is just as boring as math. Names, and dates, and wars are all we go over, and I have a hard time remembering most of them. Especially for the tests we have every month. If there was a test on the history of WWE I would ace it no problem. I bet Mr. Gamble doesn’t know when The Undertaker lost his Wrestlemania streak! It was 2014! Or who he annihilated to redeem himself four years later! It was John Cena! Mr. Gamble only tests us on the history of ancient (a.k.a. boring) cultures. I wonder if any ancient cultures had wrestling?

*Dingggggggggg!*

Fourth-period English always starts with a five-minute quick write. The projector radiates a worn yellow hue onto the screen that displays today’s prompt: Describe a favorite family vacation from your past.

*My favorite family vacation was when I was 10. My family went to Arizona to visit my grandparents. It was so hot there and I got to spend every day in the pool. My Grandparents live in a resort and we had food brought out to the pool everyday. I always ordered the chicken strips. My grandpa swam across the entire pool underwater in one breath! I tried to hold my breath too and on the last day I finally made it across the entire pool!*

As I scribble the last words of my response Mr. Spillman tells us all to put our journals away. I look around and wonder where everyone else has vacationed. Sometimes Mr. Spillman asks us if we'd like to share but today he says we don't have time. Instead, we take out our copies of *Lord of the Flies*. The rest of English is really just a countdown. I check the clock every ten minutes. First, fifty minutes left. Kids on an island. Then forty. They hunt a pig. Then thirty. Glad I ate chicken strips and not pig on my vacation. Then twenty. The kids divide themselves up. Then ten. I look around the class and think about who I would group up with. Definitely Brian and Pete. Not Isaac. Not Sonia. Then zero. Lunchtime.

*Dingggggggg*

Lunch for me is P.E. without having to deal with the kids who can't play sports. After scarfing down our lunch in the first ten minutes, the games begin. The only ones who show up to the blacktop, or the grass field, are the ones who know what they are doing. Definitely no girls. The game within the game is always Jalen vs. myself, unless we end up on the same team. Then no one stands a chance.

*Dingggggggg*

The last period of the day is Science. Walking into the class after lunch is a drag, but today, Mr. C was beaming behind his demonstration desk—his smile as wide as the frame of his glasses. As we settled into our lab stations whispers started to murmur about the cloaked object in front of him. A white sheet was draped over something with a pointy top. Mr. C pulled off the sheet and before him was a little catapult made out of popsicle sticks.

“I heard you were all learning about the Ancient Greeks in History class! So today we will be recreating one of their greatest inventions: the catapult.” Mr. C exclaimed, pulling back on the arm of the catapult and flinging a paper ball into the crowd of laughing students.

Mr. C was a dorky dude. He wore a lab coat to class everyday, which was totally unnecessary, and always had a colorful shirt underneath. He had curly white hair that he always joked he would catch on fire. The lectures he gave were hard to follow but I always enjoyed the days we did lab work. Except for the fact that I was partnered with Isaac. He always took every step of the instructions so seriously and asked me over and over again if I knew what I was doing. Today would be no different. Might as well let him do all the work.

~ ~ ~

“Alright. Just need to secure the folcrom to the base and.. voila! We have ourselves a popsicle stick catapult.’

Isaac pressed on a few spots of the triangle of sticks he kept calling ‘the base’. He looked so silly securing it with his painted nails. My dad would never let *him* build in our backyard shop.

“Okay, Mark. The honor is all yours,” Isaac said, turning to me and offering me the pink eraser.

I was stunned he wanted me to be the first to try it. He built the entire thing! I took the eraser from his open palm and placed it in the plastic cup. I pulled back the arm, and *whhhhhip!* The eraser flew across the classroom and hit Mr. C in the back. We burst out laughing. This was the best catapult I’d ever seen! It worked perfectly and launched faster than any of the others in the class. I guess Isaac really does know his stuff.

*My drawing!* I remembered my plans from math class I started this morning. *Maybe I should ask Isaac to look at them.* I reached down to the floor and began rifling through my backpack, and felt the folded paper at the very bottom.

*Dingggggggggg!*

“Yes! Finally, school’s over,” I thought to myself, zipping up my backpack. I looked across the table to Isaac, who was putting away his binder.

“See ya.” And I was out the door.

## Epilogue: A Poem

The final bell. The school day is over. Ms. Hansen makes her way down the blue and white checkered-tile hallway, swimming upstream against the school of fleeing students, still looking for her last ‘student of concern’. She finds Mr. Spillman’s classroom empty, walking up and down the aisles of deserted desks. Under the last desk of the row was a crumpled up piece of paper. Ms. Hansen bent down to pick it up. She uncrinkled the wad, which read:

*Prison with a Packed Lunch*

*out in the yard*

*circles*

*of backpacks*

*strap in strap*

*tightly woven like wicker*

*grouped like textbook units*

*chaptered by popularity*

*outcasts don’t get bolded*

*stuff me into a classroom*

*squeeze my mind into a scantron bubble*

*erase my free spirit and fill in the space*

*with a No. 2 pencil                      but only a No. 2 pencil*

*the record of my existence*

*a report card.*

*they tell me:*

*“you’ll have freedom*

*after your homework is done”*

*indicted at birth  
accused of burden—  
in the first degree  
sentenced to eighteen years  
handcuffed to a veneer  
desk*

*you'd be surprised at what  
even a child would do—  
to escape prison*



## Reflective Essay

For this senior capstone project the theme was Hidden Histories. My aim was to address the contemporary issues surrounding the public school system, which in my eyes are the horrific tragedies of countless school shootings and rising cases of depression and severe anxiety in students. I did not set out to address these matters head on (which is already being done daily within news segments and discourse within legislative bodies), but to address the landscape in which these issues are taking place. The school campus.

The hidden history I wanted to focus on were *hidden perspectives*. Those of the students themselves, whose childhoods take place on a school campus. The idea of a child uttering the words “I hate school,” is almost always disregarded. It is seen as okay. As normal. But if school takes up the majority of a child’s life, and they hate school, how long until those two ideas become merged. The main truth I hope to reveal through this project is: of course kids hate school, it isn’t made for their benefit.

Through the hidden perspective of children’s eyes, I also sought to engage with the hidden history of the public school system (also known as the compulsory school system). It is not widely known, for obvious reasons, what the intended outcome *was* when this public school system was copied and implemented in the United States. During the Industrial Revolution, a time of great expansion and development, a mass-producing and accumulation-minded body of citizens was desired to fulfill the aspirations of this epoch. The result was a school system designed to develop a mental framework conditioned for obedience to authority and directed diligence. This hasn’t changed. The times have.

Through the medium of short stories I wanted to focus on the mental framework of our students and how through the systemic principles of public school they are shaped. Through

these stories I touch on ideas implemented in school such as that one account of history dominates the rest, there is the idea of the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ student, and that learning is a switch to be turned on and off. These ideas are discreetly, but intentionally taught and the result is the creation of a hyper-competitive atmosphere. Students form themselves into groups and classes, just like we adults do, and many students feel unfulfilled in this type of society. They experience terrible loneliness that is brushed off as just ‘a part of adolescence’. For these kids, however, adolescence is all they know. *It is* their entire life.

In my stories, especially the final two, I focused heavily on internal thinking because I wanted to emphasize how the outward interactions and environments of school affect the inward molding of students’ mental frameworks. I attempted to show how thought processes are developed and thwarted because of things such as curriculums, teacher influences, and school schedules.

My intent was first and foremost to reassure students that their feelings of isolation and depression are valid, and not because of their own faults. They have been placed in a system that is not designed to care for them first and foremost. They are not receiving a well-rounded education from a school system designed to produce well-rounded, healthy, and self-sufficient adults. Secondly, what I hope parents can take from these stories is that the education they are introducing to their children is incomplete and they need to address the gaps one way or another. Lastly, I hope educators can see these stories as a call to action from their students who they have vowed to prioritize.

The process of completing this capstone project was very challenging, but rewarding. Having gone through the public school system myself, my research began with recollecting my own past. My retrospection brought back a lot of memories I may have never revisited otherwise.

What accompanied my reflection was a lot of frustration. Like most of us, if I could go back I would do things differently. I wouldn't have spent so much time stressing myself out for the approval of my teacher and peers—people who have no place in my life now. What I would have done was recklessly dive headfirst into subjects and activities that *did* interest me, along no particular guidelines. I would have developed my own idea and sense of mastery, and an unshakable confidence to pair with that mastery. Through my outward research: books by former educators, academic studies on classrooms and student counseling sessions, and countless TED Talks by actual students I know that many people agree that the landscape of school is truly 'hated' by so many. Just enough people, I believe, to make real change.

Spreading the hidden history of students' experiences isn't something new. Issues of things like bullying have been at our attention as a society for quite some time. But bullying reduces the issue down to only between students. It eliminates landscape from the equation. Including the hidden history of the public education system, and its *true* purpose, sheds light on how students develop such competitive and othering mental frameworks. It is the fabric of our schools, it is the fabric of our society. As we enter a new chapter of human evolution, something like post-Industrial rectification, we must start by tearing down our school system and starting anew. A new education, for a new generation, to build a new, sustainable world.