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“WHO CARES ABOUT THESE KIDS?”: A CASE STUDY OF THE IMPACT
OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ON EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY
FOR IMPOVERISHED YOUTH

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CHAPTER I

PURPOSE AND RATIONALE

Introduction

Although there has been ongoing debate as to the cause and importance of the achievement gap between children of color and poverty and their more financially stable, white peers, the existence of this gap has long been recognized (U.S. Department of Education, 2005; U.S. Department of Education: National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Recent legislation, specifically the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), was introduced by the federal government with two major goals: to raise the achievement for all students and to eliminate the existing achievement gap (Center on Education Policy, 2003). According to the Act, these goals were to be accomplished through the establishment of “high academic standards”; the monitoring of student progress through “rigorous,” high stakes testing procedures; the use of “scientifically based research” to improve teaching and learning; the guarantee of a “highly qualified” teacher in every classroom; and the provision of supplemental tutoring or school choice for students enrolled in schools designated as being “in need of improvement” (Center on Education Policy, 2004; Meir & Woods, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2002a; U.S. Department of Education, 2002b).

Since NCLB was signed into law, all states, districts, and individual schools have worked hard to comply with its mandates (Center on Education Policy, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006). To date, numerous studies have been conducted evaluating schools' progress toward making adequate yearly progress (AYP) through the collection and disaggregation of standardized testing data by race, gender, income, and other criteria in order to determine the performance of subgroups within the greater student population. Studies measuring the effectiveness of the Act have also been conducted through large scale surveys and case studies conducted by organizations such as the Center on Education Policy (2003, 2004, 2005, 2006), seeking to understand the impact of the new federal policy. In reviewing the current literature, though, it becomes clear that few studies have been completed that are qualitative in nature, focusing on how the assumptions underpinning this effort to increase educational opportunity and achievement are touching the lives of those most impacted by the legislation- the teachers and students. NCLB was constructed by individuals far removed from the classrooms where it is being implemented and it was important that this study be conducted in order to better understand how the policy is impacting those it was intended to serve in ways that cannot be measured through standardized test scores.

In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of current education policy providing a context for the case study that follows. Next, I provide a purpose and rationale for why this case study is an important addition to the current body of

literature that examines the impact of federal policy on expanding educational opportunity for students in urban classrooms. The chapter ends with an overview of the range of responses that states, schools and districts have had to the act.

The largely quantitative focus of research on the impact of NCLB fails to capture administrators' and teachers' day-to-day experiences in making sense of and responding to this policy. This study's qualitative, constructivist approach to understanding the impact of NCLB on the teaching and learning of poor students of color will be inclusive of subjective methods including observation, interviews, and the analysis of texts and documents. According to Silverman, " 'Authenticity' rather than reliability is often the issue in qualitative research. The aim is usually to gather an authentic understanding of people's lived experiences and open-ended questions are the most effective route towards this end" (2001, p. 13). The more common and widely circulated quantitative studies exploring the impact of NCLB are grounded in postpositivist claims for developing knowledge and rely on objective data. A qualitative approach to this study will honor the complexity of views held by teachers and students that simply cannot be captured via quantitative methods. How is the federal involvement in education policy impacting local efforts? How is this policy playing out in the actual day-to-day experiences of poor students of color and the educators who are working to enhance students' educational opportunities and achievement?

Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of this study is to understand how federal policies designed to support low achieving students are influencing educational opportunity and achievement in an urban school serving poor students of color.

The black-white achievement gap is well documented in the history of public schools in the United States (Barton, 2003; Meier & Wood, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2005; U. S. Department of Education: National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Collective NAEP data on national trends in reading, mathematics, and science between 1971 and 1999, representing American students as an aggregate, generally demonstrate a slight decline in the 1970s, a small recovery in the 1980s, and relatively stable performance since that time. Overall, with the exception of the science category for seventeen year olds, student performance on NAEP assessments for nine, thirteen, and seventeen year olds has improved in mathematics, reading, and science (Campbell, Hombo, & Mazzeo, 2000). These trends are somewhat promising, but one must consider the fact that these scores represent the entire student population and do not reflect performance of different minority subgroups within the aggregate. NCLB aims to increase the achievement of all students and to simultaneously close the achievement gap (Center on Education Policy, 2003).

Current test data reveal an enduring achievement gap between White students and students of color. A gap also exists between the achievement of poor children, defined as those who are eligible for free/reduced-price lunch, and their

non-eligible peers. The only evidence of any narrowing of the existing gap is in the mathematics achievement of Black students compared to White Students. Even in this case, however, a significant difference in average scale scores continues to exist as evidenced by 2003 test results where the average scale score of White students was 243.4 compared to the average score of 216.1 for Black students (U.S. Department of Education, 2005; U. S. Department of Education: National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Even though recent data show that performance in some subgroups is improving, a significant achievement gap exists and, simply put, according to results of standardized tests across racial and social class subgroups, poor children of color are still not faring as well as their more privileged peers in America's public schools.

NCLB, the 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, was designed and implemented to increase achievement for all students and, specifically, to close the achievement gap. According to Title I of NCLB, the purpose of the Act is to “ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b, 115 STAT. 1439). Specifically, the Act aims to accomplish this purpose, in part, by “meeting the educational needs of low-achieving children in our nation's highest-poverty schools, limited English proficient children, migratory children, children with disabilities, Indian children, neglected or

delinquent children, and young children in need of reading assistance” and by “closing the achievement gap between high- and low- performing children, especially the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students and between disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers” (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b, 115 STAT. 1440).

NCLB aims to close the achievement gap that exists along racial and social class boundaries (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b, 115 STAT. 1440). This aim is targeted toward all schools with varied racial and social class populations and has serious ramifications for urban schools such as those found in diverse cities, for example, the New York City public schools wherein the vast majority of the student population is both poor and of color (“New York City,” 2004).

Since the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), nearly \$200 billion has been invested in our public schools in an effort to support our nation’s most disadvantaged students, yet the achievement gap continues to exist (U.S. Department of Education, 2005; U.S. Department of Education: National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Previous to the NCLB Act, funding was distributed to local districts, and schools and districts were allowed to spend their money mainly as they saw fit. Supporters of the new legislation argue that there is a need for greater accountability in how funding is used along with a call for greater accountability for student learning. In response to these calls for greater accountability, President George W. Bush proposed

NCLB with three major reforms in mind: “research based instruction,” annual testing, and an “escape hatch” for disadvantaged children stuck in schools in need of improvement (Stern, 2004).

Through the mandates of NCLB, schools, states and districts are held accountable for the educational progress of all children. Each has interpreted and responded to NCLB in various ways in its efforts to help all students achieve. In turn, each of these efforts to “leave no child behind” has influenced students’ achievement and their relative freedoms to achieve in different ways.

Schools are required to serve every child through rigorous standards, standardized testing, and reporting procedures. According to the Act, student learning, and therefore, overall school success can be gauged through the testing process and subsequent disaggregation of scores. This new testing regime requires a breakdown of performance into specific, targeted subgroups. Given this disaggregation of scores, Meier and Wood assert that schools will no longer be able to “disguise the failures [of students of poverty and color] the federal funds were meant to target“(Meier & Wood, 2004, p. ix). Under the legislation, all schools are charged to meet a designated AYP goal by a certain deadline, with the ultimate goal being 100% proficiency for all students by the year 2014. Each state has been given the privilege of setting its own progress targets that will result in this 100% proficiency rating across all subgroups by 2014. The student categories that are included in disaggregated comparisons and breakdowns are: “total school population, special education students, Limited English proficiency

students, whites, African Americans, Asian/Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, Hispanics, other ethnicities, and economically disadvantaged students” (Karp, 2004, p. 54).

Disaggregation of test data will allow for comparison across different student subgroups represented within each school. The demographics of the student population in public schools in America are growing increasingly more diverse, and the achievement gap continues to widen, especially in the realm of literacy. Hispanic children comprise the fastest growing student population in our nation’s public schools. In 1972, 77.8% of the student population was White. By the year 2000, that percentage decreased to 61.3%. The major minority populations have both risen from 14.8% (Black) and 6.0% (Hispanic) in 1972 to 16.6% each in 2000 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2002). Students of diverse backgrounds (Au, 1998), those who are “usually from low-income families: of African American, Asian American, Latino/a, or Native American ancestry; and speakers of a home language other than standard American English” (p. 298) are entering schools, especially those in urban areas, in unprecedented numbers, and “the gap between the school literacy achievement of students of diverse backgrounds and those of mainstream backgrounds is a cause of growing concern, especially given demographic trends” (p. 298).

In urban settings, educators become teachers to children of diverse backgrounds from many sociocultural communities, posing unique challenges to

teaching and learning. Recognizing achievement differences between white upper and middle class students and students from poor social and ethnic minority groups necessitates consideration of how federal policies designed to support students of diverse backgrounds are being interpreted at the classroom level. These policies are being constructed to impact the achievement for these students and it is important to investigate how and in what ways. This study will explore the ways in which federal education policy plays out at the classroom level for such students and teachers.

Responses to the Act

Currently in its fifth year of implementation, NCLB has received a range of reviews and responses. A recent study by the RAND Corporation suggests that inadequate progress is being made toward the goal of 100% proficiency for all subgroups by the year 2014, as the law requires. “While state tests are not comparable with each other, or the national assessment, and the rigor of the tests and the way in which they measure proficiency in the subject also vary widely, the results generally show that too few adolescents, and particularly African-American and Hispanic youths, are on track toward meeting state and national benchmarks” (Manzo, 2004, p. 1). Despite these findings, President Bush and supporters of the law continue to promote its value and potential for closing the achievement gap. Although Bush’s educational agenda has many critics, “even

educators who questioned No Child Left Behind agree something needs to be done” (Dodge, 2005, p. 1).

Adding to the debate about the Act are those who argue that NCLB is detrimental to schools with diverse populations, even though these are the very schools the Act aims to target in positive ways. Many researchers contend that large schools with diverse populations are actually at risk of being penalized by the Act because they have many more subgroups that are required to make adequate yearly progress. If each subgroup does not demonstrate AYP, the entire school will be identified as a school in need of improvement (Bracey, 2004; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2005; Socolar, 2004). Racially and economically diverse schools with greater numbers of subgroups simply have more opportunities to fail. In Philadelphia, for example, many of the district’s larger and more diverse schools failed to make AYP, while 24 of the 25 more homogenous and smaller schools managed to do so with ease (Socolar, 2004). While some view this “diversity penalty” as a necessary component of the Act that will bring attention to the achievement gap and result in improved instruction, resources, opportunities, and achievement for those within more diverse schools, others see the situation differently. According to Socolar (2004), “critics of the NCLB ‘diversity penalty’ say that it creates incentives for schools and districts to segregate their students to minimize the numbers of subgroups represented in individual schools. It may also create an incentive to underreport or reclassify students and avoid having to count the data for a subgroup” (p. 3).

Research on the actual activities within classrooms demonstrates growing differences in the practices and pressures of teachers in high versus low poverty school settings. According to a study by Moon, Callahan, and Tomlinson (2003), teachers working to increase student achievement in high poverty settings spend 75% more time on test preparation, feel more pressured to bring up their students' test scores, and feel more threatened professionally.

If the aim of the law is to increase overall student achievement and to close the achievement gap, attention must be given to how “achievement” is being defined. According to NCLB, achievement is best measured by test scores. Many researchers would argue that achievement cannot and should not solely be defined by test performance, yet this is the foundation that NCLB stands upon. Through its emphasis on testing, NCLB is influencing education in many ways. Limiting an evaluation of its effectiveness to monitoring student achievement solely through the use of standardized test scores and other quantitatively derived data leaves something missing. If the Act is intended to improve opportunities for all students, especially poor students of color, we need better insight into how this policy and the perception of achievement are being interpreted by educators, and how these interpretations are impacting the education of the children NCLB aims to serve.

NCLB is unique by nature as it stands as an educational policy constructed and mandated at the national level, yet implemented and played out at the local level. According to Pressman and Wildavsky (1984), research on the actual

implementation of policies shows that the farther removed the actual implementation efforts are from the original source of construction, the less likely the outcomes will match the original intentions. This phenomenon is apparent in state and local efforts to implement the NCLB policy. Significant challenges have arisen in many domains throughout the first four years of the implementation of the law. This case study will examine, in depth, the lived experiences of a single school working to locally implement the federally constructed NCLB policy.

CHAPTER II

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, I provide the conceptual framework for this study. First, I introduce Larson and Ovando's framework for a politics of universalism and a politics of difference that provides an umbrella for framing this study. Next, I introduce Amartya Sen's framework for examining how public policy like NCLB expands or fails to expand opportunities and real freedoms to achieve for those it is designed to help. Together, the theories of these scholars provide a framework through which to examine the ways in which the implementation of NCLB is influencing the education of poor students of color. Collectively, this framework seeks to provide insight into how NCLB is influencing children's opportunities and freedoms to achieve. Finally, I share the primary research questions that are at the heart of this case study.

Politics of Universalism and a Politics of Difference

According to Larson and Ovando (2001), "the interests, experiences, and perspectives of a dominant White culture in the United States have been institutionalized in the operating systems, norms, and practices of schools" (p. 99). These institutionalized or sedimented logics (Larson & Ovando, 2001) have

structured the mainstream practices and expectations prevalent in our public schools today. These logics advantage some students while disadvantaging others.

Through the framework of a politics of difference and a politics of universalism, Larson and Ovando argue that people take one of two diverging paths in their efforts to increase equity and opportunity for poor children of color. Policymakers disagree about how greater equity in education can be achieved and these different perspectives are evident in the assumptions underpinning educational policy and practice.

Individuals operating under a politics of universalism believe that “all people should be treated equally and no group should receive preferential treatment” (Larson & Ovando, 2001, p. 66). Therefore, the underlying logic behind the actions and beliefs of universalists lies in neutrality. Universalists “claim (and sincerely believe) that they are neutral in their treatment of children” (p. 64). Because of its neutral stance, politics of universalism in educational policy and practice is strongly correlated with difference-blind institutionalism, asserting that although differences do exist, “if we enforce the same rules for all children in schools, we prevent inequity, bias, and unequal treatment” (Larson & Ovando, 2001, p. 65). Universalists are committed to the fair and equal treatment of human beings, and believe that neutrality “in all systems and policies prevents discrimination from biasing the decisions of those who work on behalf of institutions” (Larson & Ovando, 2001, p. 65).

In a country with a long history of differential treatment of minority populations and subgroups, a strong argument can be made for a politics of universalism: “all people should be treated equally, and no group should receive preferential treatment” (Larson & Ovando, 2001, p. 66). An important underpinning of a politics of universalism is the assumption that “we have already achieved a fair and equal society, and that, today, all people have equal rights and opportunities” (Larson & Ovando, 2001, p. 66).

As we view the opportunities afforded to the students in our nation’s public schools, universalists assert that pre-existing inequities are unimportant. Although universalists espouse equity through neutrality and universal interests, “it also occludes our ability to see the legitimate needs, interests, and concerns of many segments of our communities” (Larson & Ovando, 2001, p. 71).

Taking a stand counter to that of universalists are individuals such as Richard Rothstein who has worked to highlight the inequities in the lives of many of the children entering America’s public schools. Rothstein identifies the family income, nutrition, prenatal care, dental care, maternal smoking, housing, and lead exposure of many poor and colored school age children as a few of many factors that influence their lives and potential for learning (Rothstein, 2002). Rothstein makes it clear that the privileges of many of our children of color and/or poverty are inherently unequal, and Rothstein refuses to take a universalist stance. Instead, through his message that the inherent inequality of our nation’s youth has a

significant bearing on their chances for success, Rothstein positions himself as a proponent of a politics of difference.

Individuals aligning themselves with the assumptions underpinning a politics of difference agree with the universalist “commitment to nondiscrimination” (Larson & Ovando, 2001, p. 72). However, they disagree with universalist assumptions of how greater equity can be achieved, asserting that “we must recognize how we differ as individuals and groups” (p. 72). Larson and Ovando (2001) argue that “proponents of a politics of difference acknowledge that human beings do want and need to be recognized as full and equal members of a universal community,” but that “although we may share the desire to be treated as full and equal citizens, people do not have equal needs or equal opportunities within an unequal society” (p. 72). As critics of universalism, those aligning with a politics of difference argue that ignoring the fundamental differences between people results in the perpetuation of existing inequalities within diverse populations.

Both of these approaches are lenses through which the assumptions underpinning NCLB can be viewed. One of the unique aspects of the policy is the requirement that schools and districts collect standardized test data and disaggregate it across numerous subgroups that cross the boundaries of categories such as class, race, special needs and language. The law recognizes that for far too long, differences between subgroups have been ignored. This recognition of difference falls squarely within the realm of a politics of difference. Many critics

of NCLB argue, however, that that is where the attention to difference ends.

There are those who question the instructional requirements linked to the law, as well as the lack of attention paid to vast differences in wealth and opportunity that many students experience outside of school.

The roots of public policy are often grounded in efforts to establish greater opportunities for less privileged citizens. Differences in underlying assumptions about equity in expanding opportunities and outcomes are what define the ways in which policies are constructed and implemented and, ultimately, in their outcomes. NCLB was designed to enhance educational opportunities for all students, especially those who have been historically marginalized. How do the provisions within NCLB attend to the vast differences between students' opportunities and privileges prior to school entry? One way of understanding this policy and its impact on the teaching and learning of poor students of color is by examining the underlying assumptions informing this legislation. What assumptions about equity underpin NCLB legislation? How and in what ways are these assumptions influencing the implementation and outcomes of NCLB in schools serving poor children of color?

Exploring the Freedom to Achieve

Like Larson and Ovando, Amartya Sen argues that there are significant factors in children's lives that make their lived experiences unequal in many ways. Sen's work is clearly rooted in a politics of difference. Specifically, Sen

argues that human beings are characterized by inherent differences that impact their functioning in our society. He asserts that social arrangements need to be examined not for whether they demand equality, but for what type of equality is proposed. Because of the fundamental differences in human beings, as well as in society, Sen claims that any approach to expanding opportunities must take those differences into account (Sen, 1992). Sen also argues that in seeking greater equality, attention in policy must be paid, not solely to achievement alone, but more importantly, to the relative freedoms and unfreedoms that people have to achieve. Specifically, Sen suggests that a more equal world can only be constructed for marginalized people by examining the “unfreedoms” they encounter.

Poor students of color are exposed to countless unfreedoms that pose direct challenges to their achievement and capabilities to achieve. Rothstein directs attention to such unfreedoms as poor prenatal care, lack of ongoing dental and medical services, lack of quality early childhood or summer programs, income inequality, and unstable housing (Rothstein, 2004b). In considering the NCLB requirement that students perform at 100% proficiency by 2014, Sen’s work helps to question how the baseline differences in students’ freedoms to achieve will differentially impact the educational outcomes set forth by NCLB and would argue that what matters most in policy designed to enhance equity is attending to the actual freedoms individuals have to achieve (Sen, 1992). Sen

argues that we need to center our attention on the actual opportunities different people have to achieve what is important or valuable to them.

According to Sen, federal policies constructed to establish greater equality need to be evaluated according to their attention to expanding freedoms to achieve. He states that: “Assessing functionings rather than capabilities, can be very misleading, especially when making comparisons between people in different social circumstances...Focusing only on the functionings...leads to inadequate attention to the features of social justice relating to individual agency and freedom” (Unterhalter, 2003, p.3). Sen asks that we not look first at one’s achievement as NCLB does through the comparison of students via standardized test scores, but that we look, instead, to the opportunities those students actually have to achieve. As a critical theorist, I am constantly questioning how it is that systems advantage some while disadvantaging others. Sen directs attention to the role of preexisting privileges and unfreedoms as they influence the lives of people operating within these systems, in this case, students and their teachers. Through this framework, Sen provides a lens for attaining insight into several key questions: How does NCLB seek to increase equity in achievement for poor children of color? What assumptions underpin this policy and its implementation? And, how is this approach designed to increase equity and expand children’s opportunities to achieve?

Primary Research Questions

1. How are teachers and administrators making sense of the NCLB mandates designed to support low achieving students?
2. How are they implementing these policies?
3. How are current efforts at the school and classroom level influencing opportunities to achieve for poor students of color?

CHAPTER III

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Throughout the existence of public education in America, there have been continued efforts to improve both the quality and equality of teaching and learning in schools. These efforts have been met with a range of responses and outcomes. In the following review of literature, I provide an overview of the current literature on the achievement gap between upper to middle class white students and less privileged students that are poor and of color, including the work of Richard Rothstein who identifies inequities outside of school as a powerful influence on performance within school. Following, I present a brief review of the history of the achievement gap in America and of previous efforts at educational reform as it relates specifically to the construction of the NCLB Act, focusing on the evolution of past policies and efforts that led to the passing of NCLB. This literature sets the stage for the present legislation and provides background for understanding the importance of this study aiming to understand the impact of NCLB on the students it is intended to serve.

Next, I provide an overview of the policy, including the underlying assumptions and logic underpinning the Act. For example, what are the expected outcomes of the legislation? Who does this policy seek to serve, and in what

ways? What are the requirements and mandates of NCLB? Evidence from states, districts, and schools across the country have demonstrated a wide range of implementation efforts and related outcomes. How and in what ways is NCLB being implemented at the local level? Within this section, I will also present a variety of responses, reactions, and experiences of both proponents and critics of the policy including deep criticism of the Reading First component of NCLB.

Finally, I discuss a body of literature related to actual classroom instruction and interactions. Each of these areas are central to the challenges faced by students and teachers in urban classrooms: supporting children of immigrant parents in today's classrooms, parent involvement in student learning, navigating language barriers between home and school and the alternative routes to teacher certification that are most prevalent in urban classrooms that are typically hard to staff. How do these challenges impact students' opportunities to achieve? How and in what ways do federal policies take these challenges into account when pushing for student achievement? How do these challenges affect teachers and students as they work to narrow the achievement gap?

America's Enduring Achievement Gap

The existing achievement gap has long been recognized by many researchers (Chubb & Loveless, 2002; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, Mc Partland, Mood, Weinfeld, et al.1966), but "the federal government did not discover the achievement gap- it has existed for decades and

efforts to close it have been underway in many districts for nearly as long” (Fusarelli, 2004, p. 82). In 1966, James Coleman led a team of researchers that engaged in a comprehensive study of the academic achievement of American students. A significant finding of the Coleman Report pointed to the existence of a large achievement gap between black and white students (Chubb & Loveless, 2002). In an effort to track and monitor student achievement nationwide, in 1970, the federal government sponsored the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) that randomly tested students every two to four years. Data from the inaugural and subsequent NAEP tests demonstrate a clear and continued racial gap in achievement (Center on Education Policy, 2006; Chubb & Loveless, 2002; NAEP, 2003a; 2003b; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Many researchers argue that the gap is narrowing, or that it is not as pervasive as some claim it to be (Center on Education Policy, 2006; Mathis, 2005). Other researchers argue that the gap not only exists, but that it is growing (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Complicating the growing body of literature related to the achievement gap further are the arguments of Asa Hilliard, Gloria Ladson-Billings and other researchers who argue that the achievement gap has been inappropriately labeled.

Hilliard (2003) suggests that differences in achievement are best described as “opportunity gaps” that exist between poor children of color and their more privileged peers. Hilliard believes that efforts to improve student achievement need to be directed towards addressing the differences in students’ life opportunities which limit their real opportunities to achieve. He asserts that:

“some critics of public education obscure the work of public education in order to divert attention from the larger matters of income inequality and inequality and inadequacy in the provision of resources for schools” (Hilliard, 2003, p. 141). According to Hilliard, unless inequalities in opportunity are addressed, there is little hope for improved achievement for children living in impoverished communities.

Similarly, Ladson-Billings (2006) disagrees with the label of “achievement gap,” arguing that the “all-out focus on the ‘Achievement Gap’ moves us toward short-term solutions that are unlikely to address the long-term underlying problem” (p. 4). According to Ladson-Billings, the achievement gap would be better labeled as a long-term “education debt” that has accrued over time as a result of America’s long history of unequal treatment of minority and impoverished citizens. Ladson-Billings views the short-term, year-to-year comparisons of the achievement gap as misleading. She argues that “the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society have created an education debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 5).

Regardless of current disagreements about the causes of and best label for the existing differential in student performance, there is little dissent over the basic premise of NCLB: there is an existing achievement gap and it must be addressed. Current education policy defines the achievement gap as a difference in student performance, disregarding the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2003)

and the opportunity gap (Hilliard, 2003) that contribute to the existing achievement gap. As a result, NCLB was designed with an overt focus on improving, enhancing and, in some cases, fixing schools in an effort to enhance improve student achievement. Schools and districts that serve students who are shackled by an “education debt” or by the “opportunity gap” are left with the responsibility of improving student performance as if all children have equal opportunities to achieve and if they don’t, it is either the school’s or the child’s fault.

NCLB stands on the premise that, to date, federal policy efforts have not been successful in closing the achievement gap and that by attending to the role and responsibility of schools, this gap can be narrowed and, eventually, closed. NCLB assumes that the “achievement gap is caused by the inability of schools to provide high-quality education to all students” and places the burden of rectifying this problem directly upon the education system and educators themselves (Fusarelli, 2004). Others argue that attention must be directed towards the social and economic inequalities that extend far beyond and prior to children’s entry into our nation’s public school system (Canada, n.d.; Hart & Risley, 1995; Hodgkinson, 2003; Kozol, 1991,1995; Rothstein, 2002). These researchers disagree with the idea that the school system is the best place to address the achievement gap and urge citizens and politicians to pay attention, instead, to conditions including, but not limited to: parental employment, family income, transiency, diet and nutrition, access to health and dental care, lead exposure,

housing, parental education, and parental support (Canada, n. d.; Hart & Risley, 1995; Kozol, 1991,1995; Rothstein, 2002). According to Mathis (2003), “Simply teaching children will have little effect if they return to bad neighborhoods, single-parent homes, foster care, inadequate health care, and a general lack of support” (p. 683).

Although it is politically unpopular to suggest that complex problems, such as the achievement gap, have complex solutions, policies such as NCLB may in the end fail to attain their lofty objectives because they do not address underlying structural inequities in American society. The achievement gap is not solely the responsibility of ineffective educational leaders, poor teachers, and indifferent parents. The gap is also the result of ethnic and class bias, interest group pressure, and built-in social inequities (Fusarelli, 2004, p. 89).

In focusing solely on schools as the source of establishing equal educational opportunities and outcomes, we position schools for “inevitable failure” (Rothstein, 2002). According to Rothstein, “schools cannot have the primary responsibility for correcting the large economic, racial, and social inequalities of American society” (2002, p. 1). Individuals who argue that the responsibility for addressing gaps in achievement fall expressly upon the schools, typically, align themselves with a politics of universalism which ignores the differences and inequities that children encounter prior to entering school and holds all children to the same academic standards.

In opposition to those who blame schools for the achievement gap, many researchers argue that there are more powerful forces outside of schools that seriously undermine academic achievement for children living in economically disadvantaged communities (Evans, 2005; Mathis, 2005; Rothstein, 2004a; 2004b). These individuals agree with Larson and Ovando's notion of a politics of difference, recognizing that differences in individuals are important and must be noted. In this case, the differences are the opportunities that children have to grow and learn outside of and prior to entry in school. Individuals who recognize the significance of life opportunities outside of the school setting disagree with those who find fault solely within the educational system, claiming that:

the core diagnosis- that the school is the primary cause of and must be the primary cure for the achievement gap- is deeply flawed. It exaggerates the influence of schooling and underestimates the impact of the major contributors to the achievement gap, which occur outside of school (Evans, 2005, p. 584).

Researchers suggest that 90% of children's lives are spent outside of the school setting, including the first and most formative years of their lives. They argue that life outside of school has a greater impact on children's achievement than the 10% of time spent inside of school. These researchers argue that the achievement gap must be addressed by attending to factors that extend beyond the school and classroom (Evans, 2005; Mathis, 2005; Rothstein, 2004b). Rothstein (2004b) argues that "it is true that low income and skin color themselves don't influence

academic achievement, but the collection of characteristics that define social class differences inevitably influences that achievement” (p. 2). In his book examining the relationship between class and schools, Rothstein (2004b) asserts that “the influence of social class characteristics is probably so powerful that schools cannot overcome it, no matter how well trained are their teachers and no matter how well designed are their instructional programs and climates” (p. 5).

NCLB, however, lays the responsibility for closing the achievement gap directly on schools. In his speech immediately preceding the signing of NCLB, President Bush outlined the main principles of the Act which include accountability in the form of standardized testing to measure reading and writing proficiency in grades three through eight. In exchange for federal monies, the government is requiring states, districts, and schools to demonstrate effectiveness.

The fundamental principle of this bill is that every child can learn, we expect every child to learn, and you must show us whether or not every child is learning. The story of children being just shuffled through the system is one of the saddest stories of America. Let's just move them through. It's so much easier to move a child through than trying to figure out how to solve a child's problems. The first step to making sure that a child is not shuffled through is to test that child as to whether or not he or she can read and write, or add and subtract (“President signs,” 2002).

Although there is consensus on the existence of the gap, this is where agreement ends. According to Evans (2005), most achievement gap critics emphasize the

role of schools in academic failure, but minimize the role of social and economic differences that are unique to the students and are external from the schools students attend.

Reduced to its core, their logic is: all children are created equal, but all children are not performing equally in school; the gap typically worsens as children advance through the grades; the fault must therefore be the schools', so the solution must lie in school; the necessary knowledge and tools are available, and schools must be pressed to apply them (Evans, 2005, p. 583).

NCLB stands upon this notion and its aim is to influence student achievement through its impact on schools. Through NCLB, school accountability is gauged through standardized testing processes that are disaggregated to reveal subgroup performances and differences that were previously hidden in cumulative scoring and reporting practices. "No longer is it acceptable to hide poor performance. No longer is it acceptable to keep results away from parents" ("President signs," 2002). Following the reporting and analysis of the standardized testing data, the President claims that schools will be improved through time, incentives, and resources. Bush asserts that school improvement is guaranteed through NCLB and if "they are unable to solve the problem of not educating their children, there must be real consequences" ("President signs," 2002). According to undersecretary for education, Eugene Hickock (2003):

The goals of the law's [NCLB] accountability provisions are to make it easier to determine how well students and schools are doing, make it more difficult to close one's eyes to persistent under performance by students and schools, and to close the achievement gap among students from various ethnic, socioeconomic, and learning groups (p. 22).

Rothstein (2004b) recognizes that, in theory, there is some potential for excellent schools to offset the pre-existing differences across social class lines. It is this tenet that NCLB stands on. The legislation is based on the assumption that through the establishment of high standards and teacher quality, more flexible use of federal funds, and rigorous accountability measures, results of standardized tests will demonstrate a narrowing and an eventual closing of the achievement gap. Fusarelli (2004) finds promise in the Act:

The potential positive effects of NCLB may lay in renewed attention to narrowing the achievement gap among subgroups of students, focusing additional resources on students ill served by the existing educational system, greater equity within the system, development of more reliable data tracking and reporting systems, and development of more integrated, aligned, and coherent educational policies for students (p. 77).

Those who agree that the school system is the culprit and source of the solution to the achievement gap hold different beliefs about how this is best accomplished, though, and many doubt the actual feasibility of implementation of the Act's requirements. According to a survey sent to 4,000 members of the International

Reading Association, members strongly support the premises of NCLB, but show concern about the implementation of the Act. 77.9% of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the Act's underlying premises, and only 9.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed. When asked to respond to beliefs about whether the funding of the Act was sufficient to implement its demands, 74.3% disagreed or strongly disagreed ("Mixed reactions," 2005).

Clearly, there is agreement as to the existence of a problem in education that is made visible in a persisting achievement gap across social class lines. However, people disagree about the roots of that problem and how to go about solving it.

Educational Reform Leading to NCLB

In 1965, Congress passed the ESEA that served as the principle educational component of Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty."

In recognition of the special educational needs of low-income families and the impact that concentrations of low-income families have on the ability of local educational agencies to support adequate educational programs, the Congress hereby declares it to be the policy of the United States to provide financial assistance... to local educational agencies serving areas with concentrations of children from low-income families to expand and improve their educational programs by various means (including

preschool programs) which contribute to meeting the special educational needs of educationally deprived children (United States Congress, 1965, Section 201).

ESEA's aim was to provide educational services to low-income children. The Title I funding availed through ESEA provided poor children with opportunities to participate in Head Start and Bilingual Education programs, in addition to other guidance, counseling, and support opportunities. The notion that this funding and the services it provided were only to be used to provide educational services was soon to be challenged by the Coleman Report which argued that attention also needed to be directed towards factors outside of the school setting.

The 2001 reauthorization of the ESEA, now called NCLB, has brought a new flurry of attention to academic achievement in America. Since the onset of our nation's public school system, countless critics have offered appraisals of the system's effectiveness in educating children. Arguments have arisen over what to teach, when, how, and, even, for whom. Cases have gone to trial and battles have been fought locally and nationally over each of these issues, each one arguably with the same goal in mind- providing the best education possible. Additional confusions and challenges surfaced when defining that seemingly clear goal- what does "best" mean? And does "best" mean different things for different children? How will this be measured? How will the outcomes of education be measured in order to offer every child the "best education possible?"

The NCLB Act responds to many of these educational queries through its underlying assumptions and assertions that every child is capable of achieving proficiency, as defined on a state-by-state basis. The Act itself is a product of many years of evolved federal education policy and developing beliefs about the children being served in America's schools.

Federal Legislation

NCLB was officially signed into law on January 8, 2002 and was unique in that it was one of a very few bipartisan pieces of legislation passed within the 107th Congress. The Act was passed with overwhelming support from both the House of Representatives and the Senate and was enthusiastically sponsored by both Democrats and Republicans by an 87 to 10 vote in the Senate, and a 381 to 41 vote in the House (Stern, 2004; United States Department of Education, 2004). Both Republicans and Democrats recognized the existing achievement gaps between various subgroups and the two groups came together with the mission to more aggressively involve the federal government in public education, seeking to better serve all students in our nation's public schools.

Efforts have been made over the past fifty years, primarily to redress educational inequity, and to serve national interests by focusing on particular subject areas (Jennings, 2002). In the 1960's, efforts were made to implement the 1954 *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision by desegregating schools and granting African American children the right to attend the same schools as their

white and more privileged peers. These efforts emanated from the realization that the education many children of color were receiving was both unequal and unconstitutional. Efforts to better equalize educational opportunities followed within the next two decades. In 1965, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was implemented with the goal of improving educational opportunities for poor and low-achieving students, and in 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act granted students with disabilities the right to a “free and appropriate education.”

Access to Quality Education

In addition to addressing differences in access to and equality in education in general, specific reforms have directed attention towards increasing competency in specific curricular areas such as science, mathematics, and technology. For example, the National Defense Education Act of 1958 and President Eisenhower’s teacher training program focused attention and efforts towards improving teaching and learning in mathematics and science (Jennings, 2002). Even with these emphases, following the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, prior education policy was criticized for setting expectations too low (Toenjes, Dworkin, Lorence, & Hill, 2002). Up to this point, education policies focused on specific groups, needs, or problems in public education, through such efforts as the desegregation of schools, efforts to provide students with special needs access to an education matched to those of their peers without special

needs, and efforts to improve the science and mathematics instruction of all students following the launch of Sputnik by the Soviet Union which resulted in a questioning of the caliber of American curricula in these areas. Efforts targeted needs and groups, but none of these policies established as a goal the improvement of educational opportunities for all students in all academic areas. Therefore, historically, most education policies have touched only whatever portion of America's student population the piece of legislation was engineered to serve, and have not been engineered to serve every child in every school.

The A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) report set the groundwork for the standards-based reform movement that ultimately led to the proposal of rigorous standards for all students, not just those in privileged schools. In 1989, President George H. W. Bush, established a national movement towards instituting high educational standards to be measured through standardized testing. The 1994 reauthorization of the ESEA under President Clinton further developed the efforts of George H. W. Bush. Clinton's Goals 2000: Educate America Act and Improving America's Schools Act (IASA), and amended version of ESEA, further set the stage for the current standards-based reform efforts. These laws were the first pieces of federal legislation with the expressed aim of improving education for all children.

Each of these efforts and related congressional acts were directed towards benefiting all children, but certain groups and populations were impacted differently and not all children experienced the intended, positive outcomes of the

policies. Although the legislation passed during Clinton's tenure as President aimed to improve education for all, until NCLB, no federal legislation demanded full overall accountability across all core subject areas, or accountability to the separate subgroups represented in America's public schools.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

NCLB is intended to affect every child, in every school, in every district, and in every state of America, improving each student's opportunities to achieve. Its ambitious goals are meant to target the achievement of every child through the establishment of high academic standards, the call for a highly qualified teacher in every classroom, and the option of supplemental tutoring or transferring students out of schools in need of improvement (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b). Unlike past pieces of legislation, NCLB does not just set the stage for, or promote the enhancement of opportunities for all. NCLB goes beyond its predecessors, requiring that efforts of schools be measured through rigorous standardized testing procedures, as determined by each state. Going even further in ensuring accountability to all students, the law requires the provision of disaggregated results for each subgroup that was previously targeted through separate pieces of legislation. No longer will schools be able to mask failures of certain populations through the provision of aggregated test scores. Failure to meet the needs of students in all subgroups will ultimately result in serious sanctions against the

schools designated in need of improvement. NCLB stands apart from previous educational reform policies in its rigorous demands for accountability.

The body of literature related to NCLB is steadily growing as the Act enters its sixth year of implementation. The flexible timeline for implementing many of the requirements have expired and educators are increasingly feeling the growing pressures that this Act is placing upon their shoulders.

Premises

As do all policies, NCLB rests on a set of fundamental assumptions that influenced the construction and implementation of the law. In this case, the assumptions underlying the law suggest that there is an achievement gap and that closing the gap between poor students of color and their peers is possible, desirable, and is best accomplished through the required mandates of the law which include high standards, mandatory testing, enhanced teacher quality, and increasingly punitive sanctions for failing to make adequate progress towards proficiency in all student groups. These assumptions are demonstrated through the letter of the law itself, and through the words of the President as he defended the law as laudable:

There's no greater challenge than to make sure that every child - and all of us on this stage mean every child, not just a few children - every single child, regardless of where they live, how they're raised, the income level of their family, every child receive a first-class education in America...

We owe the children of America a good education... We believe every child can learn (“President signs,” 2002).

Addressing the Achievement Gap through NCLB

Although there has been little dissension over the need for addressing student achievement and the achievement gap, there are differing opinions on NCLB as a vehicle for bringing the goal of closing the achievement gap to reality. Proponents of the Act praise it for the high standards it has established for all students and concur with President Bush’s claims that we must no longer succumb to the “soft bigotry of low expectations” (Bush, 2006). There are many who see a great need for improving education, educational opportunities, and educational outcomes, especially for students who have struggled and failed historically in our nation’s public schools. According to the results of public opinion polls conducted in 2005, the Center on Education Policy reports that:

A sizable share of the public views NCLB favorably, and a sizeable share views it unfavorably. Unfavorable impressions rise when people are asked specific questions about the law’s requirements. And the general public perceives NCLB more positively than teachers do... About 45% of the adults polled, and 46% of the K-12 parents, said they had a favorable impression of NCLB, but 75% of the teachers polled reported having an unfavorable impression (2006, p. 5).

NCLB's Emphasis on Testing

Many scholars criticize the Act for its heavy emphasis on testing as the primary measure of success, recognizing the implications for classroom instruction geared toward test preparation (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003; Cimbricz & College, 2002; "Effect of," 2004; McNeil, 2000; Rothstein, 2004c). Those who criticize the Act also articulate their concerns over the growing federal role in education that takes away from the state and local control over the education of students (Allington, 2002; Bracey, 2003; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2005). Additional criticisms have arisen over the proposed and promised funding and that which exists in reality (Center on Education Policy, 2006; Fusarelli, 2004; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2005). Recent questions have risen about the feasibility of the mandates within the Act ("Mixed Reactions, 2005; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2005). Is it possible to achieve the lofty goals set forth by NCLB? The most current research on the impact of NCLB examines the current implementation efforts, as well as the successes, and challenges of the legislation.

In trying to understand the impact of NCLB on the students it is intended to serve, it is important to have a solid understanding of the Act itself, as well as reactions to NCLB- both positive and negative. As a critical theorist, it is my belief that policies are implemented in ways that advantage some and disadvantage others. Some of these advantages and disadvantages become clearer by attending to the accolades and criticisms of the Act. The following subsections

provide an overview of specific components of the Act, including responses and reactions from both proponents and critics of NCLB. The components included in this section of the review of literature are: funding, teacher quality, standardized testing, AYP, and sanctions.

Funding

Jonathan Kozol (1991) demonstrated inequities in educational spending and resources in his study of struggling urban and rural schools across the nation. The Coleman Report of 1966 also addressed inequity in school funding. Both argue that more equitable funding for schools needs to be established, but challenge the idea that “equal school resources alone would be sufficient to generate equal educational outcomes” (Rothstein, 2002, p. 1). Simply putting more money into schools will not make up for the pre-existing inequalities that children experience during the 18 hours of the day spent outside of the school.

Focusing on the investment the federal government makes in public schools, NCLB recognizes the need for wise distribution and utilization of funding sources. “If we've learned anything over the last generations, money alone doesn't make a good school. It certainly helps... [In the past], we've spent billions of dollars with lousy results. So now it's time to spend billions of dollars and get good results” (“President signs,” 2002). NCLB requires that federal funding sources be directed toward purchasing what the government defines as research-proven methods and programs, demonstrating the assumption that it is possible to

externally identify effective resources and proven pedagogical methods. Few disagree with the importance of making proven, researched-based investments, but many question the narrow definitions of what qualifies as “research-based.” The National Reading Panel, for example, based its assertions of effective literacy instruction and programs on data generated solely from quantitative studies, focusing on measurable inputs and outputs, ignoring the complexity of teaching and learning in the classroom. By narrowing the scope of what is considered to be “research-based,” the choices and options schools had to choose from in their efforts to expand educational opportunities for the students they know better than any external agencies diminished.

At the same time the Act asserted control on expenditures related to federal funding, NCLB has allowed for increased flexibility in use of federal funding. School districts can now shift up to 50% of federal funding across the following categories: technology, teacher improvement, innovation, and safe and drug-free schools (Center on Education Policy, 2003). Increased flexibility in using funds across categories has been received positively by schools and districts working to be creative within the boundaries set by NCLB.

The funding schools receive from the federal government is in exchange for compliance with federal education programs and policies. The portion of federal investment in public K-12 education reached its high in 1980 at 9.8%. This percentage has since declined to about 6-8%. The requirements of NCLB radically expanded educational costs, yet the federal investment remains around

8% (Fusarelli, 2004; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2005). Even though federal education funding increased by 58%- more in Bush's first three years than in Clinton's eight years, many argue that the increase is still inadequate to cover the costs related to the mandates of NCLB. According to the NEA, funding remains \$7 billion a year below what was originally projected as being appropriate and adequate funding (FactCheck, 2004).

In estimating the costs of implementing NCLB, two categories of cost must be considered. First, the compliance costs which include the basic requirements of the law including such expenditures related to annual testing and reporting, school choice or supplemental service as mandated, and meeting the requirements of the "highly qualified teacher" mandates. A second category of costs, proficiency costs, is the additional investment schools and districts will make in order to actually increase student achievement (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2005). Proficiency costs include the expenses related to remedial instruction for students, additional professional development for staff, and additional test preparations materials and programs (Mathis, 2003).

Under the Bush administration, the federal government claimed that its \$4.7 billion increase in federal funding for education is adequate to cover the requirements of the law. Critics argue that this increase only represents a 1% increase in overall education funding, though, and assert that the new requirements of the law by far surpass the minimal increase in funding allocated to cover the related costs of implementation (National Conference of State

Legislatures, 2005; Meier & Wood, 2004). States are given the privilege to choose not to follow the mandates of NCLB, but, in doing so, forfeit the funding that goes along with complying with the legislation. When Utah determined that the federal financial investment did not cover the cost of both compliance and proficiency and would result in state funding being used to cover the difference, the state took steps towards not participating. Utah, and other states that had explored similar pathways, ultimately decided that noncompliance was an even greater cost than compliance. These states discovered further penalties if the Title I funding related to NCLB was rejected (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2005). Nonparticipation in NCLB results in a loss of all funds related to Title I, not just those tied to NCLB.

Title I is based on a specific funding formula. Conceptually, not participating in the Title I program results in states not having a formula to serve as a basis for programs tied to the Title I formula. Thus, the U.S. Department of Education contends that states would lose all funding that uses the Title I formula as the basis for additional financial allocations. By significantly raising the stakes for nonparticipation, NCLB is transformed into a one-way partnership that functions as an all-or-nothing federal mandate (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2005, p. 49).

Truly, choosing not to comply is not an option, firmly establishing what some call a federal intrusion upon responsibilities constitutionally delegated to the states (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2005;

Meier & Wood, 2004). How is this requirement that has not been backed with the funds necessary for compliance impacting the implementation of this law? How does it serve schools and districts differently? How are the children within those schools affected?

Teacher Quality

It is not just the funding that affects the outcomes of efforts related to implementing NCLB. Teacher quality is a central issue. Haycock and Weiner assert “For decades, we have accepted high levels of out-of-field teaching as inevitable and have failed to change policies that systematically assign our weakest teachers to our weakest students” (Chubb, Linn, Haycock, & Weiner, 2005, p. 1). The NCLB Act endeavors to ensure the placement of a highly qualified teacher in every public school classroom by the 2005-06 school year (United States Department of Education, 2002b). “‘Highly qualified’ means that a teacher must be fully certified or licensed, have a bachelor’s degree, and show competence in subject knowledge and teaching skills (generally demonstrated by passing a rigorous state test)” (United States Department of Education, 2002a, p. 1). All new teachers hired after the 2001-2002 school year must meet these requirements. Higher standards for paraprofessionals have also been set. By January 2006, all paraprofessional support staff must have completed at least two years of higher education or meet a rigorous standard of quality as measured by a test (Jennings, 2002).

The assumption underlying NCLB's highly qualified teacher mandate is that student achievement can be positively enhanced by placing highly qualified teachers in classrooms. This assumption is supported by the research of numerous educational researchers (Cunningham & Allington, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1996) and although other factors have also been identified as influential in student achievement, I have come across no literature disagreeing that a highly qualified teacher is a positive influence on student achievement. The challenges by critics to this mandate come not in its value or appropriateness, but in the feasibility of bringing the mandate from concept to reality.

Schools in wealthier suburban settings that are able to offer competitive salaries, pleasant and professional work environments, and a better guarantee of student success have little trouble attracting highly qualified teachers. Schools that are populated with poor and low achieving students are struggling to do the same. The teaching conditions are not comparable, the locations may be less desirable places to live and the pay is often inadequate or poorly matched to the greater responsibilities and challenges these teachers face, resulting in the flight of highly qualified teachers from the challenging schools that need them the most. Rapid population growth in certain areas results in teacher shortages leaving administrators no choice in hiring less qualified applicants. In certain rural areas, the requirements of competence in content area knowledge are unfeasible given the fact that many teachers are required to teach all of the subject areas. The mandate makes it difficult, if not impossible to adequately staff classrooms

according to the Act's definition of a highly qualified teacher (Center on Education Policy, 2004; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2005).

The unequal distribution of highly qualified and experienced teachers is noted by the Center on Educational Policy. Only 31% of districts in high poverty areas report that all their teachers are highly qualified. These percentages are even lower at the high school level (2004). An additional dilemma is the inconsistency in definitions of what it means to be "highly qualified" as each state is responsible for determining its own criteria (Center in Education Policy, 2004; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2005; United States Department of Education, 2002b).

Standardized Testing

The accountability measures of NCLB by far surpass those of previous legislation in that students are now to be tested in both language arts and mathematics at least once between grades 3-5, 6-9, and 10-12. Beginning in 2007, students were required to be tested in science, as well. The yearly mandated tests are selected by each state, and every other year a sample of students must be tested using the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to monitor national progress and to serve as a check for individual state's testing programs. NCLB requires that students be tested more frequently and with greater accountability, as progress will be compared across schools, districts, and states and measured regularly against a universal standard, the NAEP. Scores

will also no longer be recorded as a collective. Instead, within every school, each subgroup's scores will be disaggregated, providing separate data for major racial and ethnic groups, major income groups, and for English Language Learners and students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b). Historically the results of such standardized tests took far too long to return to the school site to be useful for instructional purposes. A positive impact of the legislation is the requirement that test scores and related data be returned to the school by September of the following year, in order that the results can be utilized in informing instruction.

It is assumed that states have high academic standards and that the standardized tests used within each state match and are an adequate measure of those standards (Fusarelli, 2004). There are many, however, who would disagree with this. A report by the American Federation of Teachers in 2001 suggests that only 29% of the states currently have tests that are well aligned with their state standards (Fusarelli, 2004). Many others question the validity of a single standardized test as an adequate measure of student achievement, suggesting that multiple measures be used instead of the single high-stakes test that, for many, determines promotion or graduation (Calkins, Montgomery, Santman, & Falk, 1998; Kohn, 2000; Meier & Wood, 2004).

Standardized testing is not a passing trend, nor a new phenomenon in America (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Lemann, 2000; Phelps, 2003; Sacks, 1999). Throughout the twentieth century, standardized tests have been used by countless

organizations for varied purposes, in both high and low-stakes situations. Such tests have long been used in public education settings for varied purposes and on-going debates regarding their worth and value when correlated with their relative consequences- whether positive or negative- are commonplace both within and outside of educational circles. Specifically, standardized tests are those that are organized, administered, and scored under consistent and universal conditions (Calkins, Montgomery, Santman, & Falk, 1998).

Historically, state policymakers have utilized low-stakes tests in addressing issues related to accountability, improvement in instruction, the evaluation of academic programs, and other related areas of academic concern (Cimbricz & College, 2002). Low-stakes tests have been used in the past with the assumption that the information derived from them will provide the data necessary to evaluate past and direct future teaching and learning with "no significant, tangible, or direct consequences attached to the results" (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). Alternately, the high-stakes testing policies that are becoming ever more prevalent in America's public schools assume that the information gleaned from low-stakes testing practices is not enough to motivate educators and students to perform optimally, so rewards or sanctions are linked to the outcomes of the assessment with the thought that the performance of the individuals involved will be positively influenced as a result of those rewards or sanctions as they are linked to performance on the high-stakes test (Clarke, Haney, & Madaus, 2000; Heubert & Hauser, 1999; Kohn, 2000; Lemann, 2000; McNeil, 2000;

Phelps, 2003). NCLB now employs the use of standardized tests as a high-stakes accountability tool used to measure school success.

While it has clearly been demonstrated that standardized testing does have an effect on teaching and learning, it has yet to be determined whether the outcomes are resulting in better education, or just different education (Cimbricz & College, 2002). As Corbett and Wilson (1991) determined in their study of Pennsylvania and Maryland's statewide minimum competency testing programs, educational activity was observed as a result of the testing, but the relative value of the change that occurred was not found to be "change for the better" or improvements, the activity was merely recorded as "differences." Examples of the changes in instruction and instructional time are identified by the Center on Educational Policy using data from their nationally representative surveys exploring the implementation of NCLB. According to their findings, the majority of the schools and districts surveyed reported minimal reduction in the instructional time dedicated to subjects other than math and reading (2005). Counter to the survey data, though, "several officials interviewed as part of our school district case studies expressed concerns that NCLB's focus on reading and math would take time and energy away from other important subjects, as well as from gifted and talented programs or extracurricular activities like performing arts" (Center on Educational Policy, 2005).

The change of influence from low-stakes to high-stakes testing that is partnered with a seemingly nationwide movement towards higher standards is an

important one to consider. In our efforts to improve education for all by raising standards and attaching serious consequences to mandated tests, what possible outcomes must be considered? Teachers in high-stakes testing situations have been contrasted with those in low-stakes situations and the differences were clear: high-stakes clearly have a more powerful influence on perceptions and practices (Heubert & Hauser, 1999; Kohn, 2000; Lemann, 2000; McNeil, 2000; Phelps, 2003) Researchers are also concerned about the differential impact tests have on students and teachers in different settings- the stakes are much higher for students whose test scores determine whether they pass, fail, or graduate. Stakes are also higher for teachers whose jobs are on the line, depending upon the outcome of the test. Strong beliefs are voiced on both sides of the issue as to whether the influences of high-stakes testing practices are for the better or worse for education.

Advocates of standardized testing have long claimed that educators need to be held accountable for their work and effort, and that this accountability needs to come from an outside source. High-stakes testing seems to have found a home in this measure: "Advocates argue that this new student accountability mechanism- the threat of missing out on a diploma or, for younger students, being retained- motivates students to work harder, resulting in higher achievement." (Rabinowitz, Zimmerman, & Sherman, 2001, p.1). The authors continue on to argue that not enough research has been done to support or refute this assumption.

Supporters claim that standardized testing sets meaningful standards, that the data collected can give us feedback about classroom instruction, and that their presence makes schools, systems, and teachers more accountable for student learning (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Herman & Golan, 1993). Recent studies by Herman and Golan (1993) suggest that standardized testing practices can be used to promote fast and broad changes within schools and can stimulate major reform. Richard Phelps (2003), initially explored the phenomenon as he took part in a study in the 1990s by the General Accounting Office on the costs and effects of standardized testing asserts that such tests are absolutely "indispensable." How else would we know how our students are achieving? How else would we know how our students and teachers are performing?" (2003, p. 225).

Critics of standardized testing take a different stance. Many of these researchers caution the public to recognize the fact that change and "reform" are not necessarily for the better (Cimbricz & College, 2002; Corbett & Wilson, 1991). Their arguments include the assertion that teachers are professionals and should be trusted to make professional judgments about what their students need, and how to best support them. These researchers also point to the numerous overwhelming negative consequences that are associated with standardized testing that do not warrant their use (Calkins, Montgomery, Santman, & Falk, 1998; Kohn, 2000; McNeil, 2000; Phelps, 2003; Sacks, 1999). Rabinowitz, Zimmerman, and Sherman, critics of high-stakes standardized testing, argue that "failing a high school exit exam, or, even, just anticipating such a failure can push

some students over the academic edge, causing them to quit school" (Rabinowitz et al, 2001, p. 2).

Amrein and Berliner (2002c) argue that, according to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle within quantum mechanics, you can't determine the position and momentum of a particle at the same time. This same principle, in a slightly altered format, holds true when considering the impossibility of securing absolute data from a standardized test in an educational setting: "The more important that any quantitative social indicator becomes in social decision-making, the more likely it will be to distort and corrupt the social process it is intended to monitor" (p. 12). Standardized testing situations in public schools that are linked to sanctions or rewards of any sort are subject to distortion and corruption that affect the validity and reliability of the data resulting from the assessment, especially when in a high-stakes situation. The students, teachers, and administrators involved are placed in a near impossible situation when pressured to perform or produce in these rather unnatural high-stakes situations: "Common sense dictates that the very behaviors one tries to measure would be altered by the ways chosen to measure that behavior" (Sacks, 1999). According to McNeil (2000) teachers in high-stakes testing situations spend additional time preparing students for standardized tests in an effort to elevate their scores. This effort may lead to improved scores, but most definitely leads to corrupted data through practices that detract from the standardization of the assessment. Such data no longer serves as

an accurate and standardized measure of achievement (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003).

The validity of test results in such situations must be questioned- are these tests true measures of what they set out to assess, or are the scores reflections of the artificial mechanisms put into place by individuals working to raise test scores? The question of validity is an important one, especially when these tests are used to make important decisions like retention in school that have great impact on individual students, teachers, and administrators, as well as the collective. And if the tests are valid, it is imperative that their use is tied to their original intended purpose. "Results of tests designed and found valid for influencing classroom practice or for holding schools accountable are not necessarily appropriate as the basis for high-stakes decisions about individual students" (Rabinowitz, Zimmerman, & Sherman, 2001). Unfortunately, they are often used as such. An additional form of validity that is growing ever more important is that of "face validity" (Bracey, 2006). The face validity of a test, or "the degree to which those taking the test take it seriously" (Bracey, 2006, p. 121) plays a critical role in the overall validity of a test and its use for practical application. Both advocates and critics must, at the very least, recognize this fact and the related limitation of data use. If tests are constructed and normed to be used for a certain purpose, their appropriate and authentic use must match the original intentions.

An ever-expanding body of research provides strong evidence that standardized testing has a powerful impact on education. Both critics and advocates agree that testing has an effect on teaching and learning. According to Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus (2003), testing is a "driving force for fundamental change within schools" (p. 18). However, that is generally where the agreement about the value of testing ends. Some feel that the changes resulting from testing positively influence teaching and learning by ensuring coverage and mastery of important content as designated by the standards and curriculum the test is aligned with. Others disagree, arguing that:

While intended to motivate teachers and students to achieve optimal performance levels, the high-stakes nature of state testing programs can have quite the opposite effect. With regard to teachers, researchers have cautioned that placing a premium on student test performance can reduce instruction to test preparation, thus limiting the range of educational experiences to which students are exposed and minimizing the skill that teachers bring to their craft (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003).

There is a strong relationship between teaching and testing. If the test is changed, the teaching is typically altered to match the instruction necessary for students to be successful. Such alterations in practice may be the desire of testing proponents, but may be in contradiction with a teacher's pedagogical beliefs. The same consequence then is seen as negative by some, but positively by others (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003; Cimbricz & College, 2002).

Amrein and Berliner's analysis of the unintended consequences of high-stakes testing demonstrates an interesting finding:

High-stakes tests enjoy popular support because it is thought that the stakes will raise standards in a state's lowest achieving schools... These researchers also argue that instead of creating the intended consequences for which high-stakes testing policies are implemented (increased academic achievement), high-stakes tests create negative, unintended consequences which disproportionately impact students from racial minority, language minority, and low socioeconomic backgrounds (2002a, p. 9-10).

In their review of the literature on the impacts of standardized testing on teachers, Cimbricz and College (2002) found that teachers felt the impact of state tests on their beliefs and practice to be negative or perceived the tests to be a "mixed bag." In the original review of the literature, testing was determined to both positively and negatively influence teachers' beliefs and practices, but when the sources were narrowed to include only research articles, empirical support for the positive influences of testing completely vanished (Cimbricz & College, 2002).

In addition to the concerns and criticisms about the validity, value, stakes and impact of standardized testing on schools and students today, many researchers hold deep concerns about the underlying roots and purposes of standardized testing. According to Alan Stoskepf (1999), "high-stakes testing has its origins in the eugenics movement and racist assumptions about IQ" (p. 1).

Stoskepf argues that the current emphasis on standards and testing can be linked to education reforms of the early twentieth century that were driven largely by researchers promoting eugenics. Prominent educational researchers in the early 1900s such as Lewis Terman, originator of the Stanford-Binet intelligence test, and Leta Stetter Hollingworth, a strong early advocate of gifted and talented programs in schools, held strong beliefs about intelligence and capability, asserting that “only students from the right biological stock were capable of achieving high academic standards” (Stoskepf, 1999, p. 3). With these assumptions in mind, tests were designed to identify and track students along those lines with the intent of providing the type of instruction that would match the perceived capabilities of the students. Early critics of eugenics and the related testing efforts argued that the tests ignored essential environmental factors and influences that impacted achievement and potential, but this minority was ignored and standardized testing efforts that honored and favored a white, male, privileged majority took on prevalence in our education system. It is not surprising that, even today, “doing well on these tests is strongly correlated with income levels and only reconfirms the educational inequities throughout the century” (Stoskepf, 1999, p. 5).

Adequate Yearly Progress

As a requirement of NCLB, each state is required to designate what it determines to be AYP towards the ultimate goal of 100% proficiency in 2014 for all students, and a closing in the achievement gap between students of differing

backgrounds. The success of schools, districts, and states will be measured according to their progress towards complete proficiency in science, mathematics, and language arts for all subgroups. Schools that are found not to be making AYP in any subgroup for two years in a row will be noted as being “in need of improvement,” a designation that is partnered with specific sanctions that become increasingly more punitive over the years a school remains in the “schools in need of improvement” category. These sanctions are intended to support the school in its continued effort to raise achievement through various types of assistance and intervention.

Expecting continued progress for all students in all subgroups is a lofty and laudable goal, but also one that has many critics. The most fundamental criticism is in the very feasibility of the expected outcome of 100% proficiency for all subgroups by 2014. According to a report presented by Bracey (2004) to the California Department of Education tracing its history of past progress, it is predicted that by 2014, 99% of California students will not be making AYP when basing progress on the currently established standards for proficiency. Bracey (2004) cites a similar report from the state Legislative Auditor in Minnesota predicting that by 2014, 80% of Minnesota schools will be failing according to NCLB guidelines. This prediction was also based on past progress towards the current standards of proficiency. Given that individual states have been extended the privilege of defining “proficiency” for the purposes of determining AYP, one could argue that any state could make 100% progress towards AYP simply by

lowering its standards for proficiency every year. In effect, through manipulation of the state-designated AYP, students' achievement could actually regress, while state data demonstrates progress.

Many have brought challenges to the calculations of AYP by asserting that different methods of calculating AYP will bear different outcomes. A NCLB policy brief presented by Snow-Renner and Torrence (2002) of the Education Commission of the States provides an overview of the different methods that states can use to compare school or student performance. Some states use "cohort comparisons," comparing the same grade over time. For example, comparing the performance of 2001's 4th grade class to that of 2000's 4th grade class. "Quasi-longitudinal studies" track cohorts of students over time. For example, comparing the 4th grade reading scores of a school's 4th graders in 2001 to the reading scores of the 5th grade class in the same school in 2002. A final way of monitoring student and school progress and success is through "longitudinal comparisons" which track individual children's progress against themselves over time. Longitudinal systems are the most accurate and helpful in providing information about school and student progress as they rule out factors such as fluctuating enrollment and changing demographics. Cohort comparisons, for example, would not take into account the fact that students who enroll only the week before a test are still counted in determining the success of that school in educating its students (Snow-Renner & Torrence, 2002).

Additional criticisms of the AYP mandate relate to the previously mentioned privilege extended to individual states to determine their own definition of proficiency as well as the rate of progress towards 100% proficiency for all students (Fusarelli, 2004; Snow-Renner & Torrence, 2002). When comparing school success by state using each state's criteria, for example, Arkansas sets low proficiency standards for its students, resulting in a report of no failing schools in the state while Michigan, a state recognized for consistently setting high standards for its students has 1,500 schools marked as failing (Fusarelli, 2004). Results of NAEP test data demonstrate an opposite effect, demonstrating greater failure in the Arkansas schools that were self-rated as being universally successful. One response to the mandates and corresponding sanctions of NCLB has been that states are modifying tests to make them easier, changing cut-off scores to ensure more children passing, and modifying the cut off levels for proficiency so that they can avoid the sanctions imposed by NCLB (Fusarelli, 2004).

A far greater number of schools with diverse student populations have been marked as "failing" or "in need of improvement" under the law. This so-called "diversity penalty" is hitting the schools with poor children of color the hardest, resulting in numerous sanctions being placed upon them. These schools serve larger numbers of poor students and have great demographic diversity resulting in large numbers of subgroups. Schools with greater quantities of subgroups will have a more difficult time making AYP as they have a greater

number of opportunities to fall short of the AYP goals. Additional criticisms direct attention toward the recognition that only complete attainment of AYP is recognized as successful progress- significant progress towards making AYP is not taken into account. For example, if two schools had 60% proficiency as a goal and one school moved from 42% proficiency to 59.9% proficiency, it would be declared a failure. A second school, also with 60% proficiency as a goal, may move from 59% to 60%, only a 1% increase versus the previous school's 17.9% increase. Under NCLB, the second school is the only success story.

Sanctions

According to NCLB, schools that fail to make AYP for a second year must receive technical support from the district and provide students the opportunity to transfer to another public school in the district. A third consecutive year of failure to make AYP in one or more subgroups avails students with the additional option of using their share of the school's Title 1 funds to cover the costs of tutoring or additional educational support services. After a fourth year of failure to meet AYP, the school will continue with the previous improvement efforts, and will also be required to make a change in staffing or some other fundamental change in the school structure. After a fifth year of failure to meet AYP, the large scale structure of the school must undergo a powerful change such as take over by a private management company or the state, or it may be converted into a charter school (Center on Education Policy, 2003).

Controversy Over Reading First

A significant amount of funds were earmarked for a targeted reading program under NCLB entitled Reading First. In 2002, \$900 million was authorized to provide financial support for states and districts that applied for Reading First grants targeting the improvement of reading instruction and achievement in historically low-achieving schools (McGuinn, 2006). Initially celebrated and well received, the grant process and required implementation efforts were quickly laden with controversy. States were required to endure an arduous process in order to gain approval for funding for programs that were required to be “‘scientific, research-based’ reading programs” (McGuinn, 2006, p. 180). There was little dissent over the importance of ensuring that instructional practices were grounded in research. The nature of the controversy was grounded in what many educational researchers view as biased and flawed research and research practices that ultimately established the parameters for what was considered to be scientific and research-based and worthy of funding through Reading First grants (DeBray, 2006; Garan, 2001b).

In 1997, a the National Reading Panel (NRP) was commissioned by Congress to identify programs and practices in reading that were worthy of being labeled as rigorous, scientific and research-based (Hess & Petrilli, 2006). The panel ultimately published its findings in 1999, identifying five key elements of scientifically based reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics,

vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (Garan, 2001a; Hess & Petrilli, 2006; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 1999b). These findings are not without controversy, though, as the NRP was composed of a narrow and limited cohort of researchers with backgrounds in experimental research, but very little experience in instructional research. According to Joanne Yatvin, a dissenting member of the NRP, the majority of the members were university professors who approached the task as scientists rather than as educators and had little or no expertise in the teaching of reading (2000).

Criticisms in addition to the experiential limitations of the fourteen-member panel focused largely on the Panel's decision to rely upon the findings of what they called rigorous, quantitative studies that utilized treatment and control groups as legitimate research. This decision narrowed their field of acceptable studies to 38 studies, nine of which were conducted in foreign countries and 38% of which included fewer than 40 students, and ten of which were conducted more than a decade ago. Of the studies that were included, 28 involved commercial reading programs that focused heavily on phonics and were highly scripted in nature (Garan, 2001a; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 1999a). None of the studies included Limited English Proficiency Students and there were too few normally achieving readers in any of the studies for generalizations to be made as to how to best provide reading instruction for these groups. Yet, this narrow and limited collection of studies provided the only research base that the NRP used to make its generalized assertions about "best

practice in reading” for all learners (Garan, 2001a; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 1999a).

This flawed and incomplete report on research in the field of reading instruction is the foundation of the Reading First program, but the controversy does not end there. The Reading First program grew to exceed a \$1 billion effort to improve reading instruction through what many now view as “a pilot project for untested programs for friends in high places” (Grunwald, 2006, p. 1). As Reading First was launched, states repeatedly struggled to gain approval for grant applications unless they mirrored, nearly verbatim, the explicit orientation of a very narrow list of expensive reading curricula and programs. According to Grunwald, “the vast majority of the 4,800 Reading First schools have now adopted one of the five or six top-selling commercial textbooks, even though none of them has been evaluated in a peer-reviewed study against a control group” (2006, p. 1). The inspector general conducted an investigation of the complaints of favoritism over certain textbooks and programs over others and concluded that the department had acted inappropriately, “accusing the department of breaking the law by promoting its pet programs and squelching others” (Grunwald, 2006, p. 1). As a result of the findings that indicated that “the commercial interests behind those textbooks and programs have paid royalties and consulting fees to the key Reading First contractors, who also served as consultants for states seeking grants and chaired the panels approving the grants” (Grunwald, 2006, p.

1), both the director of the Reading First program, Chris Doherty, and the architect of the program, Reid Lyon, stepped down from their positions.

The controversy and preferential treatment did not end with instructional programs. Similar to the steps taken that intentionally elevated certain programs and models that then financially benefitted key decision-makers within the Reading First grant approval process, the assessment programs and professional development models that most states were steered towards resulted in great financial gains for those who approved grant applications. Ultimately, those that were approved reflected a very narrow range of choices. In assessment, for example, the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) was the assessment tool required as a screening tool by a majority of the states (Goodman, 2006; Grunwald, 2006). As with the commercial reading programs, the selection of DIBELS resulted in significant financial gains for the individuals responsible for approving applications and supporting states in their Reading First implementation efforts (Goodman, 2006; Grunwald, 2006). This is especially unfortunate given the significant numbers of educational researchers that argue vehemently that DIBELS is a very limited assessment tool that has a negative effect on the professional judgment of the classroom teacher. In his book *The Truth About DIBELS*, Kenneth Goodman provides a critical analysis of the assessment and its impact on reading instruction stating that DIBELS “creates a fragmented view of progress in reading, but it also leads to instruction that focuses on reduced aspects rather than on opportunities to make sense of

meaningful texts (2006, p. 18). This assessment tool was selected by the NYC-DOE and is being used to inform reading instruction in classrooms throughout New York City.

The DOE Response to NCLB

In 2003, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein unveiled and announced the DOE's response to the mandates of NCLB, a comprehensive school reform effort called Children First. Children First was constructed based on three foundational ideas: leadership, empowerment and accountability. The team that worked under Klein and Bloomberg to construct Children First did so with the belief that school principals hold the most powerful school leadership positions and that they should be empowered to make decisions based on the needs represented by their school. At the same time the principals are empowered with freedom to make their own decisions about instructional strategies and curriculum, they are also held accountable for student and school performance.

According to NCLB, students are required to be tested in both language arts and mathematics at least once between grades 3-5, 6-9, and 10-12. Beginning in 2007, students were required to be tested in science and social studies, as well. According to its website (New York City Department of Education, n.d.), the DOE has gone beyond this minimum requirement and students are required to take standardized tests in reading and math at grades three, four and five. Grade Four students take a science test and Grade Five students take a math test.

Beginning in 2007, students in grades three through five also take four periodic assessments that parallel the standardized tests and are intended to be predictive in nature. The results of these assessments are to be used by teachers to prepare students for the upcoming high stakes tests.

Also exceeding NCLB testing requirements are assessments at the high school level. In accordance with state education policy, in order to graduate from high school, students are required to pass four New York State Regents Exams. The DOE also exceeds NCLB requirements for assessment at the primary level by requiring that every child in Kindergarten through Grade Three be assessed using the Early Childhood Literacy Assessment System (ECLAS). In addition, Reading First schools are also required to engage in weekly progress monitoring using the DIBELS assessment. Some principals also require additional assessments. For example, at The School of Academic Excellence, teachers are required to collect weekly running records, a shorthand documentation of a student's authentic reading behaviors, and record writing conference notes. The principal also requires the teachers to administer and record results of the weekly and unit assessments that go along with commercial reading and mathematics programs used in the school. The teachers use the DOE approved mathematics curriculum, Everyday Mathematics, at all grades. In literacy at the primary levels, the teachers use Harcourt Trophies, the DOE adopted curriculum for Reading First schools. The intermediate teachers follow Lucy Calkins units of study, another DOE endorsed curriculum. Results from the Acuity tests, state and city mandated

standardized tests, and ECLAS assessments at all schools, and the required DIBELS assessments at Reading First schools, are all to be fed “into an advanced data management system, which is under development. The data management system will enable educators and parents to access information about student achievement and spot trends- even as students advance from grade to grade or move from school to school (New York City Department of Education, n.d.).

Children First also includes broader, school level accountability measures that extend beyond the requirements of NCLB. According to the DOE website (New York City Department of Education, n.d.), a combination of School Report Cards and School Quality Reviews provide both quantitative and qualitative measures of school progress and performance. The DOE identifies the School Progress Report as a quantitative measure of schools. Each school receives scores for individual student progress in academic growth over time, average student performance on annual State exams, and performance on surveys assessing the school environment that are completed by parents, staff, and students. The scores in each section are combined using a weighted formula based on the demographic configuration of the school and each school is assigned a letter grade of A, B, C, D or F.

The DOE works to balance this quantitative assessment of school performance through its Quality Review process that is qualitative in nature. Each school is assigned an outside reviewer who spends several days or more at the school site working to assess the effectiveness of the school in using student

data to inform instruction, the creation of environments conducive to learning, the principal's leadership skills and parent involvement. Reviewers use this data to assign each school a Quality Score of well-developed, proficient, or undeveloped in each category of the review as well as in the overall assessment of the school.

The results of the school accountability assessments are used to determine the school's overall effectiveness. "Schools that receive chronically low grades and low Quality Scores will face serious consequences, including targeted improvement efforts, changes in leadership (consistent with contractual obligations), and restructuring or closure. High scoring schools will be rewarded" (New York City Department of Education, n.d.). There are no descriptions of exactly how and in what ways schools will be rewarded, nor is there additional information identifying at what point schools are subject to sanctions for poor performance.

From Policy to Practice

The journey from policy construction to actual implementation is a complicated one, made even more difficult by the challenges faced in the classroom, regardless of the policy that the teachers and students are operating under. The challenges that surface in the classroom are of two sources: those that originate within the school setting and those that are brought through the front doors and into the classrooms by the children themselves. These challenges, inequities (Rothstein, 2002) and "unfreedoms" (Sen, 1999) present obstacles to

teachers and students working towards success in the classroom. Some of the challenges that affect both the staff and students in urban schools include: limited English proficiency of many students and their parents, immigrant families- both documented and illegal, lack of parental support or involvement, and alternative routes to teacher certification.

English Language Learners

Children identified as “limited English proficient” (LEP) are those who “speak a language other than English at home and speak English less than ‘very well’” (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwantoro, 2004, p. 15). In schools, these children are often labeled English Language Learners (ELLs). The decade between the 1993-1994 and 2003-2004 school year saw a 65% increase in ELLs in public schools in the United States (Samway & McKeon, 2007). This group of students is growing at an exponential rate, and not just in the three states that have the largest numbers of ELLs- California, Texas, and Florida. The states with the highest ELL growth rates are in the Southeast- South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia show growth rates of 521 percent, 470 percent, 471 percent, and 397 percent, respectively (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs, 2004; Samway & McKeon, 2007).

Although the highest concentrations of ELLs can be found in urban centers, the population of ELLS is growing rapidly across the country and over

half the schools in the country are currently home to at least one ELL student. The majority of these students are immigrants of Mexican origin (Samway & McKeon, 2007).

Achievement data on ELLs demonstrates a significant achievement gap between LEP students and their English-proficient classmates. Data from the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress show that only seven percent of fourth grade ELLs scored “at or above proficient” in reading, compared to thirty percent of the overall population. Results on the eighth grade reading test, and on the fourth and eighth grade math tests were similar. There is a significant gap between the achievement of ELL students and English proficient students (“English-language learners,” 2004). According to NCLB, ELLs are tested in math during the first round of assessments following their entry into the school. There is a one-year grace period for the reading assessments. Students are allowed to take both assessments in their native language for the first three years (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b).

Immigrant Families

Schools in urban centers are often home to students whose parents have come to America seeking better opportunities for both themselves and their children. Historically, these immigrant parents have chosen as their new home one of the six states that continue to have the largest immigrant populations: “California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey” (Capps, Fix,

Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwanto, 2004, p. 11). Beginning in the 1990s, these same states experienced a slower growth rate in their populations of school-age children of immigrants than growth rates in other states that are now experiencing rapidly growing numbers of students that are the children of immigrants (Capps et al.).

Children in immigrant families are the fastest growing segment in the child population in this country. Since 1990, the number of children in immigrant families has expanded about seven times faster than the number in native-born families and, by the year 2000, 1 of every 5 children in the United States lived in a newcomer family, with one or more parents foreign-born (Hernandez, 2004, p. 19).

Clearly, attending to the unique characteristics and needs of the children of immigrant parents will be a growing need in schools across the country, not just those in states and cities that have traditionally served as gateways for immigrant families into America.

Since many children of immigrants are also LEP, they fall into at least one of NCLB's "protected" groups. These "protected" groups also include other groups that children of immigrants often fall into, "including 'major racial and ethnic groups' (blacks, Hispanics, and Asians), low-income students, and students in special education programs" (Capps et al., 2004). "Protected" groups are those subgroups identified within NCLB that schools, districts, and states are required to attend to and demonstrate progress within. Unfortunately, this same benefit of

protection can also serve as a challenge for many of the children that fall into these groups and the schools that serve them. Most often, immigrant children fall into multiple subgroups. “Schools serving large populations in several of these groups must meet performance standards for all subgroups or face the interventions required by NCLB” (Capps et al., 2004, p. 2). The response by schools, given the emphasis on test scores, is often a narrowing of the curriculum and fewer opportunities for instruction in a child’s native language.

“The three legged stool of child well-being by age eight is this: family economic security, access to health care, and access to sound early education. Unfortunately, immigrant children tend to be disadvantaged in all three areas” (Takanishi, 2004, p. 63). As a result of the 1996 welfare reform legislation that barred immigrants from benefitting from public funds, immigrant children are less likely to have access to the first two legs of this stool. Therefore, the third leg of this stool: “access to sound early education” is even more critical. The majority of children of immigrants were born in the United States, establishing them as legal residents who have a right to a public education, but enrollment data show that many do not benefit from this right.

Given the rapidly growing numbers of immigrant children in schools, one would expect to see a parallel surge in the numbers of immigrant children in early childhood programs. This is not the case. The under-enrollment of immigrant children is greatest in those families that are classified as lower-income, with lower levels of parental education, and limited English skills. The majority of

immigrant families fitting these categories are typically undocumented and from Mexico or other Latin American countries (Capps et al., 2004). “Other potential explanations include cultural differences in mothers’ work and child-rearing patterns, as well as access to child care” (Capps et al., 2004, p. 8).

Seventy-five percent of children of immigrants were born to their parents while living in the United States, securing their rights as legal U.S. citizens. Although U.S. born, the children of immigrant parents often do not benefit from the opportunities they have the right to since their parents are often not legal citizens. “Undocumented parents may be wary of interacting with institutions such as public schools, owing to fear of deportation or other immigration-related consequences” (Capps et al., 2004, p. 9). Children of immigrant parents are much more likely to be living in poverty and with parents that have very little formal education, further reducing opportunities for parents to support school learning.

Parental Support and Involvement

“Parental involvement is defined as having an awareness of an involvement in schoolwork, understanding of the interaction between parenting skills and student success in schooling, and a commitment to consistent communication with educators about student progress” (Pate & Andrews, 2006). Such involvement has been found to be positively correlated with children’s educational performance and may have the potential to “mediate the effects of poverty, parents’ educational attainment, and race/ethnicity on achievement” (Lee & Bowen, 2006). As such, it is logical that increasing parental involvement and

engagement at school has been identified as a potential strategy to expand student opportunities to achieve and therefore to narrow the achievement gap (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

Parental involvement can take many forms. According to Fan and Chen (2001) there are three main types of parental involvement that could potentially aid in reducing the achievement gap: communication, supervision, and parental expectations and parenting style. Communication refers to parental communication with their children about school and schoolwork; supervision refers to parental monitoring of students' efforts related to school and in their free time; parental expectations- the most important of the three according to Fan and Chen's findings- refer to the messages parents send about their child's academic aspirations.

The responsibility for parental involvement does not fall solely on the shoulders of the parents, though. Schools have a responsibility to provide opportunities that will encourage parental involvement. Recent research in parental involvement identified six areas in which schools can and should provide support as it relates to parental involvement: parenting skills, home-school communication, volunteering at the school, learning at home, decision making related to school policies and practices, and collaborating with the community (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salina, Jansorn, & Van Voorhis, 2002).

However, some parents may encounter barriers to their involvement that include such unfreedoms as linguistic differences, cultural differences,

psychological discomfort, and financial or time constraints that result in limited involvement. “A major tool identified to reduce inequalities in achievement may have limited ability to do so because of inequalities in the opportunities for benefits of parent involvement across demographic groups” (Lee & Bowen, 2006, p. 194).

Therefore, schools have a significant role in nurturing parent involvement that will build cultural capital relative to the school as an institution. By building the cultural capital of the parents relative to school, their children will be positioned better to access and take advantage of the opportunities and resources educational institutions have to offer (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

Alternative Routes to Teacher Certification

As student populations continue to grow, the demand for teachers, especially in urban settings, also steadily increases. In part, this demand has increased as a result of the NCLB “highly qualified teacher” requirement mandating that every classroom be staffed by a highly qualified teacher by the 2005-2006 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b). According to the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Innovation and Improvement,

Expanding the education workforce at the necessary pace while also ensuring that teachers are effective and motivated to stay on the job requires new ways of recruiting, training, and supporting teacher

candidates. We cannot rely exclusively on traditional teacher preparation programs to ratchet up their efforts (2008, p. 1).

Shortages in the quantity and quality of teachers have been especially acute in urban areas that are notorious for high staff turnover rates, lower salaries, greater challenges, and lower attrition rates. In response to the growing need for teachers and the NCLB requirement that teachers be “highly qualified,” many alternative certification programs have been designed with the intent of rapidly producing a large corps of highly qualified teachers. Alternative routes to certification provide opportunities for individuals with a Bachelor’s Degree in a field outside of education to become certified as a teacher without having to return to a university to complete a traditional teaching program. Some of these alternative programs target recent college graduates who are interested in teaching, but lack a degree in education. Other programs target individuals who are career changers or those who have been out of the job market and seek to return. “The rationale driving alternative route programs is that many excellent teacher candidates have made other life or career choices but would be open to becoming teachers if presented with the right offer” (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2008, p. 7).

Candidates for alternative certification programs are screened rigorously to ensure that they have the maturity and ability to withstand the aggressive pre-service training sessions and to then handle the challenges and stresses of teaching, in addition to the ongoing course requirements of the program. Once

accepted, the candidates face the challenges typical of other first-year teachers, but without the undergraduate teacher preparation. Instead, they develop their knowledge of teaching “on the job” and through the required courses that they attend during the two-year commitment period. The initial and continued support offered to participants varies from program to program. According to Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger (2008), in New York City, the vast majority of teachers that teach under a license secured through an alternate route enter the system through the one of two organizations: New York City Teaching Fellows (NYCTF) or Teach for America (TFA).

TFA was established in 1990 by Wendy Kopp following the completion of her undergraduate thesis proposing an alternative route to teacher certification. Her underlying premise and motivator was her belief that “many in her generation were searching for a way to assume a significant responsibility that would make a real difference in the world and that top college students would choose teaching over more lucrative opportunities if a prominent teacher corps existed” (“History of,” 2008, para.1). During its inaugural year, 500 men and women were certified and began teaching under TFA’s certification program. Since then 20,000 teachers have been trained and placed in TFA partner schools and TFA has “become the nation's largest provider of teachers for low-income communities” (“History of,” 2008, para. 1). TFA corps members agree to a two-year commitment in the public school they are assigned in exchange for the training through which participants earn a Masters Degree. It is the intent of the program

that TFA alumni will either continue in the education field as classroom teachers or in some other capacity, or that they will enter the workforce outside of education, bringing with them a firsthand understanding of the educational inequity that exists within our schools and a desire to continue to work in some way to minimize those inequities through advocacy efforts across all fields, not just within education.

Similar to the TFA model, is another alternative teaching certification program widely utilized by New York City schools, NYCTF.

In 1999-2000, 15 percent of New York City's public school teachers and 60 percent of all new hires lacked teacher certification. The New York City Teaching Fellows (NYCTF) program was created in 2000 to recruit, select, and train talented professionals from outside the field of education to teach in City schools that were struggling to find highly qualified teachers (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2008, p.41).

Similar to TFA, NYCTF works to fill the need for qualified teachers in schools by recruiting and quickly training college graduates to enter the classroom as teachers while continuing to support their learning in the field of education. Like TFA corps members, "Fellows" participate in a summer training program and continuing follow-up courses throughout the school year and, at the end of their two-year commitment, NYCTF alumni also earn a Master's Degree in education.

Alternative certification programs have both proponents and critics. Those who support the programs celebrate the large numbers of enthusiastic teachers that are now available for hiring. Those who criticize the programs usually cite the lack of experience and long-term dedication of teachers certified via nontraditional routes. An extensive study by Kane, Rockoff and Staiger that compared the effectiveness of teachers trained through traditional and non-traditional programs showed no statistically significant difference between teachers' effectiveness, regardless of the route followed to certification (2008). They did find that "both certified and alternatively certified teachers' effectiveness improves within the first few years of experience" (p. 616). TFA's website ("Studies on," n.d.) shares the findings of a 2007 study by the Policy Studies Associates showing that 93 percent of the principals who have hired TFA corps members report that the training that TFA provides is at least as good as that of other beginning teachers and 63 percent of the principals report that the training is superior to other beginning teachers. In response to TFA's defense of their program by citing enthusiastic principals, Azimi (2007) quotes Darling-Hammond:

The principals who are saying 'I love TFA!' are responding to the fact that teaching standards in schools that hire uncertified teachers are typically low. This is a country that spends so little on the neediest, and here we are perpetuating a cycle of underprepared teachers. If one takes the lowest

possible standard and accepts that as a goal, then Teach For America is great” (Sec. 4, Para. 4).

The second criticism of alternate certification programs, “that such programs actually harm student achievement by bringing in candidates with less commitment to teaching as a career and, as a result, have higher turnover rates” (Kane, Rockoff & Staiger, 2008, p. 616) has also been investigated. According to Kane, Rockoff and Staiger (2008) “while turnover was indeed high among TFA corps members- reflecting their two-year commitment- our results show that Teaching Fellows and traditionally certified teachers had very similar retention rates” (p. 616).

In defense of criticisms of its high turnover rate, TFA argues that 60 percent of its alumni choose to remain in the field of education after their initial two-year commitment, but according to TFA, “the field of education” extends far beyond the classroom. An underlying premise of TFA is that real change in education will require allies in every field from the classroom to Capitol Hill (Azimi, 2007; “History of,” 2008). In contrast, NYCTF aims to train teachers and retain them in the actual classroom. Fellows comprised an impressive eleven percent of the entire teaching population in the New York City public schools in the 2007-2008 school year and the NYCTF program currently shows approximately a 90 percent return rate for teachers in the second year of the program and (“Program history,” n.d.; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2008).

Significant differences between the two programs are demonstrated following the initial two-year commitment required by each program. According to Kane, Rockoff and Staiger (2008), “TFA corps members have much lower cumulative retention rates. By the fifth year, only about 18% of corps members remain with the district” (p. 626). In contrast,

Teaching Fellows have very similar retention rates to regular certified teachers (with Teaching Fellows having slightly higher retention rates in the first two years). By their fifth year in teaching (with four years of experience), approximately 50% of both groups are still within the district (Kane, Rockoff & Staiger, 2008, p. 626).

Regardless of the research showing differences between the retention of TFA corps members versus Fellows, many critics group the programs together under a single umbrella of “alternately certified teachers” and there is evidence of significant frustration over the rapid departure of these teachers by those teachers who remain behind in the schools. Some are disappointed that so many of the TFA teachers only fulfill the minimum commitment and that few stay on in the field. These individuals hold the perception that:

Teach For America’s corps of teachers do not come back, that many of them view their teaching stint as a resume-burnishing pit stop before moving on to bigger things- that TFA stands for ‘Teach For Awhile’. The numbers are more telling. More than one third leave after their two years

and another ten percent drop out well before then (Azimi, 2007, Section 3).

Although research shows that the retention of Teaching Fellows exceeds that of traditionally certified teachers in the first two years and parallels that of traditionally certified teachers by the fifth year, the generalized belief that alternatively certified teachers exit the profession following only two years of service is deeply disturbing to many of their traditionally certified peers and they do not distinguish between TFA alumni and Fellows.

It may be that the difference in retention rates between the two programs stems from the demographic of the individuals recruited for participation by each program. TFA targets recent college graduates who have not yet decided on a career path or decided to become a teacher too late in their undergraduate program to complete the required coursework. NYCTF takes a different approach that is grounded in the basic assumption that “there is a substantial pool of talented individuals who have chosen other career options but who are capable and interested in becoming excellent teachers” (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2008, p.41).

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

In this chapter I explain the methodology and methods used to guide this study. I begin by introducing my methodological stance. I then provide a background of myself as a researcher. Next, I introduce the case study, providing some introductory information and explaining the selection of the school site and the participants. Finally, I provide a detailed explanation of the methods I used to collect and make sense of data.

As a critical theorist, I believe that all systems work to the advantage of some, and to the disadvantage of others. It is with this understanding that I will examine how NCLB is playing out in the lives of the disadvantaged students it is designed to serve. Within the scope of this study, I will use three primary methods for gathering data: observations in the school and in classrooms; interviews with urban students, teachers, and administrators; and document analysis of relevant school materials to gain insight into how NCLB is impacting the teaching and learning of poor students of color. Specifically, I will be looking for how the emphasis on achievement under the umbrella of NCLB is playing out in teachers' practices and in the experiences of both students and their teachers.

Methodological Stance

The federal education policies that are in place in the United States, especially those specifically designed to support historically marginalized peoples, are in need of in-depth study as all policies have both intended and unintended consequences. Taking a critical theory approach for understanding how federal policies are interpreted and implemented in the teaching and learning of children of color and poverty offers an opportunity to examine how well intended policies are playing out in schools and classrooms today.

The very nature of research conducted through a critical theory approach serves to honor those being studied by giving them a voice. “It is practical and collaborative because it is inquiry completed ‘with’ others rather than ‘on’ or ‘to’ others” (Creswell, 2003, p. 11). The specific methodological framework being utilized for the purposes of this study is that of interpretive interactionism (Denzin, 2001).

Interpretive interactionism is a logical choice for a methodological framework as my efforts to understand the ways in which federal policies are playing out are centered directly on how it is that teachers and students in schools experience the public policies designed to serve them. “Interpretive interactionism speaks to this interrelationship between private lives and public responses to personal troubles” (Denzin, 2001, p. 2). It is my intent to better come to understand if and how the No Child Left Behind act expands the freedoms to achieve of young people in America’s schools by coming to “grasp,

understand, and interpret correctly the perspectives and experiences of those persons who are served by applied programs” (Denzin, 2001, p. 3).

Researcher Background

As a qualitative researcher, I hold a firm belief in the importance of recognizing and articulating the researcher’s position in a study. According to Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), qualitative research stands in contrast to rigidly traditional quantitative, positivistic research in that researchers taking a qualitative stance reject the notion that their work can be objective and bias-free. Qualitative research “assumes that subjectivity and values are a necessary part of human interaction and therefore cannot be eliminated or controlled” (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 27). Qualitative researchers “acknowledge who we are, what our values are, and our research agenda... We believe that knowing about our personal perspective allows other researchers to better evaluate our conclusions” (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 27). Given my beliefs and stance, consistent with those of Auerbach and Silverstein, it is imperative that I share my background, experiences, and interests relevant to the topic.

I have served the educational community in America’s public schools in various capacities for the past 18 years. First as a classroom teacher and reading specialist, then as a national education consultant, serving schools in nearly every state in the nation. As both a classroom teacher and a consultant, I have had the opportunity to work in struggling urban schools as well as their more successful

suburban counterparts. My passion lies in supporting teaching and learning within urban school contexts populated by poor students of color, a group that has historically and consistently struggled within our nation's public school systems.

As a first year teacher, I went from student teaching and undergraduate training in a small college town in Ohio, directly into a classroom in the midst of Chicago's West Side projects. This was my first opportunity to see the differences that existed between the world in which I grew up, and that of the students I was now responsible for serving. It also occurred to me that the system itself seemed to privilege others like myself. I quickly became aware of the disparity between resources available to students, both within and outside of the school setting. I began to wonder how it is that we could possibly hold the same expectations for high levels of success for all children, given the fundamental social and economic inequities so many children faced. It was this seed that grew inside me over the past decade or so, and is the one that is now driving me to investigate how federal policies play out in the classrooms serving poor students of color.

As I enter this study focusing on the education of poor children of color, I come with a set of notions, beliefs, and ways of being that are aligned with who I am. I come from a background of privilege. I am white and have spent my life in a state of socioeconomic comfort. This background is a far cry from the lived experiences of those who I am most interested in serving. I must again heed the wisdom of Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) and take great care that I do not

interpret the differences that I see and perceive between my own lived experiences and those of others as deficiencies. Rather, I will seek to understand and question the differences I see, thereby, shedding light on these differences and giving voice to those who live them.

I seek to understand the educational experiences of poor children of color and their teachers through observations and interviews that will allow me to come to know the lived experiences of ordinary people. I remain conscious of “setting aside my concepts” in an effort to “learn their language” and ways of being (Spradley, 1979). As a responsible researcher I will strive to understand the world these teachers and children inhabit through the experiences they share with me.

Such a project requires learning to listen attentively to marginalized peoples; it requires educating oneself about their histories, achievements, preferred social relations, and hopes for the future; it requires putting one’s body on the line for “their” causes until they feel like “our” causes; it requires critical examination of the dominant institutional beliefs and practices that systematically disadvantage them; it requires critical self-examination to discover how one unwittingly participates in generating disadvantage to them (Harding, 1993, p, 68).

Given these beliefs and methodological stance, my proposed study examines how federal policies designed to support low achieving students are being interpreted in urban school contexts serving poor students of color will take

my role as a researcher studying an “other” different from myself into consideration and I will strive to truly listen to what is being said. As a final measure and precaution, all transcripts and analyses will be offered to the participants for their review in order to ensure that I have accurately captured their lived experiences.

For the purposes of this study, I conducted a critical interpretive case study of a single school over a seven-month period, seeking to capture the lived experience of individuals within the school. As a noninterventionist, non-participant observer, I will watch without interacting with the teachers and students as I “try to observe the ordinary” and “observe it long enough to comprehend what, for this case, ordinary means” (Stake, 1995, p. 44).

Introduction to the Case

In seeking a school for the purposes of my case study, I sought out an urban public elementary school in New York City with a significant number of poor students of color that would welcome a curious observer. The School of Academic Excellence provides an exemplar of an urban school struggling to support the achievement and success of its students and teachers. The majority of the students are poor and of color, and the teaching staff has a broad range of experience and come from varied backgrounds, paralleling the reality of the majority of public schools in urban settings. The principal, a recent graduate from a local university offering a program in administration, is currently serving her

second year, both at the school and as a principal. This site provides a good context for this study. Pseudonyms have been used for the school as well as for all participants in the study.

The School of Academic Excellence is a public school centered in the Bedford Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn in New York City. The school serves general education, special education, and bilingual and English Language learners at the pre-kindergarten level through grade five. The school is in District 14 and is part of the Community Learning Support Organization (CLSO) within the New York City Department of Education (DOE). CLSOs have taken the place of support previously provided by the regions within the New York City Public schools. Each school self selected the CLSO that best matched their interests, needs, and ambitions. According to the DOE website, the CLSO:

Is founded on the belief that schools must become communities themselves and develop meaningful relationships with families and their communities. Schools will be supported in the development of professional learning communities where commitment, dedication, and collegiality will be nurtured and expected. In turn, through programs and practices that foster the development of the whole child, schools will enrich the lives of students. (“New York City,” n.d.).

According to the *2006-2007 Annual School Report* for the school found on the DOE website, the student enrollment was 298 students. The demographic data from 2006-2007 notes the ethnic and gender breakdown of the student population

as: 0% is White, 16% are Black, 84 % are Hispanic, and 0% is “Asian or others”. 87% of the students are identified as economically disadvantaged/low-income students and are eligible for free lunch (“New York City,” n.d.).

The School of Academic Excellence has a history of low academic performance that has been turned around in recent years. Up until 2005, the school was noted as “In Need of Improvement.” The school’s federal Title 1 accountability status overall for 2006-2007 was “School in Good Standing,” a status of which the staff and students are proud of and are working hard to maintain.

In 2006-2007, there were 32 teachers on staff at The School of Academic Excellence. 6% of those were working without a valid teaching certificate, 6% were working outside their area of certification, and 19% had fewer than three years of experience. Almost a third of the staff, 31%, had a Master’s degree plus 30 hours.

Selection of the Participants

The intermediate teachers, the third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers, at The School of Academic Excellence received a letter inviting them to participate in the study. Intermediate teachers were invited to participate because of the prominent role that standardized testing plays in classrooms at those grade levels. Interested teachers completed and returned a brief survey included with the letter. See Appendix A for the overview letter and Appendix B for the survey indicating

interest. Six of the eight intermediate teachers responded with interest. Originally, I selected a Grade 3 teacher who was new to the school and teaching, a Grade 4/5 bilingual teacher with alternative certification from the NYC Teaching Fellow, a Grade 5 teacher with 17 years of experience at the school, and another Grade 5 teacher with 10 years of experience at the school who also serves as the UFT representative. These four teachers represented a range of skills, experience, and perceptions. The variance across the four teachers would provide a broad insight into how teachers at The School of Academic Excellence with various levels of experience and effectiveness are serving the students in their classrooms. Very soon into the study, the new teacher at Grade 3 became incredibly overwhelmed with the responsibilities of teaching and asked to be removed from the study. The other Grade 3 teacher who had also expressed interest in the study took his place. A change in staffing in October resulted in the Grade 4-5 Bilingual teacher moving to a Bilingual Grade 2 position. Due to the change of grade that occurred five weeks into the study, the teacher remained a participant although he was no longer teaching at an intermediate grade level.

Methods

As a critical theorist, I am grounded in the belief that systems exist that advantage some while disadvantaging others. My efforts to understand the implications of federal policy on poor children of color are driven by these beliefs. I have, therefore, positioned myself within this study as an interpretive

interactionist (Denzin, 2001), seeking to “examine the relationships between personal troubles...and the public policies and public institutions that have been created to address those troubles. Interpretive interactionism speaks to this interrelationship between private lives and public responses to personal troubles” (p. 2).

My goal in this study was to understand how NCLB is impacting the educators and students it is intended to support. Therefore, I sought to “preserve the multiple realities, the different and even contradictory views of what is happening” (Stake, 1995, p. 12) by making the lived experiences of the teachers and children that I came to know through my research available and visible to my reader (Denzin, 2001). Through this study, I bring the ordinary, everyday experiences of people working in an economically poor school community to light.

Throughout this study, I followed the inquiry steps of Denzin’s interpretive process, including: “framing the research question,” “deconstructing and analyzing critically prior conceptions,” “capturing the phenomenon,” “bracketing the phenomenon,” “constructing the phenomenon,” and “contextualizing the phenomenon” (Denzin, 2001). I explain each step in greater detail in the sections that follow.

Framing the Research Question

According to Stake (1995), the very nature of qualitative inquiry poses

challenges in finitely defining the focus of the study:

Clearly, in designing our studies, we qualitative researchers do not confine interpretation to the identification of variables and the development of instruments before data gathering and to analysis and interpretation for the report. Rather, we emphasize placing an interpreter in the field to observe the workings of the case, one who records objectively what is happening but simultaneously examines its meaning and redirects observation to refine or substantiate those meanings. Initial research questions may be modified or even replaced in mid-study by the case researcher. The aim is to thoroughly understand the case. If early questions are not working, if new issues become apparent, the design is changed (p. 9).

Following Denzin's methodology of interpretive interactionism, I framed my primary research questions in a manner that explicitly incorporates the policy being investigated and the people whom it is intended to serve: NCLB and the children of color and poverty who have been identified as those at greatest risk of failure in America's public schools. How are teachers and administrators making sense of the NCLB mandates designed to support low achieving students? How are they implementing these policies? How are their efforts influencing their students' opportunities to achieve?

Given Stake's (1995) caution against inflexibility in research questions and foci, I made a conscious effort to remain aware of the three stages through which researchers move while engaged in inquiry: observation, renewed inquiry,

and explanation (p. 22). Stake (1995) borrows the term Malcolm Parlett and David Hamilton used to describe this process at the University of Edinburgh in 1972- “progressive inquiry.” Through progressive focusing, the issues become progressively clarified and redefined as the investigation unfolds. The focus becomes more narrowed and greater attention is given to the emerging issues. My study of the impact of federal legislation on the teaching and learning of poor students of color followed this pattern. My pre-identified research questions provided the initial framework, but I was open to the possibility that they might evolve over time, based on the manner in which the investigation unfolded as new stories were told and meaning was shared. In this case, my research questions remained the same, but the foundation I had built in the literature review prior to my study was altered significantly as I came to understand the challenges my participants were facing.

Deconstruction

According to Kvale (1996), a critical component of the hermeneutic circle which interpretive researchers are constantly engaged in is that of “knowledge about the theme.” Prior to conducting a study, the researcher needs to hold a deep understanding of how this phenomena has been understood in the past, and while conducting a study, it is imperative that the researcher have extensive knowledge of the theme in order to be “sensitive to the nuances of meanings expressed and the different contexts into which the meanings may enter” (p. 49) during both the

interview and analysis stages. Kvale's notion of "knowledge about the theme" can be likened unto Denzin's notion of "deconstruction" of the phenomena as it is currently understood.

Within my study, this deconstruction unfolded through my extensive literature review, which evolved and grew throughout the study. Initially, I focused my review of related literature to examining numerous ways that achievement and the achievement gap have been explored in the past, a brief history of federal education policy, information on how NCLB has been interpreted and responded to thus far, and an overview of cross-cultural instruction. Throughout my efforts to deconstruct the phenomena, the extensive review of literature that I collected provided a solid foundation of knowledge as I sought to understand teacher's efforts to implement NCLB, but I also found that I needed to add to and supplement that literature base. Specifically, I worked to understand prior conceptions related to the immigrant experience in schools, how ELLs and their teachers work towards success, and how alternate routes to teacher certification have impacted the teaching profession and the children they are hired to serve.

Capturing the Phenomenon

According to Stake (1995), "qualitative research tries to establish an empathetic understanding for the reader, through description, sometimes called thick description, conveying to the reader what experience itself would convey"

(p. 39). “Thick description creates verisimilitude- that is, the realistic description produces for readers the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described” (Denzin, 2001, p. 100). In “capturing the phenomenon,” I sought to capture and make available to my reader the ordinary lived realities of educators who struggle to align with NCLB and NYC-DOE policy and adequately address the needs of the children they serve in an impoverished school community. I used observation, interviews, and document analysis as my primary methods for collecting data. Each of these will be explained in detail within the following sections. Every attempt was made to use these methods in order to understand the impact of federal policy on the teaching and learning of children according to the people who are most affected by this legislation- the principal and classroom teachers serving predominantly English language learners in a economically impoverished school community.

“The focus of interpretive research is on those life experiences that radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their life projects” (Denzin, 2001, p. 34). In working to help my readers develop the type of empathetic understanding of the lived experiences of educators who are trying to increase educational opportunity for impoverished youth, I sought out and recorded in detail the “epiphanic moments” (Denzin, 2001), “moments of crisis” (Denzin, 2001), or “critical events” (Stake, 1995) that best represents their daily lived realities. According to Denzin (2001), “having had such a moment, a person is never quite the same again” (p. 34).

There are two main categories of epiphanies. Biographical epiphanies (Denzin, 2001) can have an effect at the surface level, but the effects are barely felt. Biographical epiphanies include such everyday occurrences as buying a newspaper or getting a cup of coffee. Alternately, deep level epiphanies are defined as those that have effects that “cut to the core of the person’s life and leave indelible marks. These are the epiphanies of life. Interpretive researchers attempt to secure self-stories and personal experience stories that deal with events that have had deep-level effects in person’s lives” (Denzin, 2001, p. 62).

In my efforts to capture the reality of the teachers and students I came to know and share with my reader, I looked for four forms of epiphanies identified by Denzin (2001) - major epiphanies which are singular experiences that shatter a person’s life; cumulative epiphanies that occur as a result of a series of events that have built up in a person’s life; minor or illuminative epiphanies in which the “underlying tensions or problems in a situation or relationship are revealed” (p.37); and relived epiphanies during which a person goes back and relives a major epiphany or turning-point moment in his life. Through my efforts to fully capture the lived experiences of my subjects, I sought all four types of epiphanies through my observations and interviews.

In order to best support my interpretations of the epiphanic moments that my participants experienced, I used multiple data sources, in a triangulated effort. The two kinds of triangulation that I used include data triangulation and methodological triangulation (Denzin, 2001; Stake, 2001; Wragg, 1994). Data

triangulation involves collecting data over time, space, and/or people, which I accomplished through a seven-month study of a small group of four of teachers and their principal. Methodological triangulation supports more accurate interpretation as more than one method of enquiry is applied. In an effort to achieve triangulation, I cross referenced the data I collected through each of my methods, trying to better understand and verify the legitimacy of each one by examining each experience or epiphany through the other methods, as well. For example, I follow up an observation of a critical event just before an important testing day that involved a fifth grade teacher and her student by interviewing the teacher and administrators involved to reinforce, clarify, or revise my understandings and interpretations. The triangulated approach over time, people, and methods allowed me to build a deeper understanding of the event itself and the crisis it presented the teacher with. For the purpose of this study, the primary methods used for gathering data in this study included: interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Each method is discussed below.

Interviews

The purpose of my study was to understand how teachers and administrators are making sense of federal and state education policy and, subsequently, how their experiences with and understanding of these achievement policies affects teaching and learning in the classroom. The purpose of data collected through a qualitative interview is “to understand themes of the lived

daily world from the subjects' own perspectives" (Kvale, 1996, p. 27). For this reason, a significant portion of the data I collected came about through a series of formal interviews that were conducted at The School of Academic Excellence with the Principal and four teachers. I choose to focus on teachers at the intermediate level because of the testing that is required at those grade levels per NCLB. The one exception is a teacher who was reassigned to a primary grade level five weeks into the study.

The intent of my interviews was to develop an understanding of the everyday lived experiences of the individuals I spent time with. Through the interview conversations, I sought to "interpret the meaning of central themes in the life world of the subject" (Kvale, 1996, p. 30). As such, I organized my interview questions so that they related to and provided opportunities for my interviewees to share specific stories that provided insight into how they were making sense of NCLB, remaining open to how the experiences they shared related to the teaching and learning in their classroom since the implementation of NCLB. In order to understand the phenomenon being studied, I sought out multiple stories grouped around a common theme so that I could "compare and contrast the stories of many different individuals located in different phases of the experience under investigation" (Denzin, 2001, p. 75).

"Technically, the qualitative interview is semistructured: It is neither an open conversation nor a highly structured questionnaire. It is conducted according to an interview guide that focuses on certain themes and that may include

suggested questions” (Kvale, 1996, p. 27). Each series of interviews that I conducted began with a semi-structured interview, consisting of the questions found in the Initial Interview Protocol that can be found in Appendix C. This list of written questions was not followed verbatim, as if it were a highly structured verbal survey, but was used as a tool to facilitate a more natural conversation through the use of open-ended questions and probes to follow-up on responses (Wragg, 1994). Follow up interviews continued to follow the questioning efforts related to both pre-identified and developing themes. These interviews fell across a continuum, ranging from semi-structured to less formal, unstructured interviews that more closely resembled informal and natural everyday conversation (Kvale, 1996).

The purpose of the initial interviews was to establish rapport with the individuals I came to know throughout the study, and to begin to understand their perspectives on NCLB, forming a foundation for the construction of questions to be asked in follow up interviews, as well as to provide the foundation for focused classroom observations. Each interview was preceded with a brief overview, establishing a purpose for the interview and, prior to the first interview, to introduce the use of the tape recorder and the notepad I used to record my thoughts throughout the interview. Each interview closed with a debriefing period as I reviewed some of the main points of the session and ended by allowing the subject to have the last word, if she chose, by inviting her to bring up or ask about anything before closing the interview (Kvale, 1996). The initial interviews with

the Principal and teachers lasted approximately 90 minutes. Follow up interviews varied in length, according to the specific needs for follow up with each individual. The formal interviews were taped and transcribed and then coded for the themes under investigation. According to Stake (1995), “All research is a search for patterns, for consistencies” (p. 44). These consistencies and patterns were the themes that I sought out and coded for in my review of interview transcripts and my anecdotal notes as I worked to understand the lived experiences of the staff and students at The School of Academic Excellence. According to Kvale (1996), I set out to “interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what I need to know” (p. 101), and the interview process continued until I found that no more stories or relevant information were forthcoming.

Informal interviews. Opportunities for informal interviews and related conversations arose throughout the study with the Principal and teachers. I maintained an ongoing field log during observations of the classroom settings and recorded what I saw and heard, noting key points made and items to follow up on in future interviews or conversations. The notebook was divided into sections, one for each interviewee. At times, I dictated a summary of interactions I had with participants in order to best capture the episodes. All dictation was transcribed, coded, and filed with all other information on that participant.

Interview reflections. In order to better assure my efforts to capture the lived realities of my subjects, following each interview or informal engagement that I recorded anecdotal notes on, I took 5-10 minutes to reflect on and recall what I learned or was thinking at that point. At times, I recorded my thoughts verbally on my recorder, to be transcribed later. Otherwise, I took a few minutes to record my reflections in writing to aid in future analysis of greater depth (Kvale, 1996; Stake, 1995).

Observations

In seeking to understand “how people perceive and make sense of their daily routines” (Wragg, 1994, p. 57), my observations took place within the school and classrooms. At times, I joined my participants when they brought their classes to events elsewhere in the building such as assemblies or special opportunities like bake sales or book sales. My role was that of a noninterventionist, nonparticipant observer, viewing the actions within the school settings in as neutral a manner as possible. At times it was a challenge as the staff often forgot I was not an employee and would frequently ask if I’d mind covering their class for a minute. At all times, I declined, reminding them of my role as observer.

Teacher observations. I spent seven months, observing each of the teachers involved in the study. The observations focused on understanding how the

teachers were working under the influences of NCLB and on how they sought to expand students' opportunities to achieve. I was looking at instructional techniques used, as well as how students responded to various techniques. Specific observations of teachers within the classroom also related to instructional actions that were influenced directly by the upcoming standardized tests. Observations of teachers and administrators took place prior to, during, and following the mandated testing periods.

Principal observations. In observing the Principal, I worked to understand how she communicated with the staff in interchanges relevant to the study and noted the responses of the teachers. The principal was observed as she conducted her daily business which included observing as she led professional development sessions, staff meetings, individual or grade level team meetings that involve the intermediate staff, and also as she led or participated in celebrations and events that involved the students. I also looked for evidence of how the principal communicated what she believes is important to the students and teachers and I noted their responses. Specifically, I looked for actions and efforts that were achievement driven as measured by standardized tests, and those that expand students' opportunities and freedoms to achieve.

Observation field notes. Similar to the anecdotal note-taking method I used to follow informal interviews, I recorded notes on observations in a freehand fashion

providing me with an “aide memoire” (Wragg, 1994) of the events that captured my attention. For critical events, I used the pro forma, “Critical Events Record,” found in Appendix D. The record was adapted and expanded from a similar form used by Wragg (1994, p. 67). Some observation notes took the form of a diary with timed entries in which I noted observations made at certain intervals of time. In recording all notes, I took care to record any nonverbal behaviors that were displayed through actions and body language.

According to Wragg, it may be difficult to accurately interpret observations of other’s actions and behaviors, both verbal and nonverbal. “We often interpret events as we wish to see them, not as they are” (1994, p. 54). As such, following each observation, I interviewed the individual(s) being observed to ask each one for their perception of what happened in order to better ensure that I best captured that individual’s lived experience, and not my interpretation of it, which may or may not be accurate (Wragg, 1994). Similar to the post-interview routine of taking 5-10 minutes to jot down reflections on the interview session, I took a similar approach to reflections on observations and briefly recorded any reflections immediately following the observation so that they were not forgotten.

Document Analysis

In addition to observations and interviews, I also worked to understand the influence of education policy on teaching and learning within The School of

Academic Excellence through an analysis of relevant documents including student records related to risk of retention or promotion, report cards, test scores, and teacher anecdotal records. School records for standardized test score results across subgroups, the annual school report card, and the School Quality Review were also reviewed, as were classroom resources and test preparation materials used for instruction. This information was compared to information collected through observations and interviews. Notes to and from parents, administrators, and teachers related to teaching and learning were also reviewed and considered in light of mandates and pressures related to NCLB.

Bracketing the Phenomenon

After capturing the phenomenon as a whole and portraying the experiences of people in the school, I worked to “bracket the phenomenon” by coding for and pulling out specific findings for closer examination. My efforts were to understand the case on its own terms, not through the meanings and interpretations brought to it through the pre-existing literature (Denzin, 2001). Therefore, I worked to maintain the sense of the story as a whole, while searching for the subjects’ interpretations of their experiences. In bracketing the phenomenon, I took apart the interview and observation experiences and confronted what the teachers, students, and principal of The School of Academic Excellence shared with me on its own merit, trying to understand critical issues through their experiences. These issues came to the fore by coding the interview

transcripts, observation notes, and documents collected for analysis. According to Stake, “the search for meaning often is a search for patterns, for consistency within certain conditions, which we call ‘correspondence’ “ (1995, p. 78). It is here that I worked to develop a better understanding of the epiphanic moments that participants shared. Through coding, I primarily aligned the data with theories that were identified within the conceptual framework- the politics of universalism and difference and an exploration of student opportunities and freedoms to achieve.

One of the critical steps at this point is what Wolcott refers to as “canning” most of the data you accumulate (Wolcott, 1990). The goal, according to Wolcott, is not to accumulate and use all the data you can, but to “can” most of the data in order to better focus your investigation. In bracketing the phenomenon, I was mindful in selecting the stories, episodes, events, and findings that provided the best insight into how the subjects in my study were making sense of and experiencing NCLB.

Construction

Following the bracketing of the phenomenon, it was then put back together through the process of “construction,” making sense of my observations and of what the participants shared through the stories they told. Engaged in the never-ending cycle of the hermeneutic circle, I worked with my subjects in an effort to make sense of each participant’s interpretations and meanings with a

sense of correspondence (Stake, 1995). “The interpretive interactionist, in the phase of construction, endeavors to gather together the lived experiences that relate to and define the phenomenon under inspection” (Denzin, 2001, p. 78). During the construction phase, my triangulated efforts were shared with the participants through a process called “member checking” (Stake, 1995). Through “member checking,” each participant had the opportunity to examine the rough drafts and final version of my analysis and synthesis in order to best ensure that the experiences I captured truly reflected the experiences of those involved. If conflicting interpretations arise, either across subjects, or across the stories of a single subject, I continued to probe, interview, and observe to understand the multiple perspectives that arose. Although several participants expressed concern about things they spoke of during the interview process, when the transcripts and the findings of my study were shared with them, all were in agreement that I had fairly accurately captured their feelings, beliefs, and positions.

Contextualization

The subsequent process of “contextualization” was used to pull the phenomenon into an even more complete whole as it “brings the phenomenon alive in the worlds of interacting individuals” (Denzin, 2001, p. 79). It is here that I returned to the body of literature I examined in my literature review. In many cases, I had to extend my search in the literature and add to my original review of literature that I anticipated as being sufficient to support the sensemaking of my

participants' lived experiences. The experiences that I observed and learned of through the stories my subjects told were contextualized within this body of literature and presented for my reader through thick descriptions that will allow for the reader to come to better know and understand how it is that teachers and students actually experience and make sense of the effects of the No Child Left Behind Act on teaching and learning in their school. Through the presentation of patterns and consistencies found across the personal stories and critical events that I collected through my study, represented vividly through thick description, I bring to my reader the experiences of the poor students of color and the teachers and administrators dedicated to serving them at The School of Academic Excellence.

CHAPTER V

INTRODUCTION TO THE PRINCIPAL: LORENA

In this chapter, I introduce the school at the center of this case study, the School of Academic Excellence and the principal, Lorena Sanchez, who works diligently to address the needs of the school community she serves and also meet the achievement demands imposed by federal and local education policy. At times, Lorena is frustrated by contradictions she sees between the real needs of the children and their families she serves and the mandates she is obligated to comply with through federal and state policy. This chapter illustrates the contradictions Lorena experiences by comparing and contrasting NCLB assumptions with Lorena's beliefs about four major areas of focus relative to student achievement: achievement on standardized tests, proficiency for all students, accountability and highly qualified teachers. The chapter ends with concluding remarks summarizing Lorena's hopes for her students that go far beyond the measures of achievement gauged by standardized tests.

Introduction to the School of Academic Excellence

The first day of elementary school fills the air with an energy like no other. Traffic patterns change as the already busy streets become more congested with countless yellow buses and cars taking children to school. Subway cars and platforms too become over-crowded with sweaty bodies clutching stiff new

backpacks. City buses are also packed with children on their way to a universal destination: school.

The “first day of school” energy is shared by children across this country. What differs are the actual faces arriving at each school site and the things these students carry with them that are not contained in their backpacks. There are also stark differences in the classrooms where the children will spend most of their waking hours for the next year.

This study takes place in a school that welcomes over 300 children on the first day of school: The School of Academic Excellence in Brooklyn, New York. The School of Academic Excellence is one of over 1,000 schools under the leadership of the currently vast and constantly growing New York City DOE that provides instruction for over 1 million children across its five boroughs. The disparity between and across these schools and those in surrounding suburban areas is clear to anyone crossing the threshold of nearly any school site found on the posh Upper East Side or nearby wealthy suburbs, versus those that are found in locations like the South Bronx, East Harlem, and Washington Heights. These differences have been well documented by the ongoing research for the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (1999), Rebell and Wardenski (2004), and Kozol (1991, 1995, 2005).

The School of Academic Excellence is located within the boundaries of a well-known area of Brooklyn called Bedford- Stuyvesant that is locally known as Bed Stuy. Bed Stuy is not famous for its landmarks, bridges or museums like

many parts of New York City. Bed Stuy's fame is more closely aligned with Barry Stein's portrayal of the community as "the largest ghetto in the country" (1975, p. 1).

In, *Bed-Stuy on the Move*, Matias Echanove (2003) provides a history of the growth and changes in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. In the 1600s, this area was a rural community, home to Dutch colonists that farmed the land. In the 1800s, the farms began to be sold to newcomers, mostly free African Americans. In the late 1800s, wealthy New Yorkers began to establish residence in the area now becoming an exclusive location in high demand. Evidence of this historic wealth is easily recognized today in the grandeur of the massive buildings that still house the schools and churches for which they were originally built. Through the years of the Depression these public institutions remained standing, but the regal, free-standing houses were replaced by rows of brownstones and Bed-Stuy changed hands again as white immigrants left and were largely replaced by African Americans fleeing the City, or the South, with hopes of greater economic opportunity and freedom. This time period also brought with it a large influx of Caribbean immigrants also seeking opportunities in America. The post-World War II era saw an additional influx of African Americans, many relocating to this part of New York City from Harlem. The 1960s and 1970s were characterized by growing racial tension, often escalating into riots between the African American and Jewish populations. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Bed-

Stuy was characterized by its gangster culture and its well-known motto became, “Bed-Stuy, do or die!”

Since the turn of the 21st century, efforts have been made to rehabilitate Bed-Stuy and a 2005 campaign by its residents aimed to change the negative views of Bed-Stuy into more positive images such as “Bed-Stuy, and proud of it!”, a far cry from the previous labels including “Dead-Stuy.” These changes have ushered in another influx of residents that are crossing color, racial, and socioeconomic lines as the area is becoming more gentrified.

These changes to the community over time have affected the area immediately surrounding The School of Academic Excellence, also. Today the majority of the residents in the area are Hispanics, largely from Mexico, but also Caribbean-Hispanics, mostly from the Dominican Republic. Recently, the area has also seen an increase in its Hasidic Jewish population. As condominiums and luxury apartments appear in abandoned lots, the teachers grow nervous. These new residences are largely home to the Jewish families who will not put their children into public schools, sending them, instead, to local yeshivas. The administrators and teachers at The School for Academic Excellence expressed concern about the ultimate fate of their school with the influx of so many parents that will choose not to send their children to the local public school.

In the fall of 2007, The School of Academic Excellence opened its doors, welcoming 336 students. 84% of the 2007-2008 student population is Hispanic, 15% is African American, and the remainder of the student population is white,

consisting of a single, white child. 33% of the student population is bilingual and 18% of the students have been designated as special needs students. 87% of the school population qualifies for the free lunch program, and an additional 2% qualify for the reduced lunch program. Standardized test results show that the school has made AYP at all grades and all subgroups for the past three years, but the “students with disabilities” subgroup has made AYP only through the Safe Harbor provision of the law. The “Safe Harbor” designation indicates that if a subgroup did not make AYP, but at least 10% of the students that were “not proficient” the previous year moved into the “proficient” range, the subgroup could make AYP under the Safe Harbor provision (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b). The staff is quite proud of their accomplishment as they have increased student achievement in all areas and have recently moved off of the city’s Schools In Need of Improvement (SINI) list. This move was a celebration, but came with the unfortunate consequence of diminished funding for the school that has caused additional challenges.

The streets in the community that the School of Academic Excellence serves are alive with activity. Blocks are lined with brownstones that are showing visible signs of age and deterioration as well as newly constructed apartment buildings. People speaking a variety of languages flood these streets daily and the local bodegas, shops, and carry-out restaurants are always busy. Within these shops, employees and customers can always be found chatting comfortably with one another while lively music plays loudly in the background. There appear to

be few strangers in this neighborhood and those who are new to the community, like me, are joyfully greeted whether on the street or making a purchase.

The welcoming and enthusiastic personalities of the people in this community are mirrored within the school. As families bring children to the school each morning, parents call out to one another and to each other's children. The security guard often finds that she needs to quiet parents and usher them out of the school so that their high-spirited conversations do not distract students and teachers from their work. The security guard, like most of the parents, knows each adult and student by name. It seems that parents who gather here have found not only a school, but an extended family. The children and parents are visibly proud of and comfortable in the school. Further, the surrounding businesses and neighbors are supportive and protective of the school, going so far as to reserve parking spots for some favored teachers and to call out to the security guard when cars need to be moved, lest the owner receive a ticket.

The smiling security guard welcomes students and visitors and directs them to the second floor where the main office is located. Entering the main office, visitors are met again by more cheerful faces. The office is always busy with a happy hum and the door to the principal's office is rarely closed. On the same floor, the PTA has a designated room that is seldom empty and just down the hall is the Parent Coordinator's room that is also a constant source of activity. Parents come together to discuss student issues, child-rearing issues, personal health concerns and opportunities for personal and professional growth. Most of

these opportunities are provided by the principal who made the decision to open the doors of the school to parents, welcoming them in to be a part of their child's education.

This strong community spirit flows within and throughout the school halls and is particularly visible in the hundreds of photographs that are posted in the hallways, celebrating the students. The art teacher is credited with creating the stunning visual displays that capture the events that bring families into the school throughout the academic year. Every parent can find his or her child's joyful face somewhere on the walls documenting regular school community events which are treasured hallmarks of the inclusive and caring culture that Lorena strives to create at The School of Academic Excellence. Each of these events is detailed later in this chapter, but the hallways of the school are a living mural documenting the history of the current school year.

On the first day of school, the hallways outside were empty, but by the end of September, they were transformed into a gallery dedicated to displayed images of the first day of school and the multicultural day that was put on as a celebration of the individual families that combine to make up the school community. Each collection of photos shows a display of radiant faces of all ages, each celebrating their membership in The School of Academic Excellence family.

Opportunities at the school are not just for the students. Lorena and the Parent Coordinator began to offer learning and networking opportunities for the parents as well. Photographs of parent meetings and interactive workshops

covered the walls outside of the Parent Coordinator's room, and document the high level of parent engagement in the school. Each collection of photographs is paired thoughtfully with a summary of each event in English and Spanish, which also serves to inform parents who were unable to attend about the meetings.

The following months brought more events and matching sets of photographs documenting each celebration of learning and the community- a pumpkin patch created in the school in October, a school-wide Thanksgiving meal shared by all in November, and December brought a ballroom dance assembly and Santa Claus. Each event was documented by camera and captured artfully in stimulating visual displays that were viewed by all who passed. In each display, viewers could find friends, teachers, family members, and, usually, their own faces in photos documenting the school community and its activities.

The images captured by these photo-murals did not happen by chance or accident. They all represent the joyful and enthusiastic community that Lorena has worked exceptionally hard to create at The School of Academic Excellence. The high level of parent participation is not typical in most economically struggling communities. Impoverished and immigrant parents are often too busy working several jobs and, typically, do not feel welcome in schools. Lorena works hard to make sure that this is not the case at The School of Academic Excellence. The growing collection of photographs provides evidence for the success of Lorena's effort. Her smiling face can be seen repeatedly in

photographs of each event where she is engaging with parents and children and working to make every individual feel welcomed.

Introduction to Lorena

As I walked to the School of Academic Excellence on the first day of school, I was awed by the impressive presence of the building in the neighborhood as its five stories towered over the surrounding brownstones. As I grew closer, my eyes met bundles of colorful balloons that were billowing in the wind and out into the streets, welcoming students and teachers back from their summer break. As I rounded the final brownstone, I was taken aback by two stories of green scaffolding that engulfed the front of the building creating a rather anti-climactic entrance. The balloons, I was later told, were the principal's effort to make the best of a rather imperfect situation. This skill is one that I came to recognize as a fundamental trait of the Principal, Lorena Sanchez- her endless efforts to work to make sub-optimal situations as bright and productive as possible and to ensure that her school is a place where students and parents both want to be and feel welcome.

This recognition was immediately reinforced upon entering the school office. As I remembered from previous visits, the office had been painted in the traditional, institutional beige resulting in a rather drab and un-invigorating environment. Some last minute painting over the final weekend of the summer break had transformed the office from a humdrum place of business into what

could have passed for the inside of a cotton candy machine. The shock of the carnation pink walls and hot pink trim must have registered clearly on my face. The two secretaries looked up with pained expressions and a nearby teacher laughed and said, “I call it Pepto-Bismal pink!” The Principal also laughed as she rolled her eyes, pointed to the mauve, flowered curtains and said, “The paint was supposed to match those- dusty pink with dark mauve accents. That’s why you should never let a man pick the paint. I even gave them swatches!”

Adjusted to the initial shock of the office, I turned to greet Ms. Sanchez. Always impeccably dressed with matching suit, shoes, and eye make-up, Lorena Sanchez would blend right into the powerful, executive crowd on Wall Street. Instead, she chooses to spend her days serving the staff, students and community of the School of Academic Excellence. With a thousand watt smile, two rows of perfect teeth, and a firm handshake from a perfectly manicured hand, Lorena Sanchez welcomed me to the first day of school.

Lorena Sanchez did not end up at the School of Academic Excellence by chance. She explains:

Being part of this neighborhood has always been important. It’s very close to me. I grew up in this neighborhood, so that’s basically my way of giving back. I know that a lot of children in this neighborhood need some type of a good role model in their lives. Unfortunately, in the area that we live, we don’t really have that, and so I felt that it was really important for me to come back to where I learned and where I think that I got a really

good education and just give back to the children in the neighborhood the exact same thing.

Lorena has managed to do just that. After attending a local neighborhood school, she went on to college to earn a degree in teaching and then returned to that very same school to begin her career in education. She spent six years as a classroom teacher, three years as a literacy trainer, and four years as an Assistant Principal. When her previous Principal became the Superintendent, he hand-selected her for the position of Principal at the School of Academic Excellence, recognizing the benefits of having a skilled leader who brings the additional strengths of fluency in Spanish, familiarity with the community culture, and an awareness of the challenges of living in the area.

On the first day of school, Lorena spent most of her time in the entryway welcoming parents and students, paying extra care to address students and parents who were new to the school and those who were just starting kindergarten. Her luminous smile was contagious and even the teary eyes of children and the worried looks of parents melted away when Lorena offered her reassuring smile and welcoming hand. The children came dressed in their most impressive clothing showing the value they hold for education- little boys in suits and ties and little girls wearing fancy dresses full of lace and embellishments. Every child received a compliment and a smile. It was clear that parents in this school felt welcomed and their hearts seemed to soar with the promise that The School of Academic excellence would take care of and educate their children.

Lorena's Beliefs on Her Role in Expanding Educational Opportunity

Lorena's background parallels that of her students and she feels that she understands the challenges of growing up and living in the neighborhood that The School of Academic Excellence serves. Lorena's personal experiences in the community were positive. Like many of the students at her school, she was raised by a strong family that was active in the community. Lorena recalls benefitting from a good education that provided strong role models who influenced her decision to pursue a career in education. Lorena appreciates the closeness of urban communities and, specifically, the benefits of living in this close-knit Hispanic community. Lorena honors and respects the importance of community for children and recognizes that community life can either enhance or limit a child's life chances. She believes that the school must help to build community and believes that creating positive energy, opportunities for socializing and sharing music, food, and dancing is important to the development of children, their families and the community. To Lorena, the school ought to provide a safe and welcoming haven for children and their parents.

At the same time, however, Lorena is also painfully aware of the challenges that reduce opportunities for poor children of color and their families. These challenges include poverty and the associated limitations of safe and stable housing, medical and dental care, personal safety, adequate nutrition, and inconsistent or limited parental support due to overworked or absent parents, or those that would like to support their child but are unable to do so because they

are limited by language or their own educational experiences. Lorena carries her concerns for the many obstacles that the children in her school face in her heart and addressing these problems lies at the center of her efforts to expand educational opportunities for her students. She is fully aware of the place and importance of standardized testing, but also works hard to make sure that this emphasis does not take over other critically important contributions that this school makes to the children and their families.

When asked what she wants for her students, Lorena says, “I want them to come to school every day. I want them to come and learn and be ready to learn. I want them to feel safe.” The New York City DOE also places high value on student attendance. In fact, it is one of the areas that is used to rate school quality in the City. More importantly, the DOE values student performance as measured on standardized tests. Lorena’s concern for developing a student population that is enthusiastic about school and prepared to learn is sometimes complicated by the DOE’s emphasis on standardized test scores, which is an outgrowth of NCLB’s call for greater student and school accountability.

Student achievement is the biggest factor used to compare schools within New York City. Lorena reminded her staff often that 55% of their school’s performance review would be based upon the student performance as measured by the mandated standardized tests at grades three, four, and five. Lorena recognizes the importance of maintaining high test scores and test scores at her school rose enough in recent years for the previously labeled “failing” school to

be removed from the district's SINI list. Maintaining the school's status off of this list is a high priority for Lorena. She reflects on this mission:

We've worked hard to get off that list and they [the teachers] know that the priority in this school is to stay off that list and to continue to make the gains that the school has been making. There is really no room or time to slip. We can't take the chance that our students not do well.

A school's placement on or removal from the SINI list is largely contingent upon test scores. Scores at The School of Academic Excellence rose enough under the previous administration for the school to be removed from this list and one of Lorena's primary objectives is to stay off that list. This goal, a vision of high student achievement, is paired with Lorena's goal for children to come to school every day, ready to learn. Sometimes those goals are complimentary, but sometimes that are in contradiction with one another. Too much emphasis on one means that the other is ignored and both are important to Lorena.

In working to find a balance between these goals, Lorena takes on and delegates responsibilities relevant to each goal. By delegating many of the administrative responsibilities to the Assistant Principal and the team of coaches that she works closely with, Lorena is able to invest time and energy into aggressively building relationships between the school, the students and their parents. Throughout the study, it was clear that Lorena delegated the majority of the logistical and scheduling efforts, grade level meetings, and interim teacher visitations to the Assistant Principal. This freed Lorena to focus on building the

student and parent relationships she so highly values. Significant time was also dedicated to responding to the areas of need identified on the previous year's School Quality Review. The majority of these items indicated that the most pressing area of need was in the collection and use of data on student performance. Lorena's efforts to respond to these demands often engaged her in seemingly endless paperwork and took time away from interacting with the students, parents, and staff at her school. In the face of these competing challenges, Lorena works consistently to find a balance between her administrative duties that are directed by the mandates of the DOE and those she has personally identified. She aims to keep her school off the SINI list by continuing to demonstrate continuous improvement in student achievement on standardized tests, and also to ensure that students come to school every day, excited and ready to learn.

How Important is Achievement on Standardized Tests?

NCLB Assumption: Student achievement is a priority

Lorena's belief: There is more to school than achievement on a standardized test

In these days of high stakes testing, the consequences of low student performance may result in whole school sanctions, firings, restructurings, public admonishments, or, for a child, a month of summer school or being held back a grade. These tests are here to stay, at least for now, but Lorena also works hard to ensure that the children see school as more than a place to prepare for tests. She

recognizes the importance of the standardized tests, but works tirelessly to ensure that they do not take over and define children's school experiences. She also realizes that her students may not have the opportunity to experience many things that are important due to poverty or parental discomfort with academic institutions. She explains:

I think that the poverty that's there just hurts them. There's really not a lot, especially in this area, for the children to do to help them be their best. I don't think that there is a lot that is offered to the parents or to the children in the neighborhood. The parents are going to work and then they really can't be involved in the education of their children because they are at work, or they're on welfare and they are at home. We are trying to get them involved into the community but because a lot of them do not have an education they feel uncomfortable being a part of the school community.

Lorena and her staff have worked to increase participation and involvement in school activities by hosting events at different times of the day and night, as well as on the weekend. The events, in part, are designed to encourage the attendance of parents who do not have an education themselves and feel overwhelmed or intimidated by schools. Lorena believes that having events that are non-academic and are celebratory in nature encourages greater parent participation due to their non-threatening nature. Parent participation or involvement has been correlated with academic achievement, thereby expanding students' educational

opportunities (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, & Van Voorhis, 2002; Fan & Chen, 2001; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Lorena believes that increased parent involvement, even in non-academic ways, will enhance her students' opportunities to thrive in school.

Every month, there is a significant event at the school which Lorena views as an integral part of the students' school experience because many of the students would not have the opportunity to experience these things otherwise. Often, the opportunities that Lorena provides help students develop the background knowledge, schema, and experiences that their more privileged white peers experience regularly. Each event, in turn, provides the additional benefit of engaging parents as they are often invited to join these celebrations.

Lorena believes that school is about far more than getting grades and taking tests. Calkins, Montgomery, Santman, & Falk (1998) point out that standardized tests are here to stay and we need to learn to live comfortably with them and Lorena has worked to find a way to do so. Her efforts to maintain the typical structure of a school day rather than have it taken over completely by test preparation activities are evidenced in the after school opportunities offered to students at The School of Academic Excellence. Every Tuesday and Thursday, test preparation sessions are offered after School of the students in grades three, four and five. In her effort to ensure that tests and preparations for them do not take on too significant a role, Lorena balances these test-focused sessions by offering more arts-oriented sessions on alternate days. Many of the students find

far greater success in the after-school programs dedicated to dance and the arts. Like Sen (1992), Lorena believes that if she is to enhance educational achievement, she must focus on more than standardized tests. Therefore, she provides many opportunities within the walls of her school for children to thrive and experience success. She wants to show the children that they are unique and valued individuals and that the school is a place where they are loved, respected, and can feel safe.

Increasing Student Motivation

According to Farley and Rosnow (1975) there are internal and external influences on student motivation. Internal motivators are those that are self-driven and external motivators are those that are influenced by the school. Since one of Lorena's prime objectives is to expand educational opportunity by increasing student engagement and enthusiasm about school and school-related activities, she works to increase student motivation through the opportunities and activities she offers to her students.

In October, the gymnasium at The School of Academic Excellence was converted into a virtual pumpkin patch where the children all came to "pick" pumpkins. Lorena shares her logic in providing this experience:

A lot of minority students don't get to do this. Typically, all the surroundings of the school are projects. When we asked the children if

they had ever gone to a pumpkin patch or gone apple picking, a lot of them didn't know. They weren't able to tell us they had done these things. So I decided, the pumpkin patch isn't far. It's difficult getting all the pumpkins, but the enjoyment that you see on the children's faces is more important than anything else.

Lorena's motivation to bring these experiences to her students thereby enhancing their enthusiasm and motivation for school is validated in Farley and Rosnow's research (1975). Their findings show that students believe that schools can influence their motivation to do better in school by providing "more interesting activities and classes" (p. 53) and by providing them more opportunities to work with friends. Lorena believes that one way she can influence student motivation is through the interesting activities, such as the pumpkin patch, that she provides for her students.

After determining its value in her mind, Lorena shared her idea about the pumpkin patch with her PTA and staff and they enthusiastically took on the responsibility of making it happen. Along with the PE teacher, they rented a van, went to the pumpkin farm and bought hundreds of pumpkins, numerous bales of hay, and other items that would allow them to turn the gym into a pumpkin patch. Lorena was overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of the parents involved. This reinforced for her the importance of making these events happen. On the afternoon the pumpkins arrived, Lorena was called up for a phone call that she had to take. By the time she returned, 20 minutes later, a handful each of teachers

and parent volunteers had transformed the entire room into a pumpkin patch beyond anything Lorena had imagined. This event was the first in a series over the year that supported Lorena's ongoing efforts to build community within and across the staff, students, and their parents.

Brain research on learning habits demonstrates that emotion drives attention and engagement in learning (Caine & Caine, 1997; Ronis, 2007; Sylwester, 1995). Lorena believes that this is even more critical to consider when considering the challenges faced by children in urban settings. The activities that she provides the staff, students, and parents of The School of Academic Excellence during and outside of school hours are all her efforts to expand educational opportunity by increasing student motivation and engagement. The pumpkin patch is just one of many such activities engineered to address the external motivators that Lorena can influence through her role as Principal.

An Attempt to Build Community

November brought a whole school Thanksgiving dinner that was put on in the lunchroom by the students and staff. The enthusiastic PTA showed up with volunteers to support the event, including the local Lions Club that donated the turkeys. Lorena had big plans- she hoped that the cafeteria workers would be able to sit and enjoy a meal prepared for them by the students so that they, too, felt valued as part of the school community and appreciated for their efforts. She shares, "I just thought, how great would it be if the kitchen staff, for once, did not

have to serve the children and for us to serve them?” Lorena’s beliefs in the importance of valuing others are validated in the work of Allan Luks, previously the head of the Institute for the Advancement of Health and currently the head of Big Brothers and Big Sisters of New York City. According to Luks (2001), “Helping others appears to reduce personal discomfort by replacing the thoughts that cause stress—problems at work or other parts of life—with the self-enhancing good feelings received when helpers have personal contact with those they help” (p. 78). Lorena’s vision was that this staff-student celebration would provide a temporary break from the pressures and rigor of the relentless push for academic achievement while simultaneously enhancing the social-emotional health of her students through their efforts to help others.

Unfortunately, this did not happen to the degree Lorena would have liked. The celebration went on for the students, but they were not able to show their appreciation to the cafeteria workers by serving them. As was often the case at The School of Academic Excellence, Lorena’s ongoing efforts to build community and create greater opportunities for students and their families were met by a roadblock. Lorena’s plans were shattered following her interactions with the cafeteria workers’ supervisor:

This whole plan originated so that we could say thanks to the cafeteria workers who help us every day. Unfortunately, when I called their supervisor, they were like, “No you can’t do that. You’re not allowed. That’s their job that’s what they have to do.” I said, “You know, we’re not

saying for them not to do *anything*. We still want them to be a part of the whole celebration. Maybe they could like provide us with the plates and maybe they could help clean up with us at the end, but we would like to serve them.” That was turned down. I didn’t understand. We still did the food and we had some kids actually take food to the kitchen staff. They appreciated that. Since we have a charter school upstairs and they are responsible to cook for the charter school, they still had to cook, but how great would it be that instead of cooking for almost five hundred kids that particular day they only had to cook for whatever amount of kids that they have? It’s like a hundred and something that they have upstairs. It turned out really well, but we really wanted to be able to serve them and say thanks. But, we weren’t allowed.

Lorena’s disappointment about the limitations being imposed by the system was clear. She expected to be faced by the challenges the children brought to school, but she had not anticipated bureaucratic, institutional blocks to her efforts to support her students’ growth and development. In a fashion typical of Lorena Sanchez, she continued her efforts to build community within and across her school as best she could. In this case, she had the students bring food to the cafeteria workers, sharing their meal with them and letting them know that they were an important and valued part of the community. Picking her battles and working to make a difference where she can stand as guiding hallmarks of Lorena as a principal.

Celebrating Abilities that Can Not be Measured

In December, the fifth grade class put on a ballroom dance assembly at the end of the month. The same assembly was repeated at a celebration for the school in February. The two dance assemblies were like none I had ever seen. The hall was packed with parents each time and parents and teachers would call out at the top of their lungs regularly throughout the show- “You go, girl!”...“I know you can move it like that!”...”Mmmm-hmmmm!!! That’s what I’m talking about!”

December also brought Santa Claus along with presents for every single student, provided by the PTA. The December holiday assembly included performances from every grade level. Each one included exuberant singing and dancing. Girls as young as second grade were wearing full faces of makeup and dancing joyfully, gyrating their hips and throwing saucy looks over their shoulders at the audience as they spun and twirled to the beat. As I watched in amazement, a fifth grade teacher who happens to be white, like me, explained, “Dance is part of who they are. It’s in their culture and it’s what they do. We, (meaning white people), can’t imagine a party or assembly with this level of exuberance and self-expression. They cannot imagine one without it.” The Assistant Principal, also white, confirmed this.

Looking over at Lorena, I was reminded of the wisdom of the Superintendent in hiring Lorena as principal. The auditorium was filled with children and parents, rocking along to the music, and Lorena was engaging as enthusiastically as any of them. On this day, every child in Lorena’s school was a

success. Every child was given a chance to sing, dance, or perform and every child was given an opportunity to succeed and to share in the joy and frivolity of the holiday season that the community came together to celebrate. Lorena provides special activities like this one on a monthly basis, saying:

I just think that once in a while, at least once a month, we need to have some type of activity. Just to show the students that, yes, school is important. Yes, your education- that's one hundred percent very important. However, once in a while, you do need that time just to take a breather and say, okay, let's appreciate everything we're learning and let's have a good time today.

How Can All Students Achieve Academically?

NCLB Assumption: All Students Can Achieve Proficiency
If Schools Do Their Job

Lorena's Belief: Some Children Have Challenges in Their Lives That We
Must Help Them Overcome If They Are To Achieve

NCLB is based upon the assumption that all children can and will achieve if schools do their job. According to the law, all students will achieve proficiency through increased student accountability, increased school accountability, and the placement of highly qualified teachers. The policy was also constructed under the belief that by having high standards for all students and by using research proven methods, all students will achieve proficiency as measured by standardized tests (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b).

It is Lorena's hope and desire that all of her students will excel on the standardized tests they are required to take during the third, fourth and fifth grades, but she recognizes that many of her students face challenges on a daily basis that reduce the likelihood that they will perform on these tests at a level that parallels white peers who live more privileged lives. Sen (1992) would agree that the focus on achievement alone is problematic. He argues that there is a significant gap between achievement and "freedom to achieve" and that we cannot expand educational opportunities by focusing on achievement alone. He asserts that we must focus attention on expanding students' "*freedom to achieve*" by addressing the challenges, or "unfreedoms" that undermine the real opportunities that children who live in poor communities have to achieve. Although unfamiliar with Sen and his work, Lorena has taken it upon herself to work to expand educational opportunity by focusing on addressing the relative unfreedoms faced by students at The School of Academic Excellence. Lorena's school includes numerous subgroups, all with unique and, sometimes, overlapping challenges. The range of subgroups represented in her school include racial subgroups such as African Americans, Hispanics, ELLs, special education students, and those affected by poverty. Given this range of groups and their varied needs, Lorena explains her awareness and frustration related to the "diversity penalty" faced by The School of Academic Excellence and similar schools that are home to numerous groups of students who are all being held to the same unrealistic standards. Lorena knows that ignoring spaces of unfreedom

virtually assures that the students at her school will, at best, struggle mightily to achieve the levels of proficiency that are far more attainable for more privileged children. Lorena's beliefs parallel the assertions of Rothstein (2002) and Sen (1992), saying that if schools are to be successful in their endeavors to expand opportunities for poor students of color to achieve, the spaces of inequity that exist outside of the school walls must also be addressed.

Expanding Opportunities for Children by Engaging Parents

The children who come to school every day at The School of Academic Excellence come from homes rich in cultural traditions and hope for a better future. Many of their parents are immigrants who have brought their families to the United States, seeking a better life. These parents are working hard and against difficult economic odds to provide for themselves and their children. However, despite their best efforts, many parents in the community struggle. Like children living in many urban communities, many students at The School of Academic Excellence experience poverty, crime, domestic violence, lack of health care, chaotic living situations, and other life circumstances that affect not only their lives and life chances, but their potential for success in school as well (Sen, 1992). Although many of these problems are out of Lorena's control, she recognizes and works methodically to overcome as many of these difficulties as she can by focusing on parental involvement and providing many opportunities

for parents to enter into the school and become comfortable with and knowledgeable about the education of their children.

“Parents with low levels of education, for example, may be less involved at school because they feel less confident about communicating with school staff owing to a lack of knowledge of the school system, a lack of familiarity with educational jargon, or their own negative educational experiences” (Lee & Bowen, 2006, p. 198). Lorena works to overcome such obstacles, or “unfreedoms” as Amartya Sen (1992) would refer to them, through a variety of efforts. She constantly reviews and re-evaluates her efforts to engage the parents in the school community. It is Lorena’s hope that by inviting and encouraging parent attendance at non-academic, non-threatening events, their comfort and exposure to the school setting will increase and their feelings of discomfort and distrust will decrease. Observations throughout this study revealed that Lorena is a consistent presence at or near the entrance of the school at the beginning and ending of nearly every school day. She explained to me that she felt her presence was important and that parents needed to be able to interact with her and see her regularly.

Knowing the importance of parental support and involvement in expanding educational opportunity, Lorena works to engage the parents in the school community and works to strengthen the home-school connection with the parents of the children at her school. Lee and Bowen (2006) argue that “parent involvement has shown to be positively related to children’s educational

performance and may mediate the effects of poverty, parents' educational attainment, and race/ethnicity on achievement" (p. 194). As a result, "increasing parent involvement has been identified as a possible strategy for reducing the achievement gap" (Lee & Bowen, 2006, p. 194). Through seven months of interaction and observation at The School of Academic Excellence, it is obvious that addressing the space of unfreedom around limited parent involvement has been a primary area of focus for Lorena as she works to expand educational opportunity for students at her school. Both Lorena and the teachers comment on the effects of Lorena's efforts. One fifth grade teacher shares the significant change in parent presence at the school that have resulted from Lorena's work to welcome them, "Parent involvement here has grown drastically over the last few years. The administration never thought the parents were important before. Ms. Sanchez does and now you see them showing up."

Reducing Unfreedoms by Increasing Parent Involvement

As this year is only her second year as Principal of The School of Academic Excellence, Lorena continues working to increase parent involvement by implementing some new practices and getting rid of some old. Previous to the current administration, parents were not joyfully welcomed into the school. Teachers tell stories of a principal in the late 90s who was so opposed to parent involvement that he covered the windows on the first floor with contact paper so that the parents could not even look into the building. According to the Assistant

Principal, “The parents felt they weren’t allowed to come into the building. They weren’t allowed to see what was going on. The parents felt they weren’t welcome.” She explains how things have changed at The School of Academic Excellence since that time:

We bend over backwards to get parents in. The parent voice is so important. We want to have workshops that will help them to be better parents and to know what their children are doing here in school.

Lorena has had to work aggressively to help parents overcome feelings of being unwelcome in their children’s school with good reasoning. According to Lee and Bowen (2006, p. 214), “Parent educational involvement is associated with child achievement and should continue to be an important focus of school staff.

Parents’ involvement at school, according to our results, remains of central importance; existing inequalities in the levels of this type of involvement are likely to contribute to the achievement gap.” Research in parent involvement has identified six types of parent involvement that have been positively correlated with improved educational performance: parenting skills, home-school communication, volunteering at the school, learning at home, decision making related to school policies and practices, and collaborating with the community (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, & Van Voorhis, 2002). Lorena has worked to expand the opportunities her students have to achieve through her efforts to increase the involvement of their parents across all these types of parent involvement. A lack of parental involvement and support is an “unfreedom” that

many poor children of color experience and is one that Lorena feels she has the potential of influencing.

Like Sen, Lorena does not believe that she can focus on achievement as measured by test scores alone if she is to truly serve her students. It is Lorena's belief that by increasing parent involvement in her school, she can positively enhance the opportunities her students have to achieve. Entering into her second year as principal of The School of Academic Excellence, Lorena has not yet seen the full benefits of her efforts to increase parental involvements reflected in student achievement, but throughout the study, Lorena, the Assistant Principal, and other staff members frequently commented on the increased parent presence at the school and attendance at parent meetings at The School of Academic Excellence has grown significantly as a result of Lorena's efforts to change the previously held views of parents. After a full year of working hard to bring parents into the school, Lorena was delighted at the outcome of her first parent meeting during her second year as the principal:

We had a really good turnout and we're really excited about that. For the most part it, opened up my eyes because when I asked how many of the parents would like to continue to have a monthly meeting, everybody's hand was up and some of them had both hands up!

Given the research on the positive correlations between increased parental involvement and enhanced student achievement by Epstein, et al. (2002), Fan & Chen (2001), and Lee & Bowen (2006), Lorena hopes that the positive effects of

increased parental involvement at The School of Academic Excellence will soon be demonstrated in ways beyond increased parent attendance; she fully expects to see increases in academic achievement as well.

Reducing Unfreedoms by Improving Educational Opportunities for Parents

Lorena's efforts to reduce the unfreedoms her students face because of the chaos that poverty creates in children's lives have taken many forms. One of the new practices she has implemented is a series of long-term weekend workshop sessions that she offers for parents. The majority of these long-term parent workshops offered at The School of Academic Excellence are designed to support parents by enhancing their opportunities to find work in well-paying jobs. Many of the parents are lacking the basic education or skills required to find jobs with the income they need to support their families. As a result, they struggle to adequately care for their children. As a result, their children are exposed to many of the difficulties brought on by poverty that negatively affect the real opportunities that these children have to achieve: lack of health and dental care, poor nutrition, and undesirable or dangerous living conditions (Rothstein, 2002).

During her first year as principal, Lorena offered ongoing classes for parents on Saturdays on topics such as: developing skill to serve as home attendants for Alzheimer's patients, computer classes, GED classes and ESL classes. This year, the Saturday workshops were held concurrently with student test preparation sessions for the New York State English as a Second Language

Achievement Test (NYSESLAT)- the mandated test for all English Language Learners. Previously, parents voiced that lack of access to childcare kept them from attending programs offered at the school. Lorena intentionally arranged for the parent and student sessions to run concurrently to better encourage and support parents to attend since childcare was provided through the NYSESLAT test preparation program. The simultaneous programs were instituted jointly in order to expand the opportunities of both students and their parents.

By expanding educational opportunity for parents, Lorena expects that life opportunities will be enhanced for her students as well. As a result of improved skills in computers, English language, and specific areas like home health care, parents of students at Lorena's school are better able to successfully enter into and gain employment in the work force. Better employment opportunities will lead to increased income which will increase the chances that children have to access better living situations with improved nutrition, health care, and housing options.

By increasing the opportunities of the parents, Lorena feels that she is also enhancing the potential of their children to achieve as well. As she shares the success of the twenty parents that participated in last year's sessions dedicated to learning how to be a home health care worker followed by a resume writing class that resulted in a number of parents finding a job, Lorena shares her conflicting emotions:

It's good and it's bad. It's good because they're getting a job and can help their family. It's bad because they get a job and then I don't hardly see them anymore.

Reducing Unfreedoms by Honoring the Many Cultures within the School

Some of Lorena's efforts to involve parents have been very concrete and literal in nature. For example, she made the decision to move the PTA room from a higher floor down to the 2nd floor of the building, close to the office and to the parent coordinator's room. She made this move as a result of hearing that parents might not come to the school simply because they would have to walk two extra flights of stairs to get to the room they were assigned. Although Lorena could not understand how walking up two extra flights of stairs would deter a parent from going to school to support their child, she made the decision to shuffle some classrooms and as a result the PTA room is now more convenient and easily accessible to all parents. Even though it was not her preference or something that Lorena understood, she knew that the value of having parents in the school was greater than the inconvenience of moving the PTA room. Lorena commented that she has noticed an increase in parent presence on the floor and numerous visits to the PTA room during this study also reinforced the effectiveness of Lorena's decision. There was not a single time during the study that I visited this room and did not find parents, either specifically working on a PTA task or just lounging comfortably and chatting during the school day.

Lorena also made some controversial moves related to the PTA. Always working towards the greater good for her community, Lorena invested energy into restructuring the current PTA in a manner that would better support the community. She explains:

This year again I've seen a lot of growth even with our parent population. Coming into the school last year as a first year principal we had four members in the PTA and it was actually two married couples. I was a little disappointed because I just felt it wasn't really a true representation of this school. At the end of the year, working with the parent coordinator, I stressed to her that it was really important to try to get other parents involved. I said to the PTA members that were active last year, "This is nothing against what you're doing. I appreciate you 100%. However, we need other families represented." So, this year, we have six new PTA members and they are all part of a different family.

Inserting herself into the PTA was difficult for Lorena to do in that she knew that she was altering a structure that had solidified itself over the past several years, but she was able to see beyond the initial discomfort such a change would bring. She recognizes the importance of involving more parents and families in the school as well as better representing the broader demographic of the student population. When asked about the original PTA that had reigned comfortably for the past several years, Lorena says:

One of them, she is still a part of the PTA. Another one is not involved in PTA. One was a former PTA President. Unfortunately someone else was voted in and became PTA President. He is still a part of the leadership team, though. In one way, shape, or form those parents may not be involved in the PTA, but they are involved in different ways. So that's good- we didn't necessarily lose them.

Lorena's expansion of the PTA extended beyond just seeking out more families. She sought a PTA that better represented the overall demographic of the school. Previous to her intervention in the PTA leadership, the PTA consisted of representatives from Mexican families only. As a result, the Mexican culture was reflected in the nature of the activities offered, as well as in parent attendance at those events. During her initial interview, Lorena enthusiastically explained how the Mexican culture that was predominant in her school's population was also represented in the food choices offered at PTA hosted movie nights- mazorca de maíz (Mexican corn on the cob) and tostadas with refried beans. Lorena calls these "typical things our children will eat" but goes on to explain, "They sell regular things, too. They sell candy, soda, juice, and water."

However, as the year unfolded, Lorena and the Assistant Principal discovered that the focus on the Mexican culture was advantaging some communities in the school while disadvantaging others. As a result of a conversation that Lorena had with the African American security guard during which Lorena sought to understand the lower attendance and under-representation

of the black community at school events, she was alerted to the powerful influence of something seemingly as simple as food offering. As a result, Lorena pushed to expand the menu offerings at school events to better represent the range of cultures within the school. She worked with the Assistant Principal who designed a school multicultural day at the beginning of the school year that was engineered to increase knowledge and appreciation of all the cultures represented at The School of Academic Excellence. The Assistant Principal worked to have a variety of cultures represented on the multicultural celebration day. Through selective and aggressive recruiting of parents and teachers from differing backgrounds, the multicultural day was a success and the school door was opened, inviting more parents to join in the school community. Lorena wanted to create a culture where all ethnicities and cultures felt welcomed in the school, not just the predominant Mexican community.

Through all of this, Lorena saw how the unintentional elevation of Mexican families and heritage in the school was negatively impacting the participation of Puerto Rican, Dominican, African American, and other students and their families. Leading a school that is home to an existing and growing population that includes Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and other Hispanic cultures, as well as African American students, Lorena saw the need to alter the PTA demographics to better parallel that of the student body. In doing so, Lorena altered fundamental, pre-existing structures that she perceived to be barriers to her work in expanding opportunities of all her students.

Expanding Opportunities by providing a “Safe Haven”

Rothstein (2004b) argues that, “the influence of social class characteristics is probably so powerful that schools cannot overcome it, no matter how well trained are their teachers and no matter how well designed are their instructional programs and climates” (p. 5). The intent of his work is to draw attention to the fact that schools have powerful opportunities to influence the lives of children, but that they are incapable of doing it alone and cannot be held fully responsible for lapses in other areas of social responsibility that federal policy often forces on schools. Lorena, too, sees the limitations of the influence of schools as a result of the lives some students live outside of school.

One of the specific spaces of unfreedom endured by many students at Lorena’s school is that of personal safety. Numerous Leadership Team, staff, and Crisis Response team meetings throughout the study dedicated significant time to addressing the safety needs of students whether it was related to the influence of local gangs and drug dealers, or violence within the home.

At a Leadership Team meeting while discussing how to best support the students at The School of Academic Excellence, the Assistant Principal asserts, “We can’t control what’s going on at home, but while they’re here, we have to do everything possible to help them.” Lorena built upon and reinforced this statement, exclaiming, “We are their safe haven. We never want to lose that. We know if something is not quite right. We know if a child is calling out for help.”

This meeting occurred shortly after the highly-publicized death of a young girl in a nearby neighborhood who suffered from abuse that had gone unreported. The publicity of the abuse suffered by Nixmary Brown spurred the Leadership Team into action with the intent of ensuring that no child from The School of Academic Excellence suffers the same fate. The meeting concluded with the decision to educate teachers on how to recognize and respond to evidence of abuse and, also, to offer parent workshops on domestic violence and abuse. Women and children living in poverty are more vulnerable to such acts of violence as they are, typically, more limited in their freedom to choose to leave. These women often have to make “deformed choices” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 114) choosing to stay in undesirable and often dangerous situations simply because they have no other choice.

The goal of the leadership team was to support parents to learn how to handle difficult situations without violence and to help those who found themselves victims of abuse to understand their rights and options within the community. The challenge confronted by the team was: How do you get parents to attend meetings titled “Domestic Violence” or “Child Abuse?” The decision was made to imbed these topics into other workshops offered later in the year that would allow Lorena and the Guidance Counselor to directly address these concerns without speaking to empty rooms because parents were either uninterested in or embarrassed about attending workshops specifically focusing on abuse. These workshops were to be scheduled to begin after the conclusion of

this study, but these workshops reinforce and validate the dedication that Lorena has to serving the broader needs of her students and working to ameliorate the potential negative effects of life outside of school that often undermine children's freedom to focus on their education.

Overcoming Negative Influences in the Community

Some of the challenges Lorena's students face are not easily and simply addressed through increasing parental involvement and offering workshops. What is one to do, for example, with a prekindergarten student who proudly announces to the security guard, "My father's on the block!" Without the appropriate background knowledge, one might assume that this child has a supportive parent who just walked her to school and is therefore still "on the block." Unfortunately, in this neighborhood, someone who is "on the block" is a recognized and celebrated drug dealer. Such examples validate Rothstein's (2004b) assertions about the difficulties that many students face in working to overcome the significant obstacles to not only learning, but to growing up in poor communities. Drugs are a problem at all socio-economic levels, but become much more visible and destructive in poor communities where the parties involved do not have the resources and capabilities to hide, mask, or disengage from the illegal behavior. Lorena sees this, but finds that there is often too little she can do to shield her students from the negative influences of drugs in the community. Her response to this information that was shared by the security guard during a Crisis Response

meeting was a sad sigh paired with a momentary look of defeat. After a moment of silent and collective reflection, the meeting continued without the child being named or the situation addressed. There are apparently some things that Lorena is not yet prepared to take on in her role as principal.

In addition to the immediate and personal barriers related to social class status such as decreased access to health care, nutritious food, stable and clean living conditions (Rothstein, 2002), students at The School of Academic Excellence are influenced by the crime that is prevalent in the neighborhood. The father of the prekindergarten student mentioned above is faced with a difficult situation that is widely shared by racial and ethnic minority men with too little education. Although they work hard to do well and make a living, they often have too few options for making a livable wage. Drugs and drug dealers are not an unfamiliar sight to many of the students at Lorena's school. Neither are other dangerous individuals. Although there was nearly always a friendly neighborhood face to be seen during daylight hours, teachers were warned regularly at meetings that they should take care and be on the lookout while in the area. One teacher, for example, was followed into the school by a man who harassed her all the way into the building. As a result, teachers are told to leave through different doors of the building, at different times, and to park in different spots. All of this is difficult since there is only one door that is staffed by a security guard, parking is severely limited, and teachers tend to arrive and leave at the same time given the consistent hours of the school day. Specifically, teachers

were warned about a current gang initiation wherein Mexican gang members would stop to ask a woman for directions, shoot her, and then drive off. All of these things are certainly challenges that create fear for many teachers who come into and leave the community every day, but they are everyday occurrences for the children who live in the community. Staff members are growing increasingly alarmed at the gang symbols that are being found etched onto desks, auditorium seats, and in bathrooms. Lorena works hard to make her school a happy, healthy, and productive place, but the children eventually have to leave the school and go home to their families and some homes present challenges that are very difficult for the school to overcome, validating Rothstein's argument that schools are often unable to overcome the negative influences typical of many impoverished communities. Nevertheless, Lorena persists in her efforts to overcome the unfreedom that she feels she is capable of influencing. For now, Lorena responds as she can to the drugs and gangs that flit about on the periphery of her school. In the school the gang tags are swiftly removed and she visits classrooms with the guidance counselor and Assistant Principal, warning children against the negative influences of drugs and gangs. Lorena focuses her efforts mainly on minimizing the distractions these elements pose and directs her efforts towards those things she feels she has greater control over and opportunity to influence such as the hours the children spend at her school during the day and the opportunities she has to influence the parents who are in greater control of those hours that fall outside of the school day.

Challenges for English Language Learners: Access to Bilingual Education

When pressed for more information on the challenges children face in this neighborhood, she explains:

I know the challenges that this neighborhood and the children can face. I can sympathize with the children a little more. The fact that we do have a lot of English Language Learners- a lot of times children come here and people are like, 'Well, they don't know the language, so let's put them in the lowest grade possible.' I don't think that's really fair because if they know it in their language, they will definitely get it in the English language. It just takes a little bit more time.

Here, Lorena addresses an all too common school response to children who speak little English- placing them into lower grade levels even though their cognitive abilities, as demonstrated in their home language, would place them in a higher grade level grouping (Cummins, 1998). Cummins research focuses attention on the misguided attribution of academic difficulties to cognitive rather than linguistic factors. Lorena's sensitivity to and understanding of the challenges ELLs face in navigating language and content are an asset to the ELLs at the School of Academic Excellence. In assuring that their lack of proficiency in English does not impede their content learning by holding them back in lower grade levels until their English proficiency improves, works to expand their opportunities to achieve.

It is important to note that these projected beliefs were contradicted by her actual behaviors when a 4th grade student from Nicaragua arrived in January. The academically strong young girl did not speak any English, yet was placed in a third grade classroom. The teacher explains that this decision was made because there were only bilingual classes available at second and fifth grade. The only options were to place the child in a bilingual class two grades below or one grade above her grade level, or to place her in an English classroom on her grade level, or one grade level below. The ultimate decision, counter to Lorena's argument above, was to place the child in the third grade classroom with a large number of bilingual students with the expectation that the review of content would allow for her to more quickly pick up the English language. This collision between belief and practice is one that Lorena encountered frequently in her efforts to meet the required mandates of the school system as she simultaneously worked to expand her students' opportunities to achieve. In this situation, Lorena's voiced beliefs about how to best expand educational opportunities for ELLs were contradicted by her own actions. The fear of the sanctions associated with student performance on standardized tests and the incapacity of the school to meet this student's needs as a learner drove Lorena to make a decision that ran counter to her belief about how to meet the needs of ELLs. There was not a bilingual class at the child's grade level and the fourth grade staff was unable to navigate the language learning needs of the child while simultaneously supporting her content area learning. Lorena felt her only choice was to place the child at a lower grade level

where the content was more accessible and she would be left to navigate the language challenges together with her teacher.

Challenges for English Language Learners: Limited English Proficient Parents

An additional obstacle faced by students who are ELLs is the language barrier that their parents face as well. The superintendent worked to address this at The School of Academic Excellence by hiring Lorena, a fluent Spanish speaker although, by her own admission, she does not speak formal Spanish. “I’m bilingual. I speak Spanish, but it’s kind of like that Spanish that you grow up in the neighborhood and learn. It’s not, to me, proper. But, I can carry on a conversation and the parents will understand me.” Lorena has worked hard to connect with the Spanish-speaking parents in the school community and to increase their access to and comfort in the school, working to build their cultural capital relative to the school and the educational system their children are a part of. In her effort to honor the LEP parents who attend her meetings, Lorena conducts parent meetings in both Spanish and English.

Lorena’s efforts to expand educational opportunities for students whose parents do not speak English has benefitted many children whose parents are now able to engage in and understand the content of meetings, but it has also had an unfortunate, unintended consequence: the parents of the African American students are growing increasingly frustrated with meetings that are growing longer and longer because everything must be stated in English and then repeated

as it is translated into Spanish. Lorena has expressed concerns several times about how to respond to this without alienating either parent group, but has yet to come up with a solution. Already, she runs multiple sessions of each parent meeting she offers- one during the school day and one after school in order to accommodate the varied schedules of parents. She simply doesn't have the time to run any additional meetings that would focus on Spanish or English only.

It is in this realm that Lorena faces one of her greatest challenges as the leader of the school. Lorena firmly believes that she has the responsibility to meet the widely differing needs of the students in her school. One of the ways she works to address those needs and increase educational opportunity for those students is by addressing parents in their native languages- Spanish and English. A framework for a politics of difference (Larson & Ovando, 2002) structures her beliefs and actions- all parents are not the same and she must recognize how they differ as individuals if she is to be successful in expanding the educational opportunities of their children. Lorena believes that conducting the parent meetings in one language only will alienate either the Hispanic parents if all documents and workshops are provided in English only, or will alienate the non-Hispanic community if all communication is in Spanish. According to the Assistant Principal, the previous administrator followed this route out of respect to the 85% Hispanic majority. Lorena's refuses to take such a universalist stance and her efforts to ameliorate this have allowed her to better meet the needs of speakers of both English and Spanish. Those efforts have come at a cost, though,

as her efforts have posed the additional challenge of duplicating meetings and messages and the time it takes to deliver those messages. The parents seem to want Lorena to operate under a politics of difference, meaning to meet the needs of both groups, but only if it doesn't inconvenience them.

What is the Impact of Increased Accountability?

NCLB Assumption: Increasing Accountability will Narrow the Achievement Gap

Lorena's Beliefs: Too Much Accountability Is A Distraction
From Other Equally Important Concerns

As an educational policy, NCLB is unprecedented in its focus on increased school and student accountability in the form of high stakes standardized tests (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003; Cimbricz & College, 2002; "Effect of," 2004; McNeil, 2000; Rothstein, 2004b). According to the law, "By the 2005-06 school year, states must begin administering annual, state-wide assessments in reading and mathematics for grades 3-8...By 2007-08, states must implement science assessments to be administered once during each of the three levels of K-12 education: elementary, middle, and high school" (McGuinn, 2006, p. 180). There are many who praise standardized tests for positively influencing student achievement and stimulating reform (Herman & Golan, 1991; Phelps, 2003). There are also many critics who take a different stance. Although they agree that the tests influence education, they do not necessarily agree that the result is for the better. Critics argue that testing has had many negative consequences, including a narrowing of curriculum to the content areas being assessed and neglecting all

others (Amrein & Berliner, 2002a; 2002b; Cimbricz & College, 2002; Corbett & Wilson, 1991).

Inadequate performance on standardized tests impacts both individual students and entire schools. As a requirement of NCLB, all test data is viewed both as an aggregate for the school and also viewed in a disaggregated fashion calling attention to the performance of every racial and ethnic group of students in a school. The expectation is that all students in all schools will achieve proficiency in all content areas that are tested by the year 2014 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b). There are mixed views about the ways in which AYP is measured and gauged through disaggregation. Most researchers praise the attention that testing has directed to discrepancies between performance of the various student populations, but there are many who criticize the unfair burden that is placed on schools that have diverse student bodies and are therefore subject to what has been labeled the “diversity penalty” (Novak & Fuller, 2003; Kim & Sunderman, 2005). Schools serving poor racial and ethnic communities face greater opportunities to fail to make AYP under the law (Bracey, 2004; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2005; Socolar, 2004).

Lorena, too, faces the negative influences of standardized testing on a regular basis at her school. She sees the focus on preparation for standardized test performance as a distraction from other priorities she has for her students. The use of the tests to measure student achievement and the quality of education that her school provides are also a frustration for Lorena. She realizes that the

students at The School of Academic Excellence face great unfreedoms that interfere with their abilities and opportunities to achieve, yet those challenges are not taken into consideration when Lorena's students are compared to others.

Lorena Argues: "If I could pick and choose..."

Additional spaces of unfreedom faced by the students at The School of Academic Excellence become more visible when comparing the student body of Lorena's school with that of the public charter school currently occupying the fifth floor of the building. Ultimately, Lorena will not be judged on what she sees as priorities for her students- coming to school regularly and being ready to learn. Many schools do not have to work on those issues, however, if Lorena does not make this happen, she knows her children will never pass the tests. Nevertheless, she will be judged on how much students learn as measured by standardized tests and those test scores will be compared to students at other schools. NCLB is based on the assumption that all students can attain proficiency and that the achievement gap can be closed (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b). Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is the measure by which Lorena and her students will be measured. Did every student and every subgroup made adequate progress towards progress? Lorena believes that all her students can learn but is deeply frustrated by the way in which her students and therefore her school are judged and the process that compares schools, especially when the spaces of unfreedom differ so radically from school to school and student to student.

Specifically, Lorena expresses frustration over the differences between the student body at the School of Academic Excellence and the charter school that is using space on the fifth floor of her building, Lorena tells me, “If I could pick and choose whom I wanted here, then I am sure I would have a wonderful school, too.” The reality of public schools, though, is that principals cannot pick and choose their students. The challenges related to this became clear as I observed and then discussed the enrollment of a new student just three days before the all-important English Language Arts (ELA) test which determines the fate of both schools and students. Lorena recalls the situation:

Here’s one particular case. A little boy that we had come in yesterday. He’s a fourth grader and, you know, fourth grade is a mandated testing year. That’s the group of children that basically determine how your school is doing. They look at that grade. And this boy has been attending his previous school from Kindergarten all the way up to fourth grade and he was recently taken away from his mom. So, now the court mandated that the father take the child. The child’s living with the father, but the court is mandating that the father change the school because the mother is still living in the area where the child’s going to school. And, so, the court mandated that the last day he could attend the other school was December 21st. The father says to me, “I wanted to leave him in the old school because he didn’t want to change. He’s been there since Kindergarten, but

the court mandated that I had to... How do I go to a judge and say, you need to leave this child in his school because he has a test?"

Lorena pauses as she reflects on the child and then blurts out quite loudly and unexpectedly, "Oh my God! How many subgroups does this one child have?" She went on to identify all the subgroups the child would fall into and, therefore, affect the performance of the entire school: male, Hispanic, Special Ed, poverty, and ELL. There are five areas in which this child's performance could dramatically impact the future of this school, and he will only have been in attendance for three days before the standardized test begins. In addition to the challenges presented merely by being a member of the aforementioned subgroups, this is a child who has been through a court case, lost his mother, moved, changed schools, and moved in with his father, all in less than two weeks and is now facing a test that will determine whether he moves on to the next grade. Lorena feels that moving the child now is not only difficult for her school, but also unfair to the child. Rothstein, too, would argue that this child has significant needs that must be addressed that are beyond the boundaries of the school and Lorena knows that those needs matter. His performance on this test will dictate if he moves on to the next grade or be required to go to summer school. A child who has been torn from his home and mother has far more important things to process and focus on than his preparation and performance on a test that takes a snapshot at a single moment in his life that could influence his entire future. Lorena believes that the odds of this child doing well on the test are low given the recent upheaval in his

life. If he does not pass the test and is ultimately retained, the consequences are dire. According to Cunningham and Allington (1999), “ In most cases, retained children’s actual achievement gradually slides backward so that, two or three years following the retention, they are once again among the lowest achievers. The combination of overage and low achievement are powerful predictors of dropping out of school” (p. 6).

Amartya Sen would argue that the “unfreedoms” this child is facing limit educational opportunity for him and may prevent him from achieving that which is important to him. Sen argues that focusing time and energy on achievement alone for this child would be misplaced (1992, p. 31). Lorena recognizes that the social and emotional needs that are tied to the current upheaval in this child’s life must be attended to if this child is to focus on education. She knows that ignoring these needs and focusing on academic achievement only needs will not help this child to achieve his potential, yet NCLB promotes this narrow focus on academic achievement to the exclusion of other life needs.

Rothstein’s arguments parallel those of Sen who argues that we must not look to achievement as an end to itself, but rather direct our attention to the opportunities one actually has to achieve what is important to him or her. “Achievement is concerned with what we *manage* to accomplish, and freedom with the *real opportunity* that we have to accomplish what we value” (Sen, 1992, p. 31). Through its emphasis on test scores, NCLB suggests that achievement on these tests is the best indicator of school success and that which should be the

focus of school efforts aimed at closing the achievement gap (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b). Sen (1999) and Rothstein (2004b) would argue that this focus on test performance should not be the only focus of schools or of social policy. Both would argue that the significant unfreedoms faced by the students at The School of Academic Excellence and the thousands like them in surrounding schools in Bed-Stuy and other similar urban must also be addressed.

Can Students With Unequal Backgrounds Make Equal Progress?

As can be seen by the previous examples, Lorena has committed herself to serving the needs of her students in ways that extend far beyond preparing them for the tests they will be taking throughout their intermediate school years, but it is impossible to escape their influence:

It's important for the kids to do well on the tests because this is basically how every school is being rated. That's a statement that really does bother me because I don't want anyone to look at our school and say, 'Okay. They're all about test scores.'

NCLB is grounded in the assumption that all children can achieve and that the achievement gap can be closed and that this can best be achieved and measured by holding students accountable via standardized testing. Locally imposed initiatives resulting from the national NCLB policy have forced Lorena to operate under a politics of universalism that dictates that all students in all schools and all subgroups will take and be judged by tests that will determine the fate of students,

schools and their staffs. Local and federal initiatives have gone further and mandated not only that performance be measured, but that every child in every school make AYP as determined by individual states, with the ultimate goal that every child achieve proficiency by 2014. This mandate holds true for every child in every school across the country. This universalist stance, driven by the belief that “all people should be treated equally, and no group should receive preferential treatment” (Larson & Ovando, 2001, p. 66), contradicts what Lorena knows to be true of her students- the challenges that they face outside of school and the resulting baggage that they carry requires different treatment if they are to expand their real freedom to achieve. Lorena believes that without appropriate support, students cannot be compared to one another and held to the same standards if their life circumstances and opportunities to learn are vastly different. Lorena’s feelings are especially strong on this point when it comes to trying to protect her special education students:

That’s really my main concern. If they’re going to rate the schools, then they need to assess the children differently. In regards to Special Ed, and I say this all the time, Special Ed is a subgroup. If Special Ed is a subgroup, then test them as a subgroup separately. Test them based on their IEPs. Unfortunately, Special Ed students are not tested based on their IEPs... I mean, you don’t want to set low expectations for them, but, realistically, they have a legal document that states they’re not at a third grade level.

Or, they're not at a fourth grade level. Or, whatever grade it is they're in.

So, how do you test them at that level?

Lorena's frustration over the universal approach to testing students, regardless of their competencies or needs, is confounded by the fact that the performance of these students will affect her school's performance record. If every subgroup, including those students who are legally documented as having special educational needs as learners, does not continue to improve at a specified rate, the school will suffer sanctions according to the law (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Lorena finds herself in a difficult situation: her frustration with the law and its disrespect of the recognized learning needs and limitations of students with special needs is significant, yet if she refuses to comply and test her students as required by law, her school will receive sanctions for not fulfilling the requirements of testing all students. How can she honor the needs of her students while also complying with the law? The simple answer is she cannot. Lorena made the only choice she felt she could and complied with the law, assessing her students against her better judgment and against her fundamental beliefs about learning.

How Do Highly Qualified Teachers Expand Educational Opportunity?

NCLB Assumption: Hiring Highly Qualified Teachers will
Narrow the Achievement Gap

Lorena's Beliefs: Being Labeled Highly Qualified is Sometimes Not Enough

NCLB required that every classroom be staffed by a “highly qualified teacher” by the 2005-2006 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b). This mandate had serious implications for all schools, but especially for those in urban areas that are notorious for high staff turnover rates, fewer applicants, lower salaries, and greater challenges. In response to this teacher shortage, numerous agencies have constructed alternative and expedited certification routes that have rapidly increased the applicant pool. Lorena inherited several of these alternately certified teachers and has found unique challenges that go along with those staff members, as well as the needs of the entire staff as they work together to expand educational opportunities for students at The School of Academic Excellence. She realizes that the certification of a teacher as “highly qualified” is not adequate and that she needs to continue to support these teachers as professionals working in a difficult educational context.

Building a Professional Community to Expand Educational Opportunities

In stark contrast to her pristine and perfectly composed image on the first day of school, three days before, Lorena was sweating profusely with her hair pulled back in a ponytail as she worked to help teachers ready their classrooms for the children. About a third of the teachers’ rooms had been changed by her in order to keep the grade level teams together physically instead of being spread all over the building. Not afraid to do the messy work she was asking of her staff, Lorena spent much of her time on the days before school hauling desks and

chairs, sorting dusty books, and moving boxes. Through efforts like this and her “open door policy,” Lorena has earned the respect of her staff. Her “open door policy” has been made explicitly clear to the staff repeatedly. In a note to the faculty, Lorena encourages the teachers to feel comfortable communicating with her and reminds them of the important fact that she, too, is learning and growing as a professional and that they can help her to do this. She writes:

As your principal, please know my office doors will always be open to you. Once again, I thank you for empowering me through your wisdom and teaching.

Again and again, the staff shared their appreciation for an administrator who is truly open about what she knows and does not know and who is very willing to learn from other people, to seek out and find answers, and to ask for help when she needs it. Lorena believes that knowing what you know and what you don’t know is critical to good leadership. She says:

If I don’t have the information, if I don’t have the answer for you right now, I’ll try to get it for you. I’ll call other principals or other contacts that could definitely tell me or guide us.

Previous to Lorena, there the School of Academic Excellence had a series of principals whose thoughts on leadership were very different from those held by Lorena. According to veteran staff members, previous morale was low under the leadership of previous principals. One of them shares:

The school was oppressive. The halls were a dark, dark institutional green. The bulletin boards were flat and one-dimensional. It really didn't give you a good feeling. There wasn't a child friendly atmosphere that you would expect to see in a school building.

Lorena believes that a school needs to be a place where students, parents, and staff want to be and she works hard to support her staff. She states that her open door policy surprises her teachers at times and it helps her to build productive relationships with them. She recalls that one of her teachers said:

“I have to say I'm really appreciative because I want to feel like I can trust you. When I got this letter from you, at first it was like, ‘How could you do this?’ but leaving your office I do feel much better and I know that I can come to you again and say, ‘Okay. I don't have this in place, but can you tell me or give me someone who can give me the support?’”

Lorena takes to heart the importance of building good working relationships with her faculty saying: “Even though I'm the principal of this school, I can't run a school by myself.”

The sense of community that Lorena is working to build within and across the staff and community is becoming readily apparent to even those who are new to the community. Lorena recalls what a new teacher said to her about the culture of the building:

One of the IEP teachers said to me “Has this school always been this way? I really love this sense of community. Everybody is working with each

other.” It’s wonderful to hear that. Then the secretary who was listening to us turns around and says, to the teacher “No. Unfortunately, it hasn’t always been this way.” So, it made me feel good to know that what I am doing is working.

Lorena recognizes the importance of getting the entire staff, which includes her, working together to support the students and community they serve. In a letter to her staff following the receipt of a hard-earned and highly coveted “A” ranking on their New York City School Report Card, Lorena congratulates and recognizes the collective efforts of her staff:

In my many years as an educator I find that the reason for a school’s success and accomplishments comes down to one word “teamwork.” Together we have overcome many challenges and changes ranging from the old District policies, to Regional policies and now the policies and structures of the Community Learning Support Organization. We have met every challenge and have performed admirably.

Lorena, who grew up in and attended elementary and middle school in the neighborhood, ends this same letter to her staff with a bit of personal history about her journey as an educator:

As a former student of District 14, I remember as a child sitting in my old classroom and dreaming of becoming an educator. I never thought my dream would come true. I thank my luck stars every day and know that I am blessed.

Expanding Educational Opportunity Through Hiring Highly Qualified Teachers

Lorena is proud of her staff and they are aware that she is fully committed to supporting them in their efforts to expand educational opportunities for the students at The School of Academic Excellence. Lorena has hired about 20% of the staff herself, the rest she inherited from previous administrations. She explains what she looks for when hiring a new teacher:

Commitment, compassion, and making sure that they were able to relate to the needs of the school and the children. Not just that they were looking to come and go home from 8:40 to 3. They can't consider this a 9 to 5 job. If they do, they are going to burn out. That is part of their contract and that's understandable, but that is not the type of person I really want to work in our school. If you want to run out of here at 3:00 every single day, then this is not the school for you. This school does have a lot of needs and you can't fulfill those needs in the time that you're supposed to be working.

It is obvious that Lorena has been successful in her ability to interview well and to subsequently hire teachers that fit her criteria. The majority of the teachers at The School of Academic Excellence enthusiastically embrace the responsibility of being more than just a 8:40-3 teacher. The teachers at The School of Academic Excellence can be found on site working to support children long outside of school hours. Those teachers who live in the neighborhood also give themselves

to the students outside of the time they are at the school site. The well-loved art teacher lives near several of the children and tells stories of how she supports one deeply troubled fifth grade girl by bringing her to the grocery store to purchase ingredients needed to buy a cake so that she can participate in the fifth grade bake sale. The third and fifth grade teachers tell stories of sharing their personal cell phone numbers so that students in need can reach them outside of school hours.

Not all of the teachers at The School of Academic Excellence have this type of commitment and passion, however. Lorena reflects on her experiences with teachers who have been certified through an alternative certification route in New York City called the Teaching Fellows program:

We have had Fellows in the building. I haven't hired Fellows. I'm just not really fond of hiring them. I do truly believe that sometimes you have to give people opportunities, but I think that when you come from a totally different background and you're going to work in a school with a lot of needs that's not the best person for the school. We had a couple of Fellows in the school when I came here and we still have one, actually. They leave, though. I just tend to feel that they get their experience, they get what they have to do in regards to the program itself, and then it's either too much of a challenge or they fulfilled their requirements to get their Masters degree and then they just go somewhere else.

Lorena realizes the importance of commitment and consistency, especially for children in such dire need of support. She has not has good experiences with

alternatively certified teachers at either of the schools she has worked in and questions the quality of these teachers as well as their longevity. An investigation of the recent staffing history at The School of Academic Excellence shows that the alternatively certified teachers that were certified through the Fellows program continue on after their two-year commitment, but teachers who entered through the TFA program have consistently left following the completion of the required two-year commitment. Lorena does not differentiate between these two groups at her school and refers to them all as Fellows.

Research on alternatively certified teachers validate her concerns in respect to Teach For America teachers, but not for those certified through the Teaching Fellows program. TFA teachers have a greater tendency to leave the teaching field at the conclusion of their two-year commitment than teachers that are certified through the Teaching Fellows program (Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2008). Research by Kane, Rockoff, and Staiger (2008) also refute the arguments many critics make about the quality of alternatively certified teachers- they find little statistical difference between the effectiveness of new teachers that are certified through traditional or alternative routes.

If efforts to increase educational opportunity for students are to include effective teachers then those that are hired cannot be selected from a pool that has a record of suboptimal performance and high rates of attrition. Lorena is unaware of the findings of Kane, Rockoff and Staiger suggesting that hiring of Teaching

Fellows has greater potential for expanding educational opportunity than hiring TFA teachers. She has generalized her beliefs about alternatively certified teachers to all programs and chooses not to hire any of these teachers as a result of her past negative experiences with non-traditionally certified teachers.

When Policy, Beliefs, and Practice Collide

Lorena's story is one of a principal who is working hard to recognize and address the varied needs of her students while operating under the umbrella of federal and local education policies that require consistent performance across all of the groups represented and characterized by these varied needs. NCLB and the New York City DOE demand accountability of both schools and students in the form of proficient levels of performance on state assessments across all subgroups (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b). Larson and Ovando (2001) would characterize this requirement as a policy constructed under a "politics of universalism: all people should be treated equally, and no group should receive preferential treatment" (p. 66). They go on to argue that individuals and institutions that work to operate under such a difference-blind institutionalism "believe that if we enforce the same rules for all children in schools, we prevent inequity, bias, and unequal treatment" (p. 65). NCLB and the New York City DOE recognize, but simply give a nod to the differences between subgroups by labeling them and requiring equal performance and achievement across those groups, regardless of their inherent differences. According to the logic of Larson

and Ovando (2001), responding to differences in such a manner will simply result in the perpetuation of existing inequities, further limiting educational opportunity for poor children of color. Social policies and practices aimed at increasing opportunity for all children cannot ignore the pre-existing fundamental differences in children's lives and life opportunities. Ignoring these spaces of unfreedom will simply assure the perpetuation of an unequal society.

Working to Increase Educational Opportunity both Within and Outside of School

Reflecting on the results of his 1982 report *A Nation at Risk*, Terrel Bell states that he “had placed too much confidence in school reforms that affected only six hours [a day] of a child's life and ignored the other 18 hours each weekday plus the hours on weekends and holidays” (1993, p.594). This notion parallels the assertions made by Richard Rothstein (2002, 2004a; 2004b; 2004c) who argues emphatically that efforts to improve educational achievement need to be focused primarily not only on what happens in schools, but on the lives of children outside of and beyond the school. Rothstein identifies inequities in family income, nutrition, prenatal care, health care, dental care, maternal smoking, lead exposure, and housing as essential domains to explore in the quest to close the achievement gap (2002). Therefore, he argues against focusing on education as the primary solution to systemic inequities that are reproduced over generations. Instead, he suggests that we also look outside of schools and academic achievement as a primary focus and to examine the social structures and

policies that create hurdles for so many whom are already disenfranchised. Rothstein (2002) references remarks made by the New York City Mayor in a speech Bloomberg made on Martin Luther King Day, 2002: “Our national determination to reform only education and then expect all other forms of inequality and oppression to take care of themselves will doom us to another half century of lack of progress” (p. 25). These words from the mayor are an interesting contradiction to the one-size-fits-all policy he enforces in education that is being implemented without any social policy aimed at addressing the “other forms of inequality and oppression” he refers to here.

Concluding Remarks

The School of Academic Excellence has benefitted greatly during Lorena’s brief tenure as principal. It seems that the Superintendent’s intuition about the school benefitting from a leader who comes from the community and has a greater appreciation for the challenges of surviving and thriving in this area of Bed-Stuy was accurate. In this chapter we see that Lorena works hard to balance the mandates of local and federal policies while also staying true to her own priorities and beliefs about education.

She works tirelessly to provide greater opportunities for her students to achieve, largely through the opportunities she provides for parents. Further, she strives to expand educational opportunity for her students by serving their parents and building community in her school. Lorena highly values the role of parents

and works to bring them into the school and educate them in ways that will serve both the parents and their children.

Lorena's job, however, is not an easy one. She struggles to balance her personal objectives directed towards meeting the fundamental needs of her students and defending their rights, with the time and energy required to comply with district mandates that demand accountability in the form of high stakes testing. Lorena's compliance efforts have been focused overtly this year on paperwork and test performance as expected by the City. At the same time, Lorena has taken great care to ensure that the students in her school fully realize that school is far more than achievement on standardized tests. In Lorena's words, "I want them to know that it's not just about practicing for a test and taking a test." A soft look comes over Lorena's face as she herself thinks beyond the string of English Language Arts testing days that fall at the beginning of January. She smiles and then tells me about Pajama Day, which will immediately follow the test:

It's like I said to the kids this morning- "Pajama Day is right after the test. This is a day I want you to enjoy and feel really relaxed." Basically, what we're going to do is all wear our pajamas and the teachers will walk around and read to the children that day. They'll read. We'll read. Everyone will read. It's important for them to know that everything isn't about this test. Every once in a while, it's okay to just relax, sit back, and enjoy reading."

CHAPTER VI

INTRODUCTION TO THE GRADE 2 TEACHER: JASON

In this chapter, I introduce Jason, a Second Grade Bilingual teacher who has worked at The School of Academic Excellence for five years in various positions at multiple grade levels. First, I provide background on how Jason began his career in education following a nontraditional route to certification. I also provide insight into Jason's personal beliefs about his role as a teacher. Next, I share some of Jason's experiences as a teacher that have frustrated him as he finds that his beliefs about what his students need often clash with the actions he is required to take due to the demands of NCLB as well as state and local policies that directly impact classroom practice. In this chapter, we find that Jason struggles to determine how he can expand educational opportunity for his students and with what he must do to help them achieve their greatest potential. Finally, I conclude the chapter by providing insight into Jason's conflicted thoughts about continuing to work in a school system that is not allowing him to address the real needs of his students.

At just 31 years of age, Jason Caldwell carries with him the wisdom and presence of a man twice his age. It's not so much his physical appearance that portrays this image. In fact, Jason's clothes and features are all rather casual. His

shirts and pants are always clean and professional, but he looks more prepared to sling a pack over his shoulder and leap onto a train bound for unknown adventures than to walk into an elementary school classroom to teach. Jason has a soft and gentle expression with hair that he pulls back into a loose ponytail. His powerful presence is defined not by how he looks, but by the calming aura and energy he exudes.

Jason is one hundred percent present and invested in whatever moment he is living at the time. One can almost hear the wheels turning inside his head as he processes what is happening around him. Jason's clothes look as comfortable on him as he looks in them and simply being in his presence makes most people relax and feel more comfortable with themselves. Jason's nondescript physical features seem to disappear into the light of the powerful energy that radiates from within him.

Jason's journey into education has been both a lengthy and unconventional one. He reflects on a teacher that influenced his life path in a significant way:

I had a high school Spanish teacher who used to volunteer at a garbage dump in Mexico every summer. She used to bring back pictures and stories about her work there. She's the person who really made me interested in learning a different language well and in traveling and doing volunteer work. If I hadn't had her as a teacher, I don't know whether I'd even be here right now. I don't know if I would have done a lot of the

things I have done in my life. So I sort of always point to her as my initial inspiration.

After graduating from undergrad with a degree in English and a minor in Spanish, Jason bounced around working a series of odd jobs, unsure of what he wanted to do. Every summer, though, he would return to his home in Connecticut and work at a camp for children. After a few years, Jason decided to go to Spain to study abroad and teach English. Following that, he returned to Connecticut and explored the idea of becoming a teacher as he continued with his summer camp work, began doing some substitute teaching and ran an after school program. However, his wanderlust kicked in again and Jason soon found himself heading off to Guatemala where he joined the Peace Corps and worked in a teaching program. When his time in the Peace Corps came to an end, Jason moved to Brooklyn where he heard about the Teaching Fellows program.

The New York City Teaching Fellows (NYCTF) program was created in 2000 following a study that found that 15 percent of the existing teachers and 60 percent of newly hired teachers in New York City lacked certification in teaching. The program was created in response to the New York City Department of Education's struggle to find and hire highly qualified teachers as required by NCLB. Specifically, the program targeted talented and successful professionals from outside the field of education (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). "The Teaching Fellows program is grounded in two core assumptions: First, there is a substantial pool of talented individuals who have chosen other career options but

who are capable of and interested in becoming excellent teachers” and “Second, the alternative route to certification can and will meet high standards for the teacher preparation and certification” (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, p.41). Individuals accepted into the program are provided with an intense seven to nine week summer training to prepare them for the classroom and are then supported during the school year by visiting mentors and coursework provided as part of the Masters degree in education that Teaching Fellows earn in conjunction during their two to three year participation in the program (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The DOE is hopeful that the Fellows will continue to work in New York City schools beyond their initial two to three year commitment.

With a healthy amount of experience teaching, but no formal degree in education, the Teaching Fellows program offered Jason a hard-to-resist opportunity:

I decided that maybe I wanted to be a teacher. The Teaching Fellows Program got me to actually commit to being a teacher because it was kind of like a low commitment deal. I was going to get my Masters either way and have a job either way and make a full salary with full benefits either way but if, after two years, I didn't like it, I could just stop. So, all that other stuff lead up to my deciding to do the Fellows program but if it weren't for the Fellows, I probably wouldn't be a teacher today.

As a promising Teaching Fellow, Jason interviewed and was promptly hired. His background in working successfully with children and his fluency in Spanish

were both highly desirable characteristics and he quickly found a home with the staff and students at The School of Academic Excellence. As with all Teaching Fellows that are hired, Jason had a choice whether or not to continue on at the school after completing his Master's degree.

Hiring "Highly Qualified Teachers" to Enhance Academic Achievement

Research supports the assertion that highly qualified teachers have a positive impact on student learning (Allington & Cunningham, 2002; Allington & Johnston, 2001; Knapp, 1995). As a result of teacher shortages, especially in urban areas, significant numbers of classrooms in America were staffed by uncertified teachers. In an effort to expand educational opportunity for students by improving the quality of their teachers, NCLB was constructed with the requirement that every classroom teacher be "highly qualified" by the 2005-2006 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b).

According to NCLB, "'Highly qualified' means that a teacher must be fully certified or licensed, have a bachelor's degree, and show competence in subject knowledge and teaching" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a, p. 1). Jason's certification through the NYCTF Program affords him the designation of being a "highly qualified teacher" according to NCLB requirements. Jason, however, does not feel that the Teaching Fellows program adequately prepared him to be a teacher. Similar to other alternative certification programs, NYCTF offers a seven-week summer session to initially prepare participants for the

classroom and then provides continuing support and education through ongoing coursework over the next two years (Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2008; United States Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2008). Jason feels that this training was inadequate for the rigors of the classroom and believes that he has a significant need for growth as a professional educator, even after completing the Teaching Fellows program.

Two areas in which Jason feels least secure as a professional are in the yearly changes of teaching positions that he endures at the school as well as with what he perceives to be a lack of ongoing support in terms of professional development.

The Importance of Stability- "I don't ever feel confident"

NCLB demonstrates a belief in the importance of quality teaching through its "highly qualified teacher" mandate, but Jason believes that there is more to being a highly qualified teacher than simply completing a two-year program. Fortunately for the students at The School of Academic Excellence, Jason decided to stay on after completing his two-year commitment and has now been teaching at the school for five challenging years, but he still feels that he has much to learn. Although his participation in the NYCTF program provided Jason with a certificate designating him as a highly qualified teacher according to NCLB, he does not believe that his initial training program and continuing learning opportunities at his school have been sufficient. One reason that Jason has found

it difficult to ground himself in the craft of teaching is the yearly change of teaching assignment that he has experienced at The School of Academic Excellence.

Jason shares some of the changes he has experienced over the five years he has been teaching:

I taught in a Grade 4/5 Bilingual class my first year. My second year, I taught a Grade 2/3 Bilingual class. My third year, the Principal had me teach out of license as the ESL teacher. My fourth year, I taught a Grade 3/4 Bilingual class. This year, I started as a fifth grade Bilingual teacher, but now I'm teaching a Second Grade Bilingual class.

Counter to the kind of consistency that would best support a teaching professional, especially an uncertified novice, Jason has taught a different grade, sometimes two grades at once, every year. Jason recalls that this year actually started out as a promising one for him. Last year he had taught a multi-grade class with third and fourth Grade students. This year, he started out as the Grade 5 bilingual teacher- a new grade level, but at least he would be working with some of the same students he had taught last year as fourth graders. Unfortunately, the enrollment numbers did not allow him to remain in this position and several weeks into the school year he was moved from a Grade 5 Bilingual position into a Grade 2 Bilingual position. Jason comments on the effects that these yearly changes have had on him:

For me it's been kind of frustrating because it's just a lot of change. Every year I've had to learn a new curriculum and I really don't ever feel confident in what I'm doing until maybe the end of the year some years. Like last year I had a lot of support from a Teach for America teacher and I felt more confident about any grade than I have so far. I was really excited this year because I was going to stay with the kids I had last year in fourth grade. I felt like I had a lot more going for me coming into the year. So, it was disappointing then to switch to second grade during the first month of school.

Despite the frequent changes in grade level assignments, Jason had some consistency in working with the ELL population at the school. He explains:

I like being with the English language learners because that's part of why I personally got into teaching. I'm really interested in working with and advocating for people who are illegal immigrants. I know that many of my students' parents are illegal immigrants and I just believe strongly that they need good teachers. I don't know if I'm a good teacher, but I think I'm a good presence in their lives. I would like to continue with that. In one way, this year has been the best for me. This is the first time that I've been able to teach only one grade and so that I really appreciate. I know the Principal made that happen. Part of why I had to switch from fifth grade bilingual is that there weren't enough students so she put me in

second grade because she didn't want to put the fourth graders in with me and have two grades to teach again.

Jason is proud of the fact that he is a "good presence" in the lives of his students, whether they are second graders or fifth graders. His belief in the importance of giving children good role models was also reflected in the words that Barack Obama shared on the presidential campaign trail. Obama (2007) spoke of the importance of altering the life opportunities of underprivileged children in America in order to expand their freedoms to achieve, saying:

What's most overwhelming about urban poverty is that it's so difficult to escape - it's isolating and it's everywhere. If you are an African-American child unlucky enough to be born into one of these neighborhoods, you are most likely to start life hungry or malnourished. You are less likely to start with a father in your household, and if he is there, there's a fifty-fifty chance that he never finished high school and the same chance he doesn't have a job. Your school isn't likely to have the right books or the best teachers. You're more likely to encounter gang-activities than after-school activities. And if you can't find a job because the most successful businessman in your neighborhood is a drug dealer, you're more likely to join that gang yourself. Opportunity is scarce, role models are few, and there is little contact with the normalcy of life outside those streets.

NCLB posits that, through hiring highly qualified teachers, using proven methods, having high standards, and holding students and schools accountable, the

achievement gap can be closed. Jason, like Barack Obama, believes that poor children of color need and deserve more and he sees himself as a powerful and important presence in their lives.

The Need for Ongoing Support- “Nobody actually knows what I am doing”

According to NCLB, high quality teaching is important and one way that can be ensured is through the hiring of highly qualified teachers. By NCLB’s definition, once a teacher has successfully completed a graduate or undergraduate program in education, he or she is “highly qualified.” Jason believes that there is more to quality teaching than simply graduating from a program and feels that learning is ongoing and, therefore, that quality teaching requires ongoing learning opportunities. Jason shares:

I’m a person and I’ve grown. When I started, I was 26. Now I am 31. So, five years ago, if we had been having this conversation, my knowledge and values would not be the same as they are today. And five years from now, they’ll probably be different. I need to keep learning and thinking.

We all do.

As a result of this belief, Jason constantly and aggressively seeks opportunities to improve himself and the work he does in his classroom. He shares a conversation he initiated with his principal about his thoughts about himself and the school:

I think she did her best to listen. I had to do it twice because I don’t think I did a good job the first time. The first time I talked to her I made a list of

things I think I'm good at and things that I like about the school, and another list of things that I don't think I'm good at and things that I don't like about the school. She heard the negative list, but I don't think she heard the positive list. I think she's genuinely concerned and I think she genuinely doesn't want me to have any problems. So she wanted to try to fix everything in that meeting, but that's just impossible. I think she did her best and I think she's trying hard. She's sent me some materials and she had a couple coaches come in the week after I had those conversations to see what was going on in my classroom, but that was mostly it. She had a lot to say about each problem and a lot of ideas on how I could just very quickly patch it up. I appreciated the way that she was trying to help, but it wasn't enough for me. I don't know how to tell her that. I don't know what the answer is.

This intrinsic motivation to grow professionally and improve his craft is a core and fundamental marker of who Jason as a teaching professional. NCLB's highly qualified teacher requirement does not address quality or professionalism beyond the initial hiring. Jason believes that ongoing professional development is essential to his growth and success as a teacher striving to expand educational opportunity for his students. Although not required by the school or district, Jason actively seeks feedback on his teaching as he strives to do better for the students he serves. Jason shares one way that he tries to do this:

I wish the Principal, the Assistant Principal, I would even include the coaches, although they're technically not administration, but I wish they were passing through classrooms all the time. Just kind of checking in just to see what's going on. I've actually mentioned to Ms. Sanchez that I would appreciate if somebody came into my classroom once a week just so they know what I'm doing, because, really, nobody actually knows what I'm doing in my classroom and it feels isolating. I've actually asked for this. It felt scary to ask for that support, because it's opening me up. But I told the Principal that I'm not willing to cover my ass for you in the room. I would prefer that you came in when I was doing something that you didn't like so that you could see what I needed, but I would encourage you to be constructive about the way that you criticize anything that I do. I want you look at what's going on in the classroom.

Jason is atypical of other teachers at The School of Academic Excellence in his explicit invitations for feedback on his teaching, but is frustrated when his requests for support at the school level are met in superficial ways, or not at all. Jason shares his school-based disappointment as a teacher, but he is also frustrated with the district-wide decisions related to professional development (PD):

I think that it's a shame that in the new contract we lost professional development time. We gained it at the beginning- there's some PD days at the beginning of the year, but we used to have professional development

every other week. It was crap because it never was effective, but if there were a way to do an effective PD twice a month and have teachers be able to really give input or to really be listened to about what they need, then I think that would be really helpful, because I don't feel developed enough as a teacher and I know how to ask for help. I just don't feel as though there are easy answers to some of the challenges that I'm dealing with.

Jason's efforts to reach out for help were observed during a PD session at the school that was tied to implementing the traditional reading program that New York City selected as a mandated requirement under Reading First, the literacy component of NCLB. An external consultant was brought in to help the teachers. Jason spoke out at the meeting, saying:

So many of these assessments don't serve my lower functioning kids because it's so beyond them. I'd prefer not to do all these assessments that aren't helpful- I'd rather spend my time with these students working on the things that they need. I need help to figure out what they don't need, too, but these tests are too hard for them so they don't tell me anything that can help me or them.

This concern and cry for help on Jason's part was quickly dismissed by an external consultant who said, "Well, you're at a Reading First school. You have to do it [the testing]." The Reading First coach from within the school simply nodded her head in agreement and the session went on, focusing on the materials and leaving the children and Jason's questions about them behind. Such

interactions were not unusual for Jason. Throughout the study, he repeatedly voiced observations that he made about his students and the needs that they demonstrated in the classroom that were not being met through the mandated curriculum under Reading First. The consistent response to his observations about how to meet the needs that he observed was to trust the curriculum being used under Reading First rather than teach to the needs that he was identifying in his students.

A considerable body of research supports the importance of making instructional decisions based on students' needs. Research also supports Jason's assertions about the importance of ongoing professional development and learning opportunities for teachers that focuses on children as learners rather than materials. An editorial in *Rethinking Schools Online* (2005) suggests that professional development needs to be ongoing and embedded in the craft of teaching, rather than episodic in nature. According to the article, schools' efforts to nurture teachers need to focus not on "teacher proof programs," but on developing effective teaching practices by investigating outstanding models of successful teaching. Observations of professional development sessions at The School of Academic Excellence throughout the duration of this study showed that Jason and his peers were most frequently supported through just such "episodic visits of consultants and 'teacher-proof programs'" (*Rethinking Schools Online*, 2005, sec. 6, para. 1). At times, coaches from within the school provided professional development, but the majority of the professional development

opportunities observed were conducted by external consultants arranged by the district. The focus of the sessions was typically directed towards orienting teachers to new programs or curricular materials, rather than focusing on students and their needs. Jason feels that if he and his peers at The School of Academic Excellence are to expand educational opportunity for their students, they need to move beyond these limited models of professional development. Lorena, too, agrees with this, but her efforts are limited by a rapidly diminishing budget for professional development and a narrow list of consulting options that are offered by the district-sponsored CLSO. Lorena and Jason could create their own professional development opportunities, but time is hard to find when facing the pressures and challenges of serving impoverished youth in a high stakes testing environment. Neither Jason nor Lorena has been able to find a way to create these opportunities in their school.

NCLB's mandate for highly qualified teachers is grounded in research arguing for the placement of effective teachers in classrooms. Sen (1992) argues that achievement is directly linked to the opportunities one has to achieve. The effectiveness of classroom teachers has been correlated with student achievement (Allington & Cunningham, 2002; Allington & Johnston, 2001) and Sen would view the NCLB requirement of highly qualified teachers as one possible way of expanding students' opportunities to achieve. However, in order to ensure that these opportunities continue to exist, teachers need to continue on their learning journey so that they maintain their highly qualified status. This ongoing

maintenance of highly qualified status is not mandated by NCLB so schools like Lorena's are seeing reduced professional development budgets and opportunities to continually develop teachers' knowledge base that in turn impacts the impact teachers have on expanding educational opportunity. Jason has experienced a reduction in both quantity and quality of professional development opportunities in his brief tenure as a teacher and views this as problematic as he works to expand educational opportunity for his students.

How Can Schools Expand Educational Opportunity?

NCLB Assumption: Improved Performance on Standardized Tests
Will Expand Student Opportunities To Achieve

Jason's Belief: Expanding Educational Opportunity Requires
Attention to More Than Test Scores

Jason's ongoing quest for professional growth defines him as a person and as a teaching professional. There is nothing pretentious about this man who displays his diplomas prominently on the wall of his classroom. He is not trying to impress anyone with his accomplishments. He is demonstrating his value for education and these diplomas are a constant reminder to both Jason and his students that education is both valued and within their reach. When asked what is important to him as a teacher, Jason explains:

I think the thing that's most important to me is teaching kids how to communicate, how to talk about what they need, and how to talk about what they're feeling. One of the ways that I do that in second grade is to

really focus on positive reinforcement. It's not a direct correlation but I like to notice when kids are doing things well and try to encourage them to keep on doing things well. When kids come up to me and say somebody's bothering them I like to tell them, "Well, why don't you say how you're feeling to the person and tell them to please stop?" I like to hear the instigator hear it and respond in an appropriate way. If my kids don't learn anything else but how to recognize how they're feeling and tell somebody else what they need I'll be really happy. I think that's really important.

Again and again, Jason returns to these foundational beliefs about his role as a teacher. His beliefs carry him far beyond the delivery of instruction. Jason truly believes that his role is to influence these children as active participants in the world. When teaching intermediate students, Jason sees one of his primary roles as teaching students conflict resolution skills. At the primary levels where he feels the children do not yet have the capacity to think and process in such sophisticated ways, Jason sees his role as "pumping their egos up and making them feel good about themselves." He recognizes the importance of developing skill in mathematics and literacy, but Jason views those as secondary to what children need to learn in order to fully participate in society. Jason details his beliefs about his job as a teacher:

I really want kids to feel safe. I want kids to feel whole. There's something that seems unnatural about having kids sit down all day at

desks. I know they need to learn, but I guess I am really more interested in the emotional side more than how well they do on a test.

Somebody shared a good quote with me recently. I am paraphrasing, but it was something like, “Seven year olds are like little kids. Their inclination, their natural state is to want to talk to each other and run around.” That’s what they’re like, but they get to school and we tell them to sit down and shut up. I don’t think it’s right to just talk at kids and skill and drill them for a test. There’s more to life than that.

Paolo Friere (1970) would support Jason’s beliefs about pedagogy. Freire’s work on expanding educational opportunity contrasts the “banking” model of education most often utilized with oppressed peoples versus the “problem-posing” model utilized more often to the dominant and more powerful groups. According to Freire (1970), teaching under a banking model, the teacher works to “deposit” information into the learner, filling the student with his narration assuming that they are incapable of or not in need of the critical consciousness that is deliberately nurture in their more privileged peers. The passive learning promoted in a banking model of education is in sharp contrast to the learning that students that are members of the dominant culture are exposed to. These privileged students engage in learning that is centered on a constructive, problem-posing model that develops critical thinkers. Jason’s beliefs about teaching parallel the assertions that Freire makes that all children have the right to exceptional the learning opportunities that simply cannot be realized through the

banking model. If educational opportunity is to be expanded for all, teachers must resist following a banking model of education, just as Jason has chosen to do in his own classroom.

The Clash Between Educational Policy and Personal Beliefs

Jason recognizes the tension he feels when his beliefs and practices collide with those of the school and the district. During this time of increased emphasis on testing and test scores, Jason feels conflicted about his practice and how he believes schools can best serve their students. He shares his belief on what is important in teaching and learning and how that differs from what is currently emphasized in schools:

I want my students to know that it's okay to make mistakes. I want them to know that the scores that they get and the successes that they have that are attached to numbers really aren't important to who they are. I want to be able to know how they're feeling and what they need. I want them to be able to communicate that clearly. I want them to know how to take care of themselves when conflict arises rather than disown themselves by getting into a fight or just letting someone else like a teacher be responsible.

Jason is clear about what he wants for his students. He seeks to be the type of “problem-posing” (Freire, 1970) teacher who develops the cultural consciousness that his students will need to rise above their current status in society. Jason believes that Lorena holds the same desires for the students at The School of

Academic Excellence, but her words and actions sometimes suggest differently.

Jason explains:

I think if you asked Ms. Sanchez, she would agree that those are important things, but I don't think her job is depending on that at all. Her job depends on test scores. Personally, to me, my job does depend on that in my own heart. If I'm not doing that, I'm not doing my job.

Jason feels that one of the ways he can expand educational opportunity for his students is through expanding their life opportunities. He sees that expanding their freedom to achieve in life requires that he do more than cover the curriculum in his classroom, yet that is what is demanded of him by the district. Jason explains, "I want them to pass the tests because I don't want them to fail in the system, but I don't really believe that's what they need." When pressed to identify "what they need" that is not measured by the tests, Jason shares:

It's a lot of intangible stuff. Like with one of my students, Pedro. I noticed that when he makes mistakes or when he gets into a fight or something like that, he always tells me the truth. He always tells me how he's feeling about it. He's always willing to take risks or to look silly or to make mistakes. Telling the truth is important. And knowing it's okay to be wrong. I think it's really important to see which kids are willing to make mistakes because there's something creative that's attached to making mistakes. With all these tests, somehow we're not looking at what kids are gifted at. We're not looking at the way kids are created and the

way kids are gifted. We're expecting them to fit in a very rigid box. Tests don't measure the important things. How can a test measure honesty?

Creativity? Taking risks? Making mistakes? Not with a test. You can't.

NCLB requires that all students achieve proficiency on standardized test and use this as the primary indicator of successful schooling. Although second grade is not a mandatory year for standardized testing, Jason is required to test his children every week under the Reading First program as mandated under NCLB. Jason disagrees with this and finds himself in an uncomfortable position. He says, "I do the tests because I have to do them." Jason would prefer to spend his time "working on the things that they need" such as the life skills like risk-taking, comfort with mistakes, and the ability to share their opinions. Yet, the bulk of time in his classroom is dedicated to preparing for and taking tests while he tries to fit in time for what he believes his students need to learn on the fringes. Jason expresses his frustration with the situation he finds himself in:

It's really challenging to find space in myself to have energy to teach those things. To find space within the course of the day, a week, a year, to teach all that. So that's the tension I feel in myself about what I'm doing with my career.

Jason's dilemma is one with no easy solution. How can he expose his students to the kind of high-level, problem-solving, constructive, critical learning that Freire (1970) promotes and that Jason believes in if his performance, and that of his students will ultimately be measured by a standardized test that is more reflective

of an instructional model that is more consistent with Freire's (1970) notion of a banking model of education?

The Importance of Test Scores- "It's meaningless to them"

The impact of high-stakes testing is readily seen in classrooms across America. As a result of the influence of NCLB, testing has taken on a significant role in schools and not just at the grade levels where standardized testing is required by law. Jason currently teaches second grade- not one of the mandated testing years according to NCLB, yet because The School of Academic Excellence School has been designated a Reading First school, the primary teachers are required to use the Harcourt Trophies curriculum and related assessments that are mandated by the DOE. As a result, Jason finds himself being forced to use a program that is not meeting the needs of his students and is required to spend an inordinate amount of time testing his students. The Reading First program that The School of Academic Excellence participates in dictates the materials that Jason must use and the instruction he must provide. In order to continue to receive the funding that comes along with the Reading First program, Lorena is responsible for making sure that her teachers follow the program explicitly. Following the program includes teaching according to the prescribed pacing guide, covering the content and components of the program on a daily basis, and testing students on a weekly basis through ongoing "progress monitoring" and weekly unit tests that go along with the anthology. Jason is

frustrated by this external imposition of content that often does not match the needs of his students and he is overwhelmed by the significant volume of testing that he feels has little value. He explains how he has manipulated his schedule so that all the required testing in second grade occurs on the same day:

I try to squeeze it all into Friday mornings. I feel frantic Friday mornings because I just want to get everything done. I used to try to review the test like in the afternoon or on Monday. Now, I don't bother because there's no time for it and it just takes away from what we're supposed to be doing in reading. That's why I decided to start correcting the test as they take it and just let them see the mark. They don't really care anyway. It's meaningless to them, I think. They don't do very well usually.

Jason has tried to find value in these tests, but asserts that testing time takes away from "what we're supposed to be doing in reading." When speaking of the tests, he says several times that "they're not useful" and adds, "I don't feel that they're really that relevant." Jason believes that his role as a teacher is to expand educational opportunity for his students and to teach important character skills in addition to essential skills in the content areas. Preparing for and taking one test after another takes valuable time away from what Jason considers to be important—preparing his children for life outside school where success is not measured by standardized tests alone. He complies with the program and testing requirements and tries to find time for the character development work he believes is so important. Jason has tried to address the concerns he has over the overemphasis

and tests and inattention to social and character needs of the students, but his words fail to express what he feels in his heart. He shares, “I just don’t know how to have a conversation about it in a way that might actually changes somebody’s way of doing things.”

Jason explains that he wants his student to do well and realizes that “doing well” according to NCLB and the DOE is narrowly measured in terms of performance on tests. He expresses his frustration: “I want them to pass the tests because I don’t want them to fail in this system but I don’t really believe that, that’s what they need,” saying:

I just feel as though the tests aren’t really like solving the problems my kids have. I don’t know if I feel well enough equipped to solve them either but something else would be better than the test.

When Jason looks at his students, he does not see scores and numbers. He sees Anita whose father struggles to make a living for his family by reselling mattresses he finds on the street. He sees Pedro who tries to do what is right, but follows his father’s tendencies and lashes out physically before using his words. He sees Ernesto who comes to school wearing over-sized, hand-me-down clothes with an odor that lingers after Ernesto has moved away. Jason looks at his students whose basic life needs such as adequate food, shelter, safety, and clothing are not being met and wonders why the DOE places so much emphasis on test scores while ignoring the needs of so many children in NYC.

Jason continues, explaining how he deals with the imposition of the mandated curriculum and testing:

I would prefer to spend Fridays with another teacher doing serious intervention because it's just what they need. To me I basically look at Friday mornings as kind of a wash. I don't try to teach anything new and I always feel crammed for time because it takes them a while to do the test.

Jason tries hard to justify spending significant amounts of time for teaching and learning time on testing. Rather than continue to repeatedly test his students, Jason would prefer to spend more time developing social skills and providing the "serious intervention" that his students need based on the observations he makes as they read and write. He feels that his own observations are of greater value than the data he receives in the form of printouts and testing sheets. He repeatedly asked for help in using the information he gathered through the assessments, but to no avail: "I don't really use the scores to instruct my teaching because I'm not really sure how. I've actually I have asked the coach to help me with that. It's not personal and I am sure she tries, I'm just not sure she knows how to use them either." Jason qualifies these negative statements about the tests pointing out his concerns for the overemphasis on the finite areas measured by the test and the reduced value of the his own professional judgment:

I want to make it very clear that I don't think that there is no value in the tests. I really don't think that, but they are just so incomplete. They are

dangerously incomplete in my view because we're talking about raising a child here.

The overemphasis on tests has taken away from the power Jason has as the children's classroom teacher and, outside of their parents, the one who knows them best. Jason feels that the six hours he spends with the children every day qualify him to make some assertions about their needs both inside the classroom and outside the school. Yet, in the era of high stakes testing and under the shadow of NCLB, the numbers produced by a weekly computer printout are of greater importance to the DOE than what Jason has to say about his students.

A visit to the Reading First coach's room shows Jason's students reduced to little red, yellow, or green cards that are slipped into rows on a pocket chart. Based on weekly fluency assessments of how fast they can read a list of words or a passage, each student's name is written on a card and placed in a pocket. Red indicates students that are in serious academic trouble and they are labeled "intensive." Yellow indicates concern for their progress and these students are labeled "strategic." Green indicates that the student's performance was adequate and they are labeled as "benchmark" and are not of concern to the staff.

Jason is frustrated that is the weekly "progress monitoring" dictates his instructional and grouping practices for the next week. He does not believe that performance on a test of a finite element of reading is sufficient and that the single measure cannot be generalized to all other learning needs in reading. Yet,

these cards do take on that significance and Jason's opinions about his students' needs have little value.

The impact of overemphasis on achievement and testing at The School of Academic Excellence would have been predicted by Finn and Ravitch (2007). Their findings show that in a school setting, focusing on test performance to the exclusion of other important areas will inevitably lead to distorted instruction and imbalanced outcomes. In Jason's classroom, the over-emphasis on testing and test scores has taken time away from classroom instruction in content areas and from the character building activities that Jason values. In their place, Jason's students spend a significant amount of time preparing for and taking tests, even though second grade is not one of the mandated testing years according to NCLB. Chester Finn and Diane Ravitch, early advocates of NCLB, now express concern for how testing has taken over classrooms and curriculum as a result of NCLB. They write:

We're already at risk of turning U.S. schools into test prepping-skill factories where nothing matters except exam scores on basic subjects. That's not what America needs, nor is it a sufficient conception of educational accountability. We need schools that prepare our children to excel and compete not only in the global workforce, but also as full participants in our society, our culture, and our economy (2007, sec. 3, para. 3).

Mirroring Freire's (1970) concern that different sectors of the population are exposed to different educational models, Finn and Ravitch (2007) identify the widening social divide and deepening of pre-existing inequities that will result as schools respond to NCLB's demands for increased performance on standardized tests, noting that:

rich kids will study philosophy and art, music and history; their poor peers will fill in bubbles on test sheets (Finn & Ravitch, sec. 3, para. 3).

Evidence of this sad fact can be readily seen in Jason's classroom. Under Reading First, Jason is required to administer "progress monitoring" tests to his students on a weekly basis. These tests are one-on-one fluency assessments during which a child reads a list of words or a passage. Jason sits next to the child and uses a small electronic device to note the start and ending time of each reading, as well as any errors made. He does this for each child. At the end of each week, the Reading First coach collects the Palm Pilots from every Kindergarten through Grade 3 teacher and loads the data into her computer which then shows children's progress in red, yellow, or green colored bars. She then prints this document out for each teacher (on a black and white printer since the program did not include color printers) and gives the document to Jason. Jason is supposed to use this document to group his children for all reading instruction, although the progress monitoring only measures one finite element of the complex process of reading. Progress monitoring assessment is paired with weekly unit tests of spelling, vocabulary and comprehension that are also required. Altogether, these tests take

up about three hours a week, or one half of an entire school day. And those are only the assessments required for reading. Jason also has mathematics, writing, and content area assessments to administer.

Jason's concerns about the over-emphasis on testing and test performance are clearly valid. He recognizes that his students have significant language, instructional, and interpersonal needs and realizes that their educational opportunities will not be expanded through increased time and attention to test scores. As asserted by Finn and Ravitch, the overt attention on test scores in response to NCLB may increase student performance on tests, but to what end? How have their real opportunities to achieve been expanded? At The School of Academic Excellence, significant time is dedicated to the collection of data. This information is then meticulously recorded onto comprehensive class tracking sheets that include every piece of data collected on each child. Though they appear colorful and impressive, these documents and the time spent on them are of little value to the teachers. Observations throughout the duration of the study showed significant time dedicated to the creation of the tracking tool, but no time dedicated to how it would be of use to classroom teachers. The time it took to enter the data was so significant that Lorena arranged to pay paraprofessionals to stay after school to enter the data. After the tracking sheets were complete, they were bound into books that Lorena kept so she could reference students at a glance. The teachers never looked at the document again.

Jason believes that the only way to truly expand educational opportunity for his students is to spend significantly less time on test preparation and testing and to increase the amount of time he spends teaching his students what they really need to learn, both academically and socially.

How Can Students Achieve Their Potential?

NCLB Assumption: All Students Can Learn and the
Achievement Gap Can Be Closed

Jason's Belief: Many Students Have Exceptional Needs That Must Be Addressed
In Order to Expand Their Educational Opportunities

Jason's entry into education was motivated by a desire to educate and help illegal immigrants and their children. Jason is driven to help these children and their parents to successfully negotiate the challenges they face each day.

There are a lot of things I see illegal immigrants have to deal with like not being able to find jobs and not being able to speak the language. Perhaps, dealing with the issues of racism. I never had to deal with those things growing up so I just feel compelled to help people that do. For some reason I am interested in helping people coming in from other countries.

Jason's assumptions about the difficulties faced by immigrants are recognized and documented in the research of Perreira, Chapman, and Stein (2006). In their study of the experiences of Latino immigrants in North Carolina, they identified the following challenges that often follow migration: change in social position upon arrival, loss of a support network, change in social status, loss of cultural

capital that comes with integration into a new culture, adjustment to new or altered roles, economic and racial diversity, and racism (Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006). Another recognized challenge that immigrants face is limited English proficiency (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006). Many would assume that Jason's comfort with and fluency in Spanish would mediate this problem, but that has not been his experience. It became clear to Jason early on that he needed to understand more than Spanish if he hoped to truly expand opportunities for his students and their families.

Contrary to the assumption one might make about immigrant parent involvement, "it has been consistently demonstrated that immigrant parents place a high value on the education of their children" (Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006, p. 470). Jason recognizes this interest, but notes that although many of the parents of his students want to help and support their children, they often choose not to for various reasons.

Some of the parents feel intimidated to talk to me. I think sometimes maybe it's because there's a cultural difference and they feel really shy. Or they feel because they are illegal, they don't want to share too much about their lives. I have a hard time communicating with parents- not because of language barriers, but just because some of the parents don't feel very compelled to want to really have a long conversation.

Jason continues on to share a trend he has observed in the child-rearing habits of many of the immigrant parents who brought with them different norms for

discipline. Jason declined to identify specific children, but spoke in general of his observations:

Other challenges get presented because of cultural differences. One example is that there have been a couple of times when I've had to report a parent because I've noticed bruises and injuries on their children's bodies. I think that a lot of people coming to this country just don't know that if they're beating their kids at home, even if it's just small, and it causes a bruise, they are going to get reported. That's been an uncomfortable issue a couple of times.

In each of the cases when Jason had to report the parents, Jason received the full and immediate support of Lorena and the guidance counselor, but Jason finds himself in the uncomfortable place of having to report the offending parents who are then investigated by social services. These parents find themselves under investigation for engaging in child-rearing practices that were acceptable in their previous country, but are not permissible in America. Jason is required by the state and the NYC-DOE to report abuse, but feels conflicted as he recognizes how his actions have the potential to alienate the parents he works so hard to engage.

Jason's efforts to engage his immigrant parents often conflict with school and district policies that operate from a universalist perspective. In contrast, in his efforts to expand educational opportunity for his students by reaching out to their immigrant parents, Jason operates under what Larson and Ovando (2001) call a "politics of difference." He recognizes that "although we may share the

desire to be treated as full and equal citizens, people do not have equal needs or equal opportunities within an unequal society” (Larson & Ovando, 2001, p. 72). Jason acknowledges many of the obstacles faced by immigrant parents, but is unsure about how address to them. He is deeply frustrated by ongoing efforts that do not result in success. Larson and Ovando (2001) suggest that part of the challenge Jason and the immigrant parents of his students face is beyond the scope of what Jason can influence as “the interests, experiences, and perspectives of a dominant White culture in the United States have been institutionalized in the operating systems, norms, and practices of schools (p. 99). Jason works hard to reach out to his parents and to support them as they work to expand life opportunities for their children, but the DOE operates from a universalist perspective that requires the same action and response for all offenders. In the case of the parents who use physical contact as their primary mode of discipline, the DOE’s response is a swift intervention from the Administration for Children’s Services that can be both frightening and alienating. Jason feels that, although this might be an acceptable response for non-immigrant parents, he sees it as being unfair to parents who come from cultures with different norms for parenting behaviors. Jason certainly does not condone physical abuse, but he fears the repercussions of a universalist response for the immigrant parents that may serve to alienate those parents and undermine Jason’s work to build relationships with these families. These universalist approaches and institutionalized logics structure practices and expectations in public schools. These logics serve some, while

disadvantaging others: in this case, the immigrant families that Jason works to serve.

The cultural capital that immigrant families benefited from in their old country will do very little good for them in a country with radically different norms and structures (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006). The immigrant parents of Jason's students are unfamiliar with U.S. schools and classrooms and therefore struggle to support their children who work to succeed in school. Jason recognizes that the challenges faced by these his students and their parents become the challenges he faces as a teacher in the classroom:

I know most of the students that I've had in the five years that I've been here have been from either Mexico or Dominican Republic. I don't really know what percentage of them are illegal and what percentage are not. Partly because it's not something that the parents talk to me about, but many of my students have said that their parents are here illegally and I know a lot of them work in factories. My general observation this year and in other years is that the parents of my students often have very low levels of education. In fact, some of the parents that have come to parent teacher conferences have not even been able to sign their name on a report card. That's a big challenge for me because the parents don't see themselves as capable of helping their children in any way in their academic life. Typically, the parents are interested in their children

getting a good education especially in English, because many of them do not speak English very well or at all.

The unfreedoms that limit the life chances of Jason's students and parents are typical of immigrant families. They have left their home country seeking to improve life opportunities for their children through better education, better economic futures, and safer environments, yet, upon arrival, they are faced with additional obstacles. Yet, with the exception of English Language Learners, NCLB ignores the unfreedoms that immigrant children face. NCLB has granted a single year of grace for English Language Learners, but after a single year in the country, they are required to take the standardized tests alongside their non-immigrant peers. The DOE's policies mirror the national NCLB policy and, outside of language considerations, immigrant students are treated just as any other students. The School of Academic Excellence, too, makes no distinction between students of immigrant status and those who are not. At Lorena's school, great effort is invested in attending to variances between cultural groups- Dominican, African American, Mexican, etc.- but no attention is given to the unique needs of immigrant students.

Perreira, Chapman, and Stein (2006) describe the unfreedoms immigrants face in their efforts to improve their life opportunities noting that these individuals are poor, undocumented and, often, challenged by language and cultural difference that they struggle to navigate. They are burdened by the "physical and emotional stress of establishing a new life in a culture that welcomes their labor

but rejects, openly or overtly, their presence” (Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006, p. 469). These are the overwhelming unfreedoms faced by immigrant families on a daily basis, but they go virtually ignored by both NCLB and the DOE. Jason sees this mirrored at The School of Academic Excellence where he sees the unique needs of his immigrant students being ignored. Research validates Jason’s feelings about his immigrant students. According to Perreira, Chapman, and Stein (2006), immigrant parents often find themselves not only marginalized by society and in the workplace, but also in what they expected to be a protected space: the school.

Jason works to overcome the negative effects of the marginalization of his students and their parents and works to expand educational opportunity through his efforts to show parents how to support their children and to build the kind of cultural capital that will better serve them in their new homeland. One of the ways he has tried to do this is through a men’s group he organized to support immigrant fathers, but according to Jason, he was “in over my head.”

An Effort to Expand Opportunity

Jason is deeply aware of the chasm that exists between the freedoms his students have to achieve and the greater opportunities that other children have to do the same. To address this inequity, Jason took on the responsibility for reaching out to the immigrant fathers of his students and put together a group that he hoped would provide needed support for these families. He explains:

My idea was to do a men's group. I wanted to get the dads together to deal with issues that might be weighing them down. Things like feeling isolated or depressed because they're illegal immigrants in a foreign land and they don't speak the language and it's hard to get a job. I tried, but I was in over my head and I really wasn't able to get where I wanted to with that group. It was really much more superficial than I wanted it to be. I take responsibility for it; I just didn't really know how to do it. What we ended up talking about were things that the dads could do or have been doing with their kids to just be involved as parents. But, mostly, the few fathers who came were already doing that stuff. It was kind of cool but there was something about the way that I was running it that made it feel never sustainable and I decided not to do it the next year.

It seems that both Jason and the immigrant fathers he tried to support were both in over their heads. Jason's effort to support these men was admirable, but he was unaware of the magnitude and complexity of the challenges the men faced.

Therefore, he felt that he was unsuccessful in his efforts. Jason was trying to do something he could not do alone- he needed greater support for this effort through the school, the community, and the DOE. However, these very real and pressing life issues that limit the opportunities of immigrant children and their parents are not considered in DOE or NCLB policy. What Jason set out to address in a series of conversations with his men's group are the collection of deeply rooted issues that need to be addressed at a much higher level than Jason is capable of

influencing. The challenges these men face are at the very core of a society characterized by public institutions that are grounded in belief systems that elevate the status of the dominant culture, perpetuating and expanding existing inequities in an already unjust society (Larson & Ovando, 2001). Working alone, Jason has little chance of creating a more just world and expanding the opportunities of the children he works with and their parents.

The challenges faced by the immigrant children in Jason's classroom are not unique to those families and are well documented in literature on the experiences of immigrant families. Latinos are the fastest growing minority group in America and the majority of Latino youth are children of immigrants (Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006). The challenges Jason and these families face are not unique to his classroom, The School of Academic Excellence, Bed-Stuy, or New York City. The immigrant population is growing rapidly in every state across the country and their unique needs cannot be ignored for long as they comprise a rapidly growing portion of many school populations (Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006).

The challenges faced by immigrant parents are significant. In addition to the challenges all parents face in sending their child off to school for seven hours a day and then working to support their child as he or she works to be successful, the parents of immigrant children face additional challenges: navigating new social contexts, mastering a new language, interacting with new institutions, possibly leaving family behind, surviving under new economic conditions, and

existing in a family structure that is far different from what they had back in their native land. Such challenges are observed by Jason on a daily basis as he works to overcome these very unfreedoms that are ignored by NCLB and the DOE, and they go largely unattended at The School of Academic Excellence. Rothstein (2002) identifies these challenges as inequities that affect the lives and opportunities of these children entering America's schools on a very uneven playing field upon which they are expected to perform compatibly. These challenges are what Sen (1999) refers to as the unfreedoms that limit the potential success and opportunities of impoverished youth.

These "unfreedoms" (Sen, 1999) that immigrants and their children face can become major obstacles to success for Jason's students and he strives endlessly to find ways to help his students overcome them. Unfortunately, the standardized tests that Jason's students are required to take assess "achievement" only as defined by the score on a single standardized test. Sen argues that our social institutions are flawed if our efforts towards student achievement are focused purely on actual achievement, ignoring the opportunities or freedom that students have to achieve. Immigrant parents and their children are arriving in America at an exponentially growing rate with a single objective: to expand their life opportunities (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006). Once they arrive, the struggle begins to navigate the large space between their often lamented opportunities and the beauty of their dreams.

The Challenge of Communicating with Parents

The parents of the Hispanic students in Jason's classroom have a powerful advantage in having Jason as a teacher- not only is he sensitive to their needs and unique situations, but he is fluent in Spanish. Recently, though, Jason has come to realize that fluency in their language is not enough to effectively address the children's needs. Jason shares that since many of his parents are not educated and are illiterate, he finds it exceptionally challenging to have conversations with them about what it is that their child needs as a learner. No matter how well Jason has mastered the language and can communicate with the parents, the effectiveness is diminished because the content of the conversations is so far removed from the parents' personal experiences.

It's hard for me to explain what a child needs to a parent who doesn't really read or write. If I say their writing is weak, what many parents of my students hear is they need to focus on their handwriting. That's not what I'm talking about. It's just hard. I never really know how to present the child's deficiencies in a way that is going to feel empowering to the parents. That's a big challenge for me because I can say, "Your kid's doing poorly." They say, "Well, what do I do about it?" I sometimes don't know what to say to them.

Jason is unique in his efforts to always push beyond narrow academic boundaries to expand educational opportunity for his students. The current aim of the school relative to the LEP parent population is to better serve their needs by making

school documents and parent meetings accessible, by translating school documents into Spanish, and also by providing translators for parent conferences. The administration at The School of Academic Excellence focuses heavily on translating as the solution to the language difficulties faced by LEP parents. Jason feels that this limited view is problematic, but Lorena asserts that the staff is simply not equipped to address the greater problem at hand. At this time, the best Lorena can offer to Spanish-speaking students and their parents are a few bilingual classes and access to translators, as needed.

The frustration Jason demonstrates over his inability to support his students and their parents to the extent he would like to is another hallmark of him as a teaching professional: he is never content because he always sees something more he can do to expand educational opportunity for his students.

When Home Life Enters the Classroom

Jason was drawn to the classroom through his desire to serve the students he works with. Despite the overwhelming demands of testing that are imposed upon him. Jason works to make his classroom a happy and welcoming place where children feel free to make mistakes and work hard to succeed. Jason has an innate skill for taking any situation and turning it into a positive and constructive learning opportunity that honors the children who are privileged to have him as their teacher. A most telling example that captures Jason's ability to straddle the

challenges his children face and yet maintain a constant positive focus occurred one day in October.

As I observed Jason in the midst of teaching, the children became distracted by a bug walking across the floor, enthusiastically squealing, “Ooohhh! It’s a ladybug!” Jason leaned over to take a peek at the visitor. Then, without missing a beat, he grabbed a Ziplock bag, deftly scooped up the critter and announced to the class, “If you ever see a bug like that again, let me know. Bedbugs are *not* a bug we want in our class. We’ll look at it later so you know what it looks like.” Later, he explains to me that finding a bedbug in class is evidence of another bedbug epidemic in the home of one of his students. He had Anita’s brother last year and had the same problem. Their father, an illegal immigrant, makes a living by finding and selling mattresses he retrieves from the side of the road on garbage day. His home is always cluttered with other people’s trash. That trash is his family’s lifeline. Bedbugs and all.

Concluding Remarks

Jason, his students, and their families have in common more than a language and a desire to access all that America has to offer under its umbrella of freedom. They are all marked with a sense of drive and perseverance that has carried them to the place they are today. This innate drive will continue to support them as long as their efforts are not overwhelmed, suppressed or negated by a system that has, to date, virtually ignored the unique needs that they have as

a teacher, parents, and students all limited by the unfreedoms that come along with immigrant status.

The children and parents that make up Jason's classroom family are fortunate to have such a caring and driven educator working to meet their needs. Jason goes above and beyond what most teachers do in order to meet the needs of the immigrant families he wants so badly to help, but the universalist and test-focused tendencies of federal and local policy have reduced Jason's opportunities to serve these families. Jason continually fights the system that ignores the needs of his students. He exclaims, "It's not right! We're asking kids to do all this stuff and it's not what they need. It's not helpful to what I want for them in this work!" He goes on to express his disappointment in himself and the futility he feels as he tries valiantly to meet the needs of his largely immigrant students that go blatantly ignored by the school, the city, and federal policy. The system is failing Jason and his students, yet Jason continues to put the burden on himself and sadly states, "I'm not giving enough. I'm not helping enough. I'm not contributing a way that feels right to me. Maybe I'm not even supposed to be a teacher."

CHAPTER VII

INTRODUCTION TO THE GRADE 3 TEACHER: KATIE

In this chapter, I introduce Katie, one of the Grade Three teachers at The School of Academic Excellence. First, I provide an overview of Katie's brief career in education to date, including insight into Katie's beliefs about pedagogy. I also provide some basic information about elements of Katie's life that impact her teaching. Next, I provide a series of comparisons between the assumptions of NCLB that influence Katie's instructional practice and Katie's personal beliefs. Like many of her peers at The School of Academic Excellence, Katie finds herself trapped between the actions she is required to take to comply with federal, local and school-based policies and those she would like to take. Specifically, I provide examples of Katie's thoughts and actions relative to: highly qualified teachers, the impact of good teaching, supporting students to achieve their potential, and the role of schools in expanding educational opportunity. I close the chapter with a summary of the difficult situation that Katie perseveres in, against the odds that she faces.

Entering the classroom at the end of the third grade corridor, I am greeted by a consistent hum and chatter, regularly punctuated by the cheerful and exuberant voice of the teacher, Katie Edwards. One the day of my first visit, I

entered as Katie announced loudly to the group, “It’s Friday!” As she spoke, she held out both arms, hands outstretched with the thumbs, pointers, and little fingers extended in a gesture of victory. “It’s Friday!” she called out again as she stuck out her tongue and made a face not unlike that of Ozzy Osbourne about to launch into concert. Laughing, the students all stop what they are doing and focus on her as she changes positions, folds her arms and says in a stern, but joking voice, “Now, don’t make me scream today! I need my voice for the Bon Jovi concert tonight!” Laughing again, she nods her head to the class signaling that they are to get back to work. All the students giggle, put their heads down, and get back to work.

This kind of humor-laced behavior characterizes most of the interactions that Katie has with her students. As I observe, I often wonder where she draws the line between being a teacher and being a friend, but, for the most part, the students seem to know their role and act accordingly. At least they do at the beginning of the year. As the year unfolds, the lines between who is in charge begin to blur.

Katie is a bright, energetic young woman. She is tall, lean, attractive, and is constantly in motion. Katie has big, brown puppy dog eyes and long brown hair almost always pulled back into a loose knot at the back of her head. Her physical features are completely overshadowed by her personality, the energy of which catches your attention as if she were the head cheerleader on the pep squad. Katie is full of life and brings this to her classroom on a daily basis. Her energy is

contagious and there is always an energetic hum in the room as if at any second the students and teacher could all burst into a frenzied dance. Collectively, they seem to be just on the verge of taking off. It seems that Katie's liveliness is a good match for this group of students who also harbor an endless amount of energy.

Katie's efforts to be successful in her school parallel those of her students. All of them are working hard to succeed, but are facing obstacles and challenges every step of the way. Katie is overwhelmed by her current responsibilities: the planning of her wedding, a new grade level assignment, a new and inexperienced teaching partner, language barriers between she and her students and their parents, a new curriculum, difficulties with her classroom management, and, on top of all this, she juggles three jobs. Katie's students also face challenges, that are largely connected to their lives and experiences outside of school: lack of background knowledge and experiences to support their learning, parents who struggle to support their children as learners, language barriers, and a teacher who is underequipped to support their learning in addition to their many other needs. These challenges are what Amartya Sen (1999) refers to as "unfreedoms" that will make it difficult, if not impossible, for Katie's students to perform on par with their more privileged peers that do not face the challenges common to poor children of color. What stands out most about Katie as the study unfolds is the contradiction often found between her espoused beliefs and the actions she takes.

How Do Highly Qualified Teachers Expand Educational Opportunity?

NCLB Assumption: Hiring “Highly Qualified Teachers”
Will Enhance Academic Achievement

Katie’s Experience: Successful Teaching In Urban Contexts
Requires More Than Basic Certification

Katie entered into teaching as a fully credentialed teacher. Her undergraduate degree in education gave her status as a “highly qualified teacher” under NCLB. However, Katie quickly learned that being labeled “highly qualified” was not enough to meet the needs of the impoverished youth in the urban schools where she found employment. Thus far, during her short, five-year career as a teacher, Katie has worked in three schools and in four different positions. In her first school, Katie worked as a second grade teacher, but was excused after her first year and found herself searching for another position. Katie was eventually hired as an itinerant, pull-out math teacher- an odd position for a teacher with little experience to be placed in. Katie found this position to be especially challenging because she did not have her own classroom that she could run as she pleased and found that many teachers were hesitant to release their students to her so she could work with them. During the two years she spent at this school and in this position, Katie spent more time trying to fill her time than actually using it to serve children. Katie shares:

The teachers there, they didn’t trust me, or they didn’t know me. I was supposed to help their kids with math and I’d only taught one year. The first year I spent most of my time sitting in my office. I wanted to work

with students, but since I couldn't, I spent my time writing up the lesson plans that were all about what I would do if I had students to work with. It was pretty frustrating and a waste of time.

Katie was both overwhelmed and disappointed with her initial experiences in teaching. After the disappointment of being excessed after her first year and forced to find employment elsewhere, she was again disappointed at her second school after being placed in a position that was inappropriately matched to her experience. As a second year teacher, she found herself saddled with the responsibility of working with children at every grade level with serious learning needs in math that their experienced classroom teachers could not resolve and that are typically addressed by an expert. Katie struggled to connect with the teachers she was supposed to help and ended up writing endless lesson plans that she never taught. Although technically certified to perform these duties, Katie simply did not have the respect of her peers or years of experience with children necessary to do her job successfully.

After two years of feeling frustrated, Katie decided it was time for her to look elsewhere and so she sent resumes and applications to schools that were advertising for and hiring teachers. One of the schools that Katie went to for an interview was the school that Lorena Sanchez had previously worked in. Katie's interview at that school had been canceled, but the people at that building connected her with Ms. Sanchez who was also looking for teachers at her new school nearby. Katie recalls:

Since the door closed at one school and it opened at another, I felt I needed to pursue that. So I did. I met with Ms. Sanchez that day and spoke with her informally. I remember Ms. Sanchez asked me, “How would you be an asset to my school? Why should I hire you on as a teacher?” I told her that I wanted to go back to being a classroom teacher and working with students and building relationships with them. I told her that I understood that new teachers have a lot to learn and that I would probably make a lot of mistakes throughout the year, but that I would learn from my mistakes and continue to grow. We hit it off. She invited me back for a formal interview, and ended up hiring me on as a fifth grade teacher.

Katie’s openness about her abilities, strengths and shortcomings is something that she repeatedly and authentically displays. She is not afraid to ask for help when she needs it. Katie does not seem to do as consistent a job of following up on the suggestions she receives, though. At times, she incorporates suggestions into her teaching repertoire, but when the challenge of doing so proves to be too great, Katie chooses to maintain or return to more comfortable and familiar practices.

During grade level meetings, Katie would often welcome support that was offered. When the AP suggested that the classrooms needed to be better organized and suggested that the teachers use the coaches for support with this, Katie immediately looked to the coach team and called out, “Hey! Anyone wanna have a play date?” One of them agreed, an appointment was made, and by the time I returned two days later, Katie’s room had been completely rearranged to better

support the required whole group and small group instruction required at The School of Academic Excellence.

During this same meeting Katie comments that the required social studies text is dry. “It’s all reading,” she says. “There is nothing to spice it up.” The AP suggests that Katie and the other third grade teacher “collaborate to come up with some ideas to make it more interesting and engaging.” This collaboration never takes place, though, and Katie’s social studies lessons continue to be anchored to the textbook. Later in the year while struggling with math lessons in preparation for the math test, Katie again seeks out help from the AP. The AP directs her to the math coach who comes in and models a successful lesson that engages Katie’s students. Katie thanked the coach, but later confided, “I don’t get it. I don’t teach that way so I guess I’ll just do it the way I know how.”

Katie is aware of when she needs help and is not afraid to ask for support, but more often than not, she ultimately returns to the previous ineffective habits that drove her to seek out help in the first place.

Following her first year at The School of Academic Excellence as a fifth grade teacher, Katie was moved into a third grade opening. The fifth grade teacher who had been on a medical reassignment returned to her classroom and her seniority meant that she would replace Katie. Katie was initially unhappy with the assignment, but has accepted it and has come to appreciate her new position.

I just thought I'd be really good at being a fifth grade teacher. I feel like I can only grow as a teacher if I get to teach the same grade level more than once- at least for a couple of years. I did feel like all I was doing at fifth grade was test prep, so it's kind of nice to only have two tests this year. I never really felt I was teaching anything there. All we did was prepare for the tests.

Katie explains her beliefs on teaching that extend far beyond preparing for and taking tests: "School's not just a place to learn and do work. It's a place where people care about you and how you learn." Katie does not believe that continuing through cycles of test prep and testing allow for teachers to "really teach." For Katie, following a scripted test prep curriculum does not qualify as teaching so she quickly grew excited about the flexibility, opportunities, and possibilities of teaching third grade since there were only two mandated standardized tests at that grade level.

Regardless of the grade level and position she is assigned in any given year, Katie holds strong beliefs about her role and responsibilities. She further explains her beliefs on learning:

It's about trying to make learning engaging. Obviously test scores are important. Obviously getting them to do all the work is important, but I guess importance for each person is different. Like what's important to me might not be important to somebody else. What's important to me is getting them to understand the material. Getting them actively engaged in

what I'm doing. I try to do a lot of hands on activities with them because I believe you learn better by doing.

For Katie, engagement appears to mean lessons that allow the teacher to move around in a highly animated fashion. During lessons, Katie often breaks out into theatrical movements to make her point. There are many times during the day when her students are actively engaged in call and response type activities that include physical gestures. She has created a number of such activities to aid in her management efforts. For example, if she calls out "SLANT!" her students know to S- Stand up (or Sit down), L- Listen to the teacher, A- pay Attention to the speaker, and remember N- No, T- Talking. The group enthusiastically demonstrates for me as Katie calls out "Show me SLANTed! Show me unSLANTed!" She does this repeatedly as the children go back and forth from being perfectly poised to learn to something that resembles their more typical state where they talk and spill from their seats and mess around with items on their desks.

It is interesting to note, though, that each of these "engagement" opportunities that Katie's children are highly familiar with came about not through careful and well thought out lesson plans, but through Katie's impulsive responses to misbehavior in the classroom during her darkest moments of frustration. Each one serves as a remarkably successful trigger to redirect misbehavior or to refocus attention, but not one of them was intentionally planned ahead of time by Katie. When asked why she did each of the engagement

activities, she replies with exasperation and desperation saying that they just weren't "getting it" and she "didn't know what else to do."

Katie enters her classroom every day, labeled a "highly qualified" teacher, yet she is unable to recognize that her most desperate acts are often her most successful endeavors and those that best match her espoused beliefs about the importance of engaging learners. One of Katie's most serious and observable limitations as a teacher is in her lack of planning. Katie sees her reading and math curriculum as being highly structured and was observed to invest less time planning for these subjects. She can often be found juggling a teacher's guide on her lap skimming the lesson she is about to teach while simultaneously sending students off to get materials that should have already been in place. The School of Academic Excellence requires teachers to submit lesson plans, but it is easy to fill in boxes pulled from the lessons of a highly scripted program without actually investing time in planning the lessons.

Katie tries to plan well and to provide successful teaching that results in engaged learners, but finds it difficult. She is once again teaching a new grade level and has the content of that new grade level to cover, as well as a literacy program that is both comprehensive and very different from what she was teaching at fifth grade. Reflecting on the scripted literacy program, she says: "I think the biggest challenge is learning a brand new curriculum because it is so structured in the third grade with the Reading First program." Additionally, Katie is challenged by the responsibility she feels she has to support the newly hired and

inexperienced teacher who is her sole grade level teammate. Although she has had five years of experience in teaching, Katie does not have the knowledge base at third grade or for teaching in general to carry both herself and the new teacher.

Katie's most timely challenge and current distracter to her planning and teaching efforts is her upcoming wedding. To bring in additional money, she is working three jobs. She works full time as a teacher. She also works a part time job on Saturday where she provides therapeutic recreation for high school students with autism. Finally, she works four nights a week and Saturday afternoons in a trendy clothing store. By February, with just over a month before her wedding, Katie shares the depths of her exhaustion and frustration: "I just can't do it anymore. I can't sleep. I can't eat. I'm getting sick all the time. Well, at least I can sleep on Sundays. I haven't even seen my fiancé for two weeks."

In order to pay for the costs related to her wedding, Katie made the decision to take on additional work outside of her fulltime job as a teacher. This decision did not just impact Katie. Her students also suffered from Katie's over-extension of herself. The extra hours of work claimed valuable time that could have been invested in planning lessons and reflecting on her students' needs and her own teaching efforts. By NCLB standards, Katie, technically, meets the requirements of a highly qualified teacher, yet she finds that in order to be successful at The School of Academic Excellence, she needs more than a certificate and sleep on Sundays.

How Can Students Achieve Their Potential?

NCLB Assumption: Student Needs Can Be Addressed Within the Classroom

Katie's Belief: Parental Support Outside of the Classroom Is Necessary

All of the previously identified stressors decrease Katie's and, therefore, her students' opportunities for success in school. Regardless, Katie perseveres in her efforts to live up to the expectations of the local and federal policies that insist that all children can learn provided they are exposed to quality instruction.

Katie's struggles can be seen most readily in her management skills that deteriorate as the year unfolds. At the beginning of the year, Katie's lighthearted Pollyanna-like disposition and humor worked well. She easily redirected a child's off-task behavior with the request, "My darling, my sweet pea, my love of my life, will you please sit down?" She explains her positive approach with a boy she identified as being particularly challenging: "I don't care if he's sitting at the table, on the floor or at a desk. If he has his book open and is following along, I'm happy. It's all about what he needs to do to learn." I observe the same child several times throughout the session and record in my notes that "he seems to be all over the place and totally taking advantage of her." At the same time, Katie appears oblivious to the steady erosion of routines and management in her classroom. She maneuvers through her days with an upbeat state of mind and the assumption that the children will follow along with her lead in a Pied Piper-like fashion.

As I settled in to observe one day late in September, Katie began by taking attendance. Normally a rather benign routine in most classrooms, Katie's students were using it as a tool to outperform each other as each child responded to role call with an increasingly loud and obnoxious version of "here." At one point, a child screeched "here" in such a high-pitched, piercing shriek that my ears were left ringing for at least ten minutes. This misbehavior was the launching pad for Katie's day and the inappropriate behaviors went completely unattended to by Katie.

As she continued through the morning, evidence of her lack of planning continually resurfaced and every time she turned her back to review the teacher's guide, pens and papers went flying and children would dart from their chairs. Every now and then, a particularly bold child would catch my eye inviting me to join the game that was going on right behind Katie's back whenever she was turned and, oftentimes, right under her nose when she was facing them. Katie eventually caught on and chastised her students, threatening to take away an art activity she had planned to do with them in the afternoon. The children laughed at what they perceived to be an empty threat.

During a reading lesson that morning, Katie tried to explain the meaning of "foul" to a group that, by then, had again escalated into an unmanageable frenzy. "Basketball!" she called out. At this, they all stopped, obviously more interested in basketball than in reading. "Basketball!" she called out again, almost surprised to see that she had captured their attention. "In basketball," she

continued, “if you climb on someone’s back...” but then was interrupted by raucous and maniacal laughter. “That’s it!” she yells. “No magic kite project after lunch today and no more reading now!” and she ordered the students back to their seats where they sat with their heads down long enough for me to finally give up and leave the room, realizing that nothing more was going to happen in that classroom any time soon.

Throughout most of the month of October, Katie had found somewhat of a groove and could be regularly found bantering enthusiastically with her children. When asked, she would explain behavior challenges in a proactive way saying that all children learn differently and that she felt it was her responsibility to let them all learn in the manner that best suited them as individuals. Katie continued to laugh off the persistent off-task behavior of her students as well as their tendencies to shout out responses or not doing their work by saying: “All children are different. They need to do what they need to do to learn. And I need to let them.”

By the end of October, the tone of the classroom changed radically and Katie began turning on her students, now lashing out at the same student she had earlier in the semester referred to as just doing “what he needs to do to learn.” Now, however, when he speaks out of turn, she admonishes him in front of the class:

Armando! Two fingers on your lips! You are going to sit for 90 minutes with your fingers on your lips. You have to do it because I can't keep sending you to your seat because you don't learn anything.

Armando's behavior that day was no different from that of other students in the classroom, although, in general, he tended to engage in off-task or silly behavior with greater frequency than the other students. Armando is a lively little boy with a sparkle in his eye and an abundance of energy. He was attentive when Katie was teaching, but when her lessons were not focused or when she was distracted, Armando would entertain himself by chatting with a friend or touching someone or something near him. His behaviors were not intentionally disrespectful or overtly disruptive to other students, however, Katie seemed to be losing patience with him. Katie's often disorganized and poorly planned lessons and her lack of classroom management skills were a poor match for Armando's needs as a learner.

On this day, after chastising Armando several more times by just calling out his name and saying "Stop!", Katie calls out to him again when he bothers another student:

You are annoying him! Get up! Move! 4-3-2-1! Move far away from him! If I make you sit in your seat you won't learn anything for another day. You're disrupting everyone's learning and you're not letting me do my job. I've got your daddy on speed dial and don't you think I won't use it!

A few minutes later, her wrath escalates,

Armando! Two fingers on your lips! I mean it! Do you think I am kidding? You are acting like a baby so I am going to treat you like a baby!

Just a few minutes later, she addresses him, her frustration reaching its peak:

See! This is my problem with you. If I send you to your seat you don't learn. And if you stay here, you're a rude little boy! Rude and disruptive. You. Apologize to him. Now. Don't look at me. Apologize to him. Look at him. Are you going to say it? Apologize? Or, will we sit here until Christmas?

Katie's mounting frustrations with Armando are the topic of a conversation we have later. When I ask about him, she reveals to me that he and a number of other students have been a challenge for quite some time. Overwhelmed and frustrated, Katie often lashes out at her students. Both she and her students are victims of a system that is placing an inordinate amount of pressure to increase academic achievement as measured by standardized test scores. The stress that Katie feels is, clearly, passed on to her students. She consistently pushes for greater time on task, attention to skills work, and academic growth, however, she lacks the skills to adequately engage her students and connect to their learning needs.

In contrast, the only other Grade Three classroom in the school is an oasis of peace and there is a consistent hum of steady work and calm voices. Both classes are under the same pressure to perform well on the tests, but Katie is often

overwhelmed in her efforts to get students to respond to her demands for achievement.

NCLB's relentless push for academic achievement is mirrored by the demands of the DOE. The School of Academic Excellence, like many schools that serve poor urban youth, has responded to the pressures to increase academic performance and time dedicated to developing strength in critical, but non-tested areas falls to the wayside. The social and emotional needs of Katie's students are significant. Their lagging academic skills partnered with relentless pressures to perform well on tests creates a classroom context that often pits Katie against her students. The lack of order and organization in Katie's classroom makes it even more difficult for her students to succeed. According to Rudolf Dreikurs, all behavior is goal driven and misbehavior can be attributed to what he refers to the mistaken goals of misbehavior: attention, power, revenge or inadequacy (Walton & Powers, 1974). Katie's classroom is not currently structured in a way that supports children in these categories and they often act out in frustration when overwhelmed or confused by the tasks Katie presents. Oftentimes, her choices are based on the mandated curriculum that she struggles to deliver, either because she does not understand it or because it does not match the needs and experiences of her students. Katie's inexperience as a teacher and the limitations imposed upon her by the mandated curriculum prevent her from being able to address the needs of her students and they often act out accordingly.

Regardless of the situation in her classroom, Katie believes that the parents have a responsibility for the behavior of their children so she reaches out to several of them to address inappropriate classroom behaviors. Unfortunately, she does not always receive the sort of response and support she expects.

She contacted one of the boy's parents in hopes of getting their support and was appalled when the student returned to class the next day and announced "I got a beatin' last night." Another parent demonstrated what Katie considered to be an equally disturbing response to misbehavior in the classroom when she told Katie that if her son misbehaved in class that Katie "should just hit him if he's misbehaving or not listening."

Katie's stress is palpable as she tries to explain her reaction to this:

I can't hit them. I don't want to hit them. I can't control his parents if they hit him. They shouldn't, but they do, I can't control it if they do so I don't call home anymore. I try to deal with it. I try to make it better.

That's why I use humor. Humor has to be a part of what I do. If it wasn't, I'd lose my mind.

The degeneration of instructional and behavioral management in Katie's classrooms has roots in two places: Katie's inexperience as a teacher that will only be overcome with practice, reflection, and professional support; and through what Katie views as a lack of support from the parents of her students. Most of the parents of Katie's students are enthusiastic participants and supporters, but Katie finds that those students who have the greatest needs are those whose

parents she perceives to be least supportive of her efforts. Parental responses to Katie's request for support that are directed toward physical discipline of their children contradicts Katie's beliefs about how to best influence her students' behaviors. Annette Lareau (2003) and Lisa Delpit (1995) would argue that these families have differing conceptions about how to best influence their children's behavior and for them, disciplining a child physically is appropriate and acceptable with one parent feeling that it is appropriate for Katie to physically discipline her child.

Katie has different beliefs about how to discipline children than those held by many of the parents she works with. The clash between these beliefs pose challenges to Katie as she is left to decide how to best respond to these mismatches. She refuses to physically address the misbehavior per one parent's request and is left in a quandary. Does she contact the parents knowing that the result will be a beating at home, or does she let the behavior go? How can she control a child without physically disciplining them when that is how they are raised at home? Her decision has been to address the situation as best she can within the confines of her classroom- largely through humor and letting a lot of behaviors slide by that would be otherwise unacceptable. To Katie, the consequences of reporting these behaviors to the children's parents is simply too great.

How Can Good Teaching Expand Educational Opportunity?

NCLB Assumption: Through Good Teaching, All Students Can Learn and the Achievement Gap Can Be Closed

Katie's Belief: Good Teaching Requires That Teachers Have the Ability to Communicate Successfully With Students and Parents

The School of Academic Excellence values parent participation and involvement and invites parents into the school during September for a "Meet and Greet" opportunity with their child's classroom teacher. On the designated day in September, parents are invited to school to meet their child's teacher and learn a little bit about what to expect at that grade level. Katie was rather disappointed at the turnout- only eight of eighteen students' parents came to the session. Parent conferences provided Katie another opportunity to communicate with her students' parents. She reflects on the November round of conferences that were much better attended: "Conferences went very well for me. I had 17 out of 18 students."

Katie was pleased with the high turnout, but shared her thoughts on the difference between attendance rates at the two events. Katie explains:

You see, there's a lot of parent participation when there's a problem. Like when they think the teacher is not doing their job. You don't see them as much when the teachers contact the parents. Most of them don't come in when I ask, but I gave a lot of 1s on the report cards and I told the parents how bad their kids behave. All the sudden, they pay attention and, look! 17 kids' parents came!

Katie continues on to explain how the conferences went:

It went overall very well. The parents were kind of shocked at some things I was saying, but overall they were kind of like, “Alright. Well, now I know what I can do to help you out.” I was just very honest with them. I mean, I feel it’s important. They need to know what’s going on with their kid.

Katie’s primary focus in her conferences was to get the support of her parents in order to change misbehavior and bad homework habits. Based on the attendance rates at the November conference session, it can be inferred that the parents of Katie’s students are motivated to support their children. Katie shared the story of Enrique who had not been doing his homework. His mother was shocked and the very next day, Enrique showed up in class with every piece of homework he had neglected for the year. Enrique’s story is one of success, but not one without challenge.

However, parental motivation and attendance are not enough. As can be seen from the previous example on methods of discipline, Katie struggles to successfully engage parents who want to help their children when their methodologies and beliefs about how to best support their children differ from those of the teacher. These cultural mismatches have manifested themselves in Katie’s classroom in very literal ways as well: Katie speaks English and, like Enrique, most of her students and their parents speak Spanish.

Communicating with Parents and Students

Although parents and, often, extended family members attended each conference, several of the conferences were difficult for Katie because of the language barrier she faces as she is unable to speak Spanish and most of her students' parents are unable to speak English. Lorena has worked to make translators available for conferences, but when most of the parents speak Spanish and most of the teachers speak English, a translator is not always available and the responsibility falls on Katie and the parents of her students. Both Katie and the parents worked to bridge this communication gap. In most conferences, Katie found herself speaking to rather large audiences.

In Enrique's case, his mother brother, and cousin arrived for the conference with Enrique. The cousin's job was to translate. Katie shared Enrique's poor record of test scores and lack of consistency in completing and submitting his homework. Enrique's cousin, fluent in both English and Spanish, efficiently translated the content of the conference. Enrique and Katie were very fortunate that his mother had the forethought and opportunity to bring along the cousin. Not all families are as fortunate to have a personal translator. Katie shares of one such conference:

It wasn't just all the parents that came in. They brought their brothers, cousins, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandmothers. After a while, I realized that I had full families sitting around my table, and I'd start the conference saying, "Hi everybody! How are we doing today?"

As she sat at the table, surrounded by non-English speaking families, Katie was so overwhelmed she could not even call upon her most basic Spanish skills and extend a greeting to these families in their native language.

When families did not bring other family members to translate, Katie would call on one of her colleagues to do the job. More often, though, the role of translating would fall upon one of Katie's students who had come along with his or her parents:

The kid would be here with them and they would translate, which I'm kind of iffy about that. I don't mind it, but sometimes the kids are really shy and they don't want their parents to know things. They are like, "Well, do I really have to say that?" And then I have to wonder what they say. They might not exactly say what I tell them to. Instead of them saying "I talk a lot!" they might say "Mommy, I don't talk at all!"

Minimally, Katie is pleased with the impact she can have on her students as learners through her conferences. She has also expanded this support through the numerous telephone calls she makes in her efforts to nurture parental involvement. Just as she faces a language barrier in person, she shares of the challenges she faces trying to speak with the parents over the phone:

There's this one little girl who, I know she needed help, so I decided to call her house. I wanted to talk to her or to her parents. But, when I called and said "Hello," whoever answered the phone said "Hola!" Then I said "Hello" and whoever answered said, "Hola!" I said, "Hello. I'm Maria's

teacher.” Whoever answered the phone said “No speak English!” and hung up the phone. What am I supposed to do? Guess that’s why I am trying to learn Spanish on my own. I don’t think I have another choice.

Katie and her students are similarly challenged by the language when it comes to day to day interactions in the classroom. Of Katie’s 18 students, only one of them does not speak Spanish.

My students are bilingual and their language at home is Spanish, but most of them do speak, read, and write in English. Sometimes their words get mixed up, though, and they tend to write in what I call Spanglish- a mixture of both English and Spanish. It’s hard when you don’t speak the language. I know for me I don’t speak the language. Communicating with them, unless it’s translated in Spanish- they don’t get it.

Katie has worked to make the best of this situation by calling on her Spanish-speaking peers to assist her when talking to parents or translating important documents, still she believes that this is not enough and she has decided to learn to speak Spanish herself.

I feel bad. It is difficult because I feel like I’m burdening somebody else when they have their own paperwork or their own stuff to do. So I’m actually learning Spanish myself. I’m learning from the kids. I’ll ask them how you say this? How do you say that? And they’ve actually given me a thumb’s up now that I’m getting a lot better. Now I’ve gotten to the point that if a parent is saying something, as long as they are talking

slowly, I can pick up on a couple of things. I still need somebody to translate it back to them because I don't know how to speak it yet, but it's helping.

NCLB assumes that the placement of a highly qualified teacher will provide children with the educational opportunity necessary to achieve. At The School of Academic Excellence, being highly qualified is not sufficient in order to truly meet the needs of students and to expand educational opportunity. As Katie quickly learned, teachers at The School of Academic Excellence need to be able to speak Spanish. NCLB recognizes that English Language Learners are at a disadvantage compared to their English-speaking peers, yet the only provision the law provides to address this unfreedom is the exemption from the taking of the mandated standardized test until after the child has been enrolled for a full academic year (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b, 2005).

Sen (1992) argues that the unequal school entry point and continued challenges faced by ELLs make the expectation of universal proficient performance (as measured by standardized test performance after a single year) inherently problematic. Sen's focus on freedom to achieve is tied to his notion of capabilities, or the set of functionings that allow an individual to achieve what is important to him or her (1992). "Sen asserts that any approach to supporting an individual in need or suffering with deprivations should be concerned, primarily, with expanding capabilities or freedoms to achieve (Anderson, 2004, p. 126).

In this case, the students in Katie's classroom deserve to have their educational opportunities expanded by exposure to a teacher who speaks the native language of both the children and their parents and to be privileged with opportunity to be assessed either in their native language or given the time needed to master the language before being required to take the tests that will dictate whether they are able to move on to the next grade level. Unfortunately, NCLB has a different focus. Unlike Sen who argues that attention must be directed towards expanding the opportunities these students have to achieve, NCLB directs attention towards performance on a test. Katie is left to do the best she can to ensure that her students will perform adequately on a test they do not care about or understand. She does the best she can to ensure their success through her efforts to bridge the language gap and move them forward academically.

At the beginning of the year, Katie's efforts to communicate with her students were adequate as all of them were bilingual. They all had differing levels of proficiency, but all had sufficient knowledge of the language to understand Katie and vice versa. During moments of great confusion, there were enough students that could translate when their second languages failed either Katie or her students.

*Failing to Meet the Needs of English Language Learners-
“She’s didn’t speak a word of English”*

The need that Katie felt to develop facility in Spanish became more pressing in January when she received a new student, Maria. Katie shares the story of how the little girl who only speaks Spanish ended up in her class:

Maria was three days into the country at that time. She does not speak one word of English. She’s from Nicaragua and they thought that I was the best candidate to be her teacher because my Spanish was better than the other third grade teacher’s. I knew a couple of words here or there, but now I pretty much try to teach bilingually almost all day.

It is obvious that Maria would benefit significantly from a bilingual classroom with a teacher who speaks fluently in Spanish, as well as in English, but there was no bilingual class at fourth grade. Katie tried her best, but her claim to “teach bilingual almost all day” was observed more accurately to be her teaching in English and then repeating herself in a fractured form of Spanish as prompted by her students.

Entering the classroom one day, I overheard Katie call out, “Abre tus libros!” She proudly translated to me, “That means, ‘Open your books.’” Katie continued on through her “bilingual” lesson simply substituting words she had learned as she continued. “Lapiz” for “pencil,” “papel” for “paper,” and “pagina XX” with the correct page number provided to her by her students as she directed them through a lesson. Katie’s “bilingual teaching” seemed to reach its peak

during math lessons where she was able to speak slowly enough for children to translate her lessons word for word. Katie would say each word in English, her students would translate, and then Katie would repeat them in Spanish to Maria who would nod once when her Spanish-speaking peers would say a word and then again as her “bilingual” teacher repeated the word.

This situation is certainly not adequate for Maria to understand the content of the lessons and was probably highly distracting to her peers. It also does little to expand her educational opportunities as Maria is functioning on the fourth grade level, but was placed into a third grade because there was no bilingual class available for her. However, Katie persists and works to do the best she can to serve this child. She explains how it is that the student ended up in her classroom:

She’s supposed to be in the fourth grade, but because she’s new in the country they didn’t want to throw her into the fourth grade yet. They wanted her to repeat the third grade until like her English gets a little bit better. There is no bilingual third grade class and there’s no bilingual fourth grade as far as I know. I know there’s only second grade bilingual. And they didn’t want to put her that far back.

It is of interest to note that the principal explicitly stated her disagreement with the practice of placing students at a lower grade level simply because of their language skills, yet that is exactly how this child’s mismatch with the existing system was handled. She could not speak English, so she was placed a grade level

behind in order to learn English on less challenging material and then move on to the fourth grade a year later.

This decision was a difficult one for Lorena and the logic is a troubled one with no solution forthcoming from the DOE. There are simply not enough bilingual students in the intermediate grades at The School of Academic Excellence to justify adding bilingual classes. Therefore, all the students that should have and would have benefited from a bilingual education were unceremoniously dumped into general education classrooms, often led by teachers like Katie with little to no knowledge of the Spanish language.

Given this, Katie works to support her Spanish-speaking students as best she can. They benefit from small group sessions with the school ELL teacher a few times a week, but the bulk of their instructional time is spent in Katie's classroom. Katie pairs students together so they can help each other and tries to pick up and use as much Spanish as she can, but she finds it hard:

It makes it difficult because now I'll be teaching a lesson and she'll just raise her hand and say, "En Espanol, por favor. No entienda." I'm like all right, hold on, and try to figure out how to say it so she can understand.

Katie admits that her Spanish is limited, but she labors to translate her lessons into fragments of Spanish so that Maria can access at least some of the content.

I just think that it's important because obviously I'm not in her shoes and I don't know what it's like to come to a brand new country and not know the language. Like I'm not in her shoes but I can imagine that it's really

hard and I want to try and make this transition as easy as I can for her. She's going to pick it up eventually. She's extremely bright. She's way ahead of my kids- very intelligent. It's just the language thing that's a problem.

This student's "unfreedom" (Sen, 1999) in the form of lacking fluency in English in a school with no bilingual options for students at the intermediate grades, has led to a further unfreedom for the child- being moved back a grade.

Unfortunately, research and experience demonstrate that most retained children do not catch up and stay caught up. For these children, retention has only confirmed to themselves (and everyone else) that they are "dumb" and can't succeed in school. Once they begin to believe this, it all too often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Cunningham & Allington, 1999, p. 7).

Of course, in this case, the retention is not related to academic performance. It is directly related to language. The solution for this child's lack of English was to hold her back in third grade with a teacher who works to support her by speaking broken Spanish that she learns from a Disney English-Spanish dictionary. According to Katie, this methodology will work and "She's going to pick it up eventually," because "She's extremely bright."

But, what if she doesn't "pick it up?" How long can she continue learning in fractured Spanish that cannot come close to capturing the complexity of the learning she should be doing as a nine year old? What disservice is she being

provided by placing her in a classroom full of children who are a year younger than her? As a result of the placement in Katie's classroom rather than a more appropriate setting that matched the student's grade level and language needs, Maria's educational opportunities are being even further reduced than they were originally. The unfreedoms she faces have now been compounded by the school that should be serving her by building educational opportunity, not reducing it. Yet, what option did Lorena have but to place her in Katie's classroom? Maria would have floundered in fourth grade and certainly would not fit into Jason's grade 2 bilingual class. Lorena did the best she could in placing the child, and Katie continues on, doing the best she can to teach Maria.

How Can Students Achieve Their Potential?

NCLB Assumption: All Students Can Learn and the
Achievement Gap Can Be Closed

Katie's Belief: Many Students Have Exceptional Needs That Must Be
Addressed In Order To Expand Their Educational Opportunities

Katie's students face challenges they carry from home other than their lack of proficiency in English. According to Katie, although most of her students' parents truly want to support their children, many find it hard to do so. She estimates that most of the parents work two to three jobs and are physically not around or are just too tired to really support their child with schoolwork, no matter how supportive they would like to be. She also notes that many of her

parents are not educated themselves, so it becomes very difficult for them to help their child with homework. Katie laments:

How can a parent support their child if the parent's not understanding it as well? Everybody's opinion on that will be different and I don't know if I have a wrong opinion or a right opinion, but if the parent is struggling with the work, too, why frustrate both of them?

Recognizing this challenge, Katie has decided one way to help these students and their parents is to share her cell phone number. The DOE has established a homework hotline of sorts so that students can call and ask for help, but Katie feels that it would be better for them to get the support from her, rather than a stranger. "I know there is Dial-a-Teacher, but if she is turning to me for help, I feel like if I say, 'No I can't help you. Call somebody else,' then I'm not doing my job as an educator."

Katie shares that after she decided to share her private cell phone number, the parents and students began to call her nonstop throughout her shifts at the clothing store, as well as during the school day. Katie accepts these intrusions, though, as she realizes that it is one of the ways she can make a difference in the lives of these children and their families. She tells of one student who calls with much greater frequency than the others:

Her mother speaks Spanish and her father speaks Spanglish. How can they help her? So, I gave her my phone number. The first night, she called me nine times to ask for help. Now she calls me maybe every other day. Or,

every two days. I'm trying to wean her off that since I don't want her to become too dependent on me. So, now she will call me only if it's an emergency. I tell her I want to see how much you can do on your own tonight. I'm really proud of how you're working. I do the encouraging words with her because then she can say, "Yes I'm doing it." I taught her that if there's a question that I can't help you with at home put a post-it in it and we'll talk about it in the morning. And she's been doing that. I have little tiny post-its that I gave her- half a little stack of them. I told her, "Here's a couple post-its for you. If you don't understand something, put a little sticky note on there and write down what you have trouble with."

In her efforts to expand educational opportunity for her students, Katie reaches into the hours that fall outside of the regular school day knowing that the unfreedoms they face outside of school hours limit their ability to achieve.

Unfortunately, this effort proved to be too much for Katie and in expanding opportunity for her students, she quickly became overwhelmed as she was inundated by calls from both students and parents. She started to deter her students' requests for help via phone by replacing them with the use of sticky notes that she could follow up on during school the next day. The parents quickly learned that while it was hard to reach Katie outside of school hours due to her multiple jobs, they could always contact her during the school day. Katie frequently takes calls from her students' parents during the day, even if students are in the room. In doing this, Katie found a solution to her time crisis by taking

parent calls during her instructional time, however, this practice reduced educational opportunity for her students by stealing away precious instructional time to talk with parents instead of teaching the children in front of her. What is the greater loss? Katie's time outside of school, or the students' instructional time within? Logic dictates that student instructional time must remain sacred, but Katie simply has no more time that she is willing to give.

The Limitations of Insufficient Background Knowledge

Another challenge Katie finds that her students face are the lack of expected experiences that provide necessary background knowledge assumed by most publishing companies. This background knowledge is necessary for the building of higher level concepts in social studies, science, and other content-related areas of study.

After observing a reading lesson with content related to the Special Olympics that had not gone well as a result of the students' lack of prior knowledge, Katie complains about the assumptions made by the publishers that dictate the curriculum she is supposed to cover:

They assume these kids are micro-geniuses. That they have the background knowledge they need. They're not and they don't. The textbooks think they know all of this. I find it all the time. Some of these kids don't even have a television. Half don't have cable.

Katie's example of her students' lack of schema was displayed during the reading lesson that Katie conducted that was related to the Special Olympics. The text assumed that the children had background knowledge and experiences related to the Olympics that would then be a scaffold for the reading on the Special Olympics. As Katie started what appeared to be an unplanned lesson, balancing the teacher's guide on her knees, she quickly realized that her students did not know what the Olympics were. The very first part of the lesson was a launching pad for the rest of the lesson where the students were to generate thoughts and ideas relative to the Olympics. Katie started by asking, "Why are the Olympics special?" No one spoke, so Katie asked the children to raise their hand if they knew what the Olympics were. Not a single child raised their hand and Katie lost a second as a shocked expression dawned on her face and then awkwardly launched into an explanation of the Olympics, looking to me for help, asking what sports were in the Olympics. When she realized no help was forthcoming, Katie quickly flipped through the guide and then announced that the Olympics are special sports games that happen every year and they have things like swimming and basketball and skiing. A quick glance at the students' reader gave her another idea and she added that there were runners at the Olympics and that they "get blocks". (The text actually referenced the "blocks" that sprinters prop under their feet at the beginning of a race.)

At this point, Katie told the students to turn and talk to a partner about why the Olympics were special. She shares with me later:

Technically, I am not supposed to talk about the content of the oral language block- *they* are supposed to talk about the question of the day. I am not supposed to teach it and talk about the Olympics, but how can they talk about it if I don't give them some background knowledge since they don't have any of it to use?

A Katie's children turned to talk to one another about the Olympics, Katie quickly grew frustrated, "You're listing what athletes do- the different sports. I don't want a list, I want to know why the Olympics are special!" Challenges within this lesson were compounded by the lack of planning that Katie did in preparation for the lesson. As she labored to explain why the Olympics are "special," she completely misled her students and did not prepare them adequately for the reading that was actually about the "Special Olympics." If Katie has previewed the lesson and subsequent reading, she would have been prepared to appropriately scaffold the students' background knowledge that was necessary to access this text. It is unfortunate that background experiences are lacking for these students as they often are for poor urban youth who do not benefit from the array of experiences their more privileged peers have access to. Katie takes an interesting approach to the observation she has made that is shared by many other teachers of impoverished youth. This approach does little to expand educational opportunities. When asked where she finds the time to help her students develop the prerequisite background knowledge and then also teach the lessons she's

actually required to teach, Katie simply shrugs her shoulders and asks, “Wave my magic teaching wand and make it happen?”

How Can Schools Expand Educational Opportunity?

NCLB Assumption: Schools Alone Cannot Eliminate Children’s Obstacles to Learning

Katie’s Belief: Fulfilling Opportunities and Experiences Outside of School are Necessary

The staff at The School of Academic Excellence recognizes the powerful influence they can have on their students through the provision of rich after-school opportunities that are run by the teachers. Depending on the year and the teachers involved, the school offers students opportunities to explore Reader’s Theater, dance, music, sports, and art. Each after school session is run by a school staff member who grows close to the children involved in the activity, providing the students with safe and healthy after school options with a powerful role model who engages with them enthusiastically.

Most of Katie’s students participate in these after school events, but what began as a source of opportunity became a source of disappointment towards the middle of the year. A final insult to the challenges that Katie and her students face are the budget cuts that continued to cycle and repeat throughout the course of this study. Nearly every month, there was another tightening of the purse strings by the district that further restricted the opportunities the school was able to offer to it’s students. In February, a particularly brutal budget cut came along

that left the principal with no choice but to begin to cut non-essential, non-academic programs. Katie explains the loss:

I feel sorry for them because now without that after school dance or sports then they have nothing else. They'll go home and what sit in front of the TV for another and additional hour and a half when they could be doing something active and do something healthy and work with other people and work as a team or whatever the case is. I just feel sorry for them.

They need something good and somebody supportive, After-school dance and sports did that for them. Now that they're cutting it and they're getting rid of it, these poor kids are going to have nothing. I think it's a disgrace.

But when you think about it there's no money for it. Whatever money we have we have to salvage it for other things.

The loss of these programs is a great source of unfreedom for Katie's students. For many, these after-school sessions were the alternative to junk food and an afternoon in front of the television. The neighborhood playground is unsafe and littered with hypodermic needles and old condoms- not a place conducive to play, structured or not.

Expanding educational opportunity simply requires that the hours children spend outside of school are addressed. Rothstein identifies the specific activities that middle-class children experience during the summer that their less privileged peers do not: summer camp, family vacations, trips to the zoo or museums, or lessons and activities related to sports or crafts (2004b). "Each of these

experiences for middle-class children, or lack of them for lower-class children, may contribute to the growth in the achievement gap during the summer” (Rothstein, 2004b, p. 58). Hayes and Grether demonstrated that the achievement gap continues to widen during the school year, but at a significantly different rate than it widens during the summer- “while in school, the relatively rich white school children do barely better than the ghetto school children (1.3 times as much progress per month in 1965-6) but during the summers the relatively rich whites progress at 6 times the rate of non-whites” (1983, p. 60). While he agrees that the differential that results from varied experiences during the summer sessions accounts for the bulk of the achievement gap, Rothstein (2004b) believes that in order to expand educational opportunity, schools must address the after-school hours, asserting “ strategy to close the achievement gap between lower-class and middle-class children cannot ignore these non-school hours” (p. 58).

Given the findings of Coleman et al, Hayes and Grether, and Rothstein, the hours spent outside of school are powerful influencers of achievement. The findings of Hayes and Grether, first shared in 1969 and then published in 1983, attest clearly to the folly in cutting the after-school programs and other opportunities that are so important to expanding educational opportunity for poor students of color. In the conclusion of their study, they comment on their findings and the response of the educational system over forty years ago:

If this conclusion is correct, our whole approach to equalizing educational opportunities and achievements may be misdirected. Enormous amounts

of money and energies are being given to changing the school and its curriculum, re-training its teachers, and tinkering with its administrative structure- local, city and state. We may be pouring money and energy into the one place that our results say is not primarily responsible for the reading and word knowledge differentials that have been measured. The same point appears as one of the Coleman Report's (Coleman, et al, 1966) main theses- some of the most important sources of variation in student's academic achievement are not now under the direct control of teachers, principals, or school boards" (Hayes & Grether, 1983, p. 66).

Sadly, these findings and assertions are from a study that was presented at the Eastern Sociological Association Convention in New York City in 1969. Forty years later, the achievement gap endures and programs that have the potential for expanding educational opportunity continue to be cut.

After a series of budget cuts that often came about as a surprise, The School of Academic Excellence, like thousands of others across the city, has opted to cut from its budget what they sadly see as the most dispensable and the programs that get kids excited about school are canceled. Like thousands of other principals in NYC, Lorena was forced to decide where to tighten her purse strings and settled on the programs that are offered outside of school hours so as not to effect the actual school day. When Katie describes the reaction of her students to the loss of the after-school dance program, she uses the words "heart broken," "devastated," "distracted," and "it just got ripped away from them." Her children

see the value in these programs, as do Lorena, Katie and the other teachers, there is simply no money left to continue them and the children will be left to entertain themselves during the precious after school hours that hold potential for narrowing the achievement gap.

Concluding Remarks

The situation that Katie and her students find themselves in could be considered both unfair and inappropriate. Katie's students represent typical impoverished youth who are saddled with significant challenges they must overcome in order to learn. Katie herself faces challenges as she is simply underqualified to meet her students' needs and to expand educational opportunity for them. Regardless, Katie perseveres.

The morning after the ELA test is finally completed, Katie and her students can be found in the room all on rhythm and smiling broadly, jubilant to have the test behind them. Just hours before, the classroom was characterized by what I noted to be a "militant and institutional feel." As Katie and I talk and the students start to get restless, Katie calls out loudly, "Battle of epic proportions! Who would win?" Immediately, the students are all silent, sitting up straight, hands folded on their desks in front of them. Each one has a smile on their face and a sparkle in their eye, the teacher included.

Katie looks to me and says, "I am so excited! I'm glad it's over. Now we can get back to life and won't have to do any more test prep for a whole 'nother year!" Katie pauses for a second to think, "Well, at least until the math test."

CHAPTER VIII

INTRODUCTION TO THE GRADE 5 TEAM: KARA & VANESSA

In this chapter I introduce the experiences of the two teachers that make up the Grade Five team at The School of Academic Excellence: Kara and Vanessa. First, I provide background on each of the teachers, explaining their individual journeys into the education profession and providing insight into their beliefs about their roles as teachers. Kara and Vanessa's experiences parallel those of the other participants in this study as each one is conflicted between what they view as their responsibility in meeting their students' needs and what they are being mandated to do by federal, state and local educational policy. In this chapter, I explore four of the most prominent themes emerging in Vanessa and Kara's stories: the focus on achievement on standardized tests, the impact of increased accountability, the label of highly qualified teachers and the support needed to help students to help students learn and achieve.

The Evolution of the Grade Five Team

Vanessa Ramos and Kara O'Meara, the two fifth grade teachers at The School of Academic Excellence are the Batman and Robin of Bed-Stuy. They are the Dynamic Duo of The School of Academic Excellence. The women live near

each other and commute to and from their homes on Staten Island together on a daily basis. They also plan their lessons jointly. They share breakfast, lunch, diet tips, and resources. And, every Friday, they have lunch together off campus. I was warned about the sanctity of these lunches when the teachers expressed their interest in participating in my study, but simultaneously cautioned me that they would not and could not meet on Fridays during lunch, because that was a special time they reserved for themselves.

I was delighted, therefore, when I was invited to join them for one of their Friday lunches. My fantasy of joining a casual meal shared by friends was rudely disrupted, however, when I met them in the lobby of the school at the appointed time. Both were leading their students while simultaneously pulling on their coats, hats, and gloves. They rapidly deposited their children in the lunchroom line, and they quickly rushed out the door and into the cold. We scrambled in a mad dash for Vanessa's car, leapt in and she tore away from the curb almost before the doors had all been closed. Vanessa maneuvered expertly through the streets of Bed-Stuy and out of the section of town that offered sandwiches at bodegas and nameless combination pizza/Chinese restaurants with storefronts, but no seating. We stopped in an area few miles away where all the restaurants had names on their signs and benches for sitting outside. Rapidly, we leapt from the car and rushed into the restaurant where Kara ordered for all three of us. I soon learned that the 50-minute lunch/recess period simply did not offer sufficient time to both commute and read the menu. Lunch came and was devoured quickly as

we chatted amiably with only a moment of stress when the waitress could not be found to deliver the bill. Once summoned, we paid, stuffed in final mouthfuls of food and departed just as quickly as we had entered. The perfectly timed and executed lunch landed us back on campus and in the cafeteria just as the students finished lining up to return to class.

This manic, but expertly executed excursion is not unlike the careful manner in which these women approach their teaching responsibilities and their efforts to increase opportunity for the poor students of color they have dedicated their careers to serving: they realize the difficulty of the task they are taking on and the improbability of great success, but are willing to do everything they can to make it happen, regardless of the odds.

Vanessa and Kara have been teaching together at The School of Academic Excellence for the past ten years. Jointly, they hold twenty-eight years of classroom experiences, twenty-even of those years at The School of Academic Excellence. For the past five years, the two have grown close as they make up the fifth grade team and stand as leaders in the school, both because of their tenure at the school and because of the leadership qualities each exudes. Vanessa has been at the school for eighteen years and has seen six different administrations in that time. Kara has been at the school for eleven years and quickly established herself as a leader in the school and was appointed as the school United Federation of Teachers (UFT) chapter leader several years ago.

Kara and Vanessa have differing racial backgrounds- Kara is white and Vanessa is Hispanic like many of her students, but they came to teaching through similar routes as education is a second career for both of them. Vanessa began her career as a social worker with a caseload of senior citizens. For the first two years out of college, Vanessa spent her days serving the elderly. She explains her frustration with this work:

When you're twenty-one and you are young, you just got out of college, and you're working with people whose lives are basically over, it's depressing. Every day most of the conversation is "I was in the hospital for five days. I can't eat." It was really very depressing for a person who was twenty-one and beginning her life. It was very depressing and very sad because every week it was like, "So and so died over the weekend." It was a sad situation. I don't mean to say that older people are sad people, but when you are twenty-one you can't relate to that.

Vanessa comes from a family of teachers- both her mother and brother work in the field of education, so when the DOE declared a teaching shortage and began looking for candidates holding Bachelor's degrees in any area, Vanessa decided to make a career change.

I was twenty-one and beginning my life. Kids are beginning their life. So, it was like, wow! This is where I know I fit in because I am starting my career and what better way to start than with students who are just starting their life and I can share that with them. I just didn't feel like I was

making an impact at the senior center whereas I make an impact here. At least I think I do.

After being hired, Vanessa went on to get her Master's degree in Bilingual Education and was permanently certified as a teacher. She began her career as a Kindergarten teacher then transferred to The School of Academic Excellence where she worked for seven years as a Grade 1 teacher, two years as an itinerant reading teacher, one year as a Social Studies cluster teacher, and has been at Grade 5 for the past five years, most of those with Kara.

Kara also came to teaching as a second career. Previous to working in education, Kara owned a successful business in the real estate market although she held a Bachelor's degree certifying her to teach High School English. Kara enjoyed her work, but never had a day off or health insurance and, after nine years in the real estate business, decided that teaching is what she really wanted to do. Kara sought a position as a high school English teacher and went to interview at what she thought was a high school. It turns out that the school was an elementary school. She was hired and continues to teach at The School of Academic Excellence. Kara's humor and flexibility shine through as she explains her introduction to the school and the principal at the time:

He came over he sat on the couch, right on the arm of the chair and said, "What grade do you want to teach?" I said High School English and he said the school was only going to fifth grade. I said well then I guess fifth grade. He said, "We also have an opening for a computer teacher," and I

said well you know I'm very familiar with computers through my business and everything like that. He said, "Call me Friday and I'll let you know." So I called him Friday- he didn't know who I was- but he said, "Alright, you'll be the computer teacher." I came in the following Tuesday and 45 minutes into the day they decided I'd be the fifth grade teacher. The assistant principal was bringing in a friend of hers and she was going to be the computer teacher because it turned out they weren't really going to have a computer lab so they could give her this position and she wouldn't have to do anything. So I became the fifth grade teacher with no training in Elementary Ed and no idea how to put up bulletin board paper. I went to the teacher trainer in the building who had never taught a day herself. She was like a 68 year old woman who had been the secretary for the superintendent at the time. When they switched superintendents she came into this building as a teacher trainer because she had gone to school to get an Elementary Ed degree or whatever, but she had never taught. So when I asked her for the curriculum she said, "What curriculum?" I said well, it's New York City. They must have some guidelines for what you are supposed to teach. She said, "Well, nobody's ever asked me for that before." So I started with nothing, absolutely nothing. The teacher that was on the grade, she had been the fourth grade teacher the year before so she knew there was going to be a vacancy in the fifth grade and that she would be filling the other fifth grade position. Basically, she stacked the

classes accordingly. She took the ones she liked and put the other ones in my class. She kind of distanced herself from me that year...

The next several years that Kara had at The School For Academic Leadership were not unlike this one. The next three years she worked as a fourth grade teacher. During her fifth year a new principal came on and decided to make Kara the Teacher Trainer at the school because she “heard [Kara] was a good teacher.” Kara laughs as she explains the four different positions she went through in the next 48 hours:

So, the new principal made me be the Teacher Trainer. I took the little sentence strip down off of my door that said “Ms. O’Meara Class 5-409” and put one up that said “Ms. O’Meara Teacher Trainer”. I was the Teacher Trainer for 48 hours- long enough to hand out rolls of masking tape to each teacher. I had written on the side, “STICK WITH SAE”- that was my morale booster. Then the superintendent got wind of it, called up the principal and said, “Are you crazy? She’s not certified!” and the principal dragged in someone else to be the new Teacher Trainer. The principal told me, “You will be the Early Childhood Reading Teacher.”

I have absolutely no early childhood experience, but I took down the sentence strip that said “Ms. O’Meara Teacher Trainer” and put up a new one that said “Ms. O’Meara Early Childhood Reading.” Then, I was sharing a room with my friend Vanessa Ramos who was Vanessa Unterro at the time and she was the Project Read Teacher for grades three and

four. She said to me, “I want that job that you have.” I said you can have it- I don’t want it. She went downstairs and she talked to the principal and they decided we would switch, so then I became “Ms. O’Meara Project Read” teacher and put up my last sentence strip that year.

After one year in the pull-out position, Kara returned to fourth grade for two years and, with the exception of one year as the Librarian when she had a broken arm, she has spent the past five years at Grade 5 with Vanessa.

Both Vanessa and Kara express frustration over most of their past principals, but speak highly of the current principal, Lorena Sanchez. According to Vanessa,

Ms. Sanchez is a wonderful person. She has done a lot of wonderful things to change this school. She’s very fair. She’s not one of those people that embarrasses you in front of other teachers- which we’ve had before. She’s very nice and very fair. I feel like she understands that we’ve been here for a long time and I think she respects that. The kids really know her and have gotten to know her because she’s been around them. She’s not hiding somewhere in her office. The kids are very important to her. And the staff and parents. She wants to have everyone work together because if you don’t have the communication between the parents, the teacher, the administration and the staff, nothing’s going to work.

Kara’s thoughts on the principal mirror those of Vanessa, and she adds additional insight as the UFT representative:

She brings up problems as soon as they surface and they are dealt with promptly. She actually listens! The principal lets the teachers know that she doesn't know everything and she will ask for advice. Ms. Sanchez always has the teachers' backs. If a parent comes up and talks to her about a teacher, she will back up the teacher no matter what it is and then find out later what the situation was. If it's something where the teacher was wrong, then I guess she would address that, but it's always a united front which is nice.

Although Kara and Vanessa share fundamental beliefs about the school, their students and their responsibilities, their teaching styles are markedly different while still maintaining underlying similarities. Both women have a sharp sense of humor that comes through clearly in their teaching. Kara's humor tends to be more comedic and self-deprecating while Vanessa's often takes on a sarcastic undertone. The students respond positively to both styles, though, as the teachers' love for them shines through their words and actions.

Creating an Environment for Learning

After observing in Kara's classroom one day, I noted that she runs her classroom like a ringmaster in a three-ring circus, constantly moving and waving her arms. Sharing this with her, Kara laughs and agrees:

That's so funny that you should say that. I always compare teaching to the act in the circus where there is the guy with the plates. He puts one plate

up on a pole and starts it spinning. Well, that's like a kid. Then he gets another pole and he starts the second plate spinning but the first one starts falling off and he's got to get that one spinning again. Eventually he has to have all the plates spinning at once and it's the most difficult thing in the world.

Commenting on her sense of humor that pervades her teaching, Kara says:

You have to keep them entertained and, seriously, if I don't keep myself entertained I would hate the job. I mean, you have to like it. And that's my personality.

Her personality shines through as she teaches a lesson on routines for rotating during independent work. As she talks, she gestures dramatically in the air:

It's really important that we rotate today. (A child yawns.) It's REALLY important that we rotate today. It's important because Aliesha is yawning. And if she's yawning, she might fall asleep. We don't want her to fall asleep so we've got to rotate. Remember- we've got to rotate and do it right, or Aliesha will fall asleep!

All the students, including Aliesha giggle and remain engaged throughout the rest of the lesson. After the first successful round, Kara stands in the middle of the room and directs the first rotation:

Go quickly! Watch out! Be careful not to knock over the old lady in the middle of the room wearing (Kara looks down at herself.) a blue turtleneck!

The children look up, laugh, and continue on with their work giggling. This is just one more successful day in Kara's classroom where she consistently works hard to engage the challenging bunch of ten year olds that entered her classroom on the first day of school. She comments on the unusually long amount of time it took to establish the tone that now characterizes her classroom: "I'm just starting to befriend the class now, in October."

Vanessa's classroom is home to a similar bunch of students who posed a great challenge to her at the beginning of the year. She explains: "I was overwhelmed and real negative about things, but that was the beginning. I always feel like that in the beginning but now our routine is kind of down pat." Like Kara, Vanessa had to work exceptionally hard at the beginning of the school year to manage the behavior of the students in her classroom, but as the year unfolded and relationships were built, the group developed regular routines and structures. One of the most powerful activities that bonded the class and Vanessa was the ballroom dance program they all participated in that was funded through a violence prevention grant. Vanessa explains:

The kids and I are getting closer and it always happens about this time. I think it happened during ballroom dancing when we did the performance.

I was kind of proud of them so I felt this closeness to them.

Vanessa found that dance is an opportunity for the students to express themselves and excel at activities that are non-academic. Many of her students struggle academically but have great strength in other areas- dance is one way they can

express themselves confidently. Vanessa found dance to be so powerful that she established and runs an after school dance program that students can choose to participate in. Vanessa enjoys her students and chooses to laugh with them often. She frequently brings in donuts to share to celebrate birthdays or accomplishments like the ballroom dance performance or completion of standardized tests. She shares, “I try because sometimes it’s the only fun they have. I try to do that for them because it’s just fun. It’s fun for them and it’s fun for me because they like it.”

Vanessa is aware of the pressures her students face. Like Kara and her class, Vanessa and her students struggled mightily as a group at the beginning of the year as the students started the year as a very unruly bunch. Most of their students had spent their previous year in the classroom of a young and inexperienced teacher who “gave up on them and let them run wild” according to Vanessa. She found it hard to reign in their wildness while also working to make sure that they weren’t miserable. The string of tests imposed on fifth grade students and their teachers were a constant source of underlying pressure that added to the management challenges that Vanessa and her students faced. The social studies test at the end of October was followed by the ELA test that falls immediately after the winter break at the end of December. Not even two months later, the math test is taken in March.

Preparation for the next test that seems to always loom just ahead made it difficult for Vanessa to find time to slow down enough for she and her students to

cherish their final year as elementary school students. One of the protected times that the fifth grade teachers were able to “have fun” with their students was during the dance practice sessions that every student participated in enthusiastically and successfully. Vanessa and Kara see such opportunities as essential to the social and emotional development of their students, two areas that are virtually ignored by NCLB.

Vanessa tries to enjoy the moments she shares with her students. Most of the comments and interactions that Vanessa has with her students are upbeat and laced with her humor and sarcasm. As she trips over a backpack a child has left out of place, she calls out laughing, “What? Are you trying to kill me? I’m your teacher! Where would you get your donuts?” She then looks at me and laughs again- “I gotta humor myself or I won’t make it!” Vanessa laughs as she makes this comment, but there is a dark, underlying truth to the words she speaks. She left her career as a case worker supporting senior citizens and entered the field of education with a vision of days filled with learning and laughter, rather than depression and death. Vanessa struggles to find joy and laughter as frequently as she would like. The pressures for performance on the tests and the needs of her students that spill over from home into the classroom have brought her to the point where she has to find things to laugh about or she won’t “make it”.

The Intrusion of Testing and Test Preparation

Both teachers try as hard as they can to “make it,” but this proves to be increasingly difficult as the high stakes tests loom closer and closer. In the days before the tests, Kara’s stress level rises such that she is visibly tense and rigid and, although usually welcoming and remarkably inviting and flexible, she explicitly states that I simply cannot come into her classroom: “Don’t even come close. Don’t come. I can’t. I’m sorry. I don’t even have time. I can’t talk.” She apologizes later for being so rude but says she could not have me there as she was still preparing for the upcoming ELA test. She explains her growing frustrations related to the required test and preparation:

It’s nothing that I’m even proud of. That’s probably why you were shooed from my room at every opportunity. I hate test prep. It doesn’t help. It’s a waste of time and I wish I could take it away. More than it just being a waste of time. More than it being non-productive. It literally saps away the time where you could be productive.

Kara was never hesitant to express her frustration about the tests that are a constant presence in the limited time she and her students share. As a fifth grade teacher, Kara and her students are subjected to the imposition of standardized tests three to four times a year. All students must take the social studies, ELA and mathematics tests and ELLs are required to take an additional test, the NYSESLAT. Not more than two months pass in Kara and Vanessa’s classrooms when a test is not on the immediate horizon. Previous to the emphasis on high

stakes tests, Kara received national awards for the amazing technology projects that she and her students were working on. Sadly, there is no longer room for such opportunities in her curriculum any longer as the previous administration felt that visitors who came to observe the success in Kara's classroom were a distraction to teaching and learning. This principal is gone, but Kara struggles now to find time to build these activities back into her schedule given the management struggles resulting from the students' suboptimal Grade 4 experiences. Kara also feels the pressure to prepare her students for whatever test is next on the docket and that takes time from other opportunities she would like to provide to her students.

NCLB set out to measure student learning and teacher effectiveness through its required barrage of standardized tests. Unfortunately, in Kara's classroom, much of her innovative teaching has been replaced by lessons engineered to prepare them for performance on standardized tests and the learning that is taking place is most often in service of the tests. Kara does find time to sneak her innovative methods in, as she did with an impromptu lesson on the hazards of filling our bodies with the chemicals that are found in soft drinks. Her students listened with rapt attention as Kara went on digging deeply into an analysis of the label on a soda bottle, identifying the effects many of the ingredients would have on the body of a young child. Several times she looked at me with a look of confused guilt on her face, conflicted between the stack of test prep packets on the table by the door and her intuition to continue with the lesson

that had the potential to change the lives of her students through its impact on their health. The intrusion of NCLB into the classrooms of sub-par teachers who are not effectively meeting the needs of their students may have a positive effect on teaching and learning in those classrooms. Its intrusion into Kara's once highly productive classroom, though, has reduced her effectiveness and this year's students are not benefitting from the opportunities that previous classes were awarded for.

Vanessa shares similar frustrations, but invites me in to her classroom. Here, the tone has changed significantly and the concern in her voice and behavior is clear. As I observe one test preparation session, she tries to maintain her typical light-hearted and humorous approach and jokes with a student, "If you get this right, I'll give you an extra donut." She laughs and says to me, "Look, I'm feeding into this!" Two weeks later and just days before the test, Vanessa's frustration has grown and she loses patience with her students: "Stop laughing! It's not funny! I told you we're going to be serious for the next three days. It's not going to be fun. We've got to get ready for this test." Unsure of how to respond to this frustrated and unfamiliar person, one of the students continues laughing and Vanessa calls out, "Antwionne! You have three days! Do you want to be sitting here next year? You want to be here again just because you want to be the class clown?"

I record in my notes that Vanessa continues to cycle through efforts to support her students and help them with light-hearted approaches she hopes will

relieve their stress but often cycles back to frenzied frustration when they are unable to perform as they need to if they are to succeed on the upcoming test. Following one long and frustrating test preparation session, Vanessa sadly asked me, “What did I do to be banished here?”

External Influences that Limit Educational Opportunity

Both Vanessa and Kara want the best for their children and work relentlessly to expand their students’ opportunities to achieve, but the challenges their students face outside of the school hours paired with the pressures of the tests are simply overwhelming for both of them. No matter how hard Vanessa and Kara work to entertain their students and engage them with powerful and exciting instruction in preparation for life far beyond school, the immediate upcoming years at middle school, and the standardized tests hovering immediately on the horizon, the unfreedoms that present themselves on a regular, daily basis to the students in the fifth grade classrooms at The School of Academic Excellence are inescapable.

Kara and Vanessa are very happy teaching fifth grade. They see themselves as having a great opportunity in being students’ last teacher at the elementary level. Vanessa explains why she was motivated to move into a fifth grade position:

When I taught the little kids, they loved it. Kids love everyone when they’re little. But, when I looked at who the kids wanted to see again, who

they wanted to share with, who they wanted to talk to, they always came back to their fifth grade teacher. I wanted to be that teacher they came back to. Now, I am that teacher!

Kara and Vanessa are both “that teacher” their past students return to visit and they are happy for the influence they hope to be in their lives before their students are released into what they view as being the anonymous and impersonal world of middle school where they fear their students will be lost. Kara and Vanessa realize that they are the most stable and positive presence in many of their students’ lives. They share stories of the obstacles their students face outside of school. Many of their students are being raised in homes with five or six other siblings, most often a mix of very young children from various fathers. Several of their students live in homeless shelters or are packed into overcrowded homes built for one family, but housing many. Several of them have already exceeded their parents’ educational levels and are unable to rely on them for support with their schoolwork. According to Kara and Vanessa, some children’s parents simply don’t care. Vanessa shares a story of one such child:

I have one student where I know her mother could care less for what she’s doing and Letecia knows it. It’s a sad situation. Letecia doesn’t care if she does her homework or not because the mother doesn’t care. The mother has five kids and is pregnant again. I have a lot of them like that. They just don’t care so the kids don’t care. And they keep having babies.

Vanessa later tells of another story that carries the same dark cloud:

I have one student, Ramon, who comes to school maybe three times a week. I had to call the mother to find out what was going on. She never called me back so I asked him when he came back again. He told me his mother didn't want to get up in the morning so he couldn't come to school yesterday. It upsets me because then the mother finally comes up here and acts like she's all concerned. I'm like, how concerned can you be if you won't get up and take your kid to school? So, she puts up this whole facade that she so concerned and is like, "Oh, tell me what I have to do?" Get up and bring your kid to school! How's that?

Not all the stories in their classrooms are sad, though. Each teacher shares stories about some parents who care deeply for their children and do their very best despite difficult life circumstances.

When pressed to make sense of the stories they tell about parents who seem not to care about their children, they explain that they believe that most of the parents do care, they just struggle to meet many of the basic life needs of their children due to their socio-economic circumstances and the chaos of low wages, unemployment, and homelessness. These situations impact both parents and their children. It does not seem, however, that either teacher appreciates the full extent to which life circumstances create deformed choices that some parents are forced to make in their efforts to support themselves and their children. Vanessa and Kara often express that parents ought to choose to be good parents by helping them with homework, getting them off to school on time and caring about the

grades they receive in school. When parents do not engage in these practices, Kara and Vanessa interpret their behaviors as not caring about their children. They do recognize the hardships many of the parents have, but in the most extreme cases of student misbehavior and underperformance, Kara and Vanessa consistently point their fingers at parents they see as uncaring.

In reality, many parents in this community are forced to work multiple jobs in order to keep their children out of homeless shelters and put food on the table. This means that these parents do not always have the choice to be home to help their child with his or her homework or to attend school meetings. Many would choose to do these things, if they had the real choice to do so, however, they do not have that freedom. When parents struggle to stay afloat economically, children must grow up fast and take on the responsibilities far beyond their years. Some parents have worked hard to make it economically only to be let go from job after job when they are no longer needed. fail. Economic stress leads some people to drinking, drugs, and even criminal behavior to out of desperation and depression. Such deformed choices are not the choices that most parents would make if they had other options, but too few poor parents have the freedom to make other choices. Deformed choices such as these are not recognized or reflected in education policy at the federal, state or local level.

Teachers often look at children who are functioning well and hold them up as models, believing that if these parents can take good care of their children under difficult economic circumstances, why can't the rest? Kara tells a story

about a pair of students who were lucky to have two supportive parents and a stable home environment. The father's income was sufficient that the mother could stay home and was available to support and monitor her children's activities before and after school. Therefore, these parents were able to support their children in ways that expanded both their life and educational opportunities. However, this family met with a tragedy when illness struck and educational opportunity was altered for these children. Kara recalls:

I feel sorry for the parents. I really like the parents a lot. I think they really try the best they can. We actually just lost a parent to cancer pretty unexpectedly. I spent time on the leadership team with her from the very beginning of my career and I have her nephew in my class. Her son is in the fourth grade and her other son is in the sixth grade now. I always held her and her husband up like model parents. They always kept on top of their kids with their homework and they read to them and they took them places. That's what parents should do. But, to be honest, even though she grew up in the neighborhood and went to school here, too, I think they were in a little bit better situation financially than a lot of the other parents here. She was a stay at home mom. He's a professional man and has a job somewhere. The kids had more opportunities than other kids around here.

To Kara, these children stand as an exception to the majority of the students at The School of Academic Excellence. However, with the loss of the mother, Kara

wonders how the children will be impacted emotionally and academically. With a sad tone in her voice, she comments on other parents:

I think a lot of the parents here are working so hard that they don't ask the kids about their homework. They don't ask their kids about their day at school, so the kids just don't attach any importance to it. Nobody gives them any reason for it to be important.

The emphasis on standardized testing at The School of Academic Excellence and other schools ignores the very serious life issues facing many children, particularly, those children living in poor communities. Anderson and Larson (2009) explain the limitation of focusing on achievement alone with impoverished youth:

the distinction between achievement and freedom to achieve is central to understanding issues of equity and to increasing actual achievement for poor people. [Sen] asserted that we cannot expand *real* opportunity by focusing on achievement alone. Rather, we must focus on expanding *freedoms* to achieve (Sen, 1992). To Sen, this requires identifying the spaces of “unfreedom” that prevent impoverished people from doing what they would choose to *do if they had the freedom to do so* (p. 75).

Sen (1992) and Rothstein (2004) argue that our emphasis on achievement alone is misplaced and that poor children of color would be best served by focusing instead on these students' relative freedom to achieve, rather than their achievement alone. Sen and Rothstein assert that if we are to expand students'

educational opportunities that we must address the unfreedoms that these children face at the center of our efforts.

Larson and Ovando (2001) would agree with this focus on minimizing unfreedoms and addressing inequities through an approach that would follow the logics of a politics of difference. According to NCLB, the existing achievement gap can and will be closed through the establishment of high academic standards; the monitoring of student progress through rigorous, high stakes testing procedures; the use of scientifically based research to improve teaching and learning; the guarantee of a highly qualified teacher in every classroom; and the provision of supplemental tutoring or school choice for students enrolled in schools designated as being in need of improvement (Center on Education Policy, 2004; Meir & Woods, Eds., 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2002a, 2002b). NCLB is rooted in the belief that these efforts are adequate to extend sufficient educational opportunity to all children, as well as to eliminate the achievement gap. Although NCLB recognizes differences within and across the subgroups of students such as American Indian, Hispanic, African American, Asian, White, free and reduced lunch, LEP, special education and migrant status, it does not directly address the many underlying social, economic, and linguistic inequities that virtually guarantee that the achievement gap will continue to exist.

Larson and Ovando (2001) and Rothstein (2004) argue against the universalist logic of NCLB that is then mirrored through the compliance that is then locally mandated by the DOE. They argue instead that through a politics of

difference approach, these underlying freedoms will be clearly identified and attended to. It is only when these unfreedoms have been minimized or eradicated altogether that there will exist hope for and the possibility of narrowing of the achievement gap. These are unfreedoms that Vanessa, Kara, and their students fight against every day in order to perform proficiently on the standardized tests that loom over them throughout the year as mandated by NCLB. NCLB is grounded in assumptions that run counter to Kara and Vanessa's beliefs and experiences.

How Important is Achievement on Standardized Tests?

NCLB Assumption: Increased Performance on Standardized Tests is the Priority

Vanessa & Kara's Belief: Standardized Testing Should
Not Be the Focal Point of Schools

NCLB is unprecedented in its focus on accountability as measured by student performance on standardized tests. As of 2007, the law mandates that student performance be measured in Language Arts, Science and Mathematics at least once in grades 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b). Not only has the frequency of standardized tests increased as a result of NCLB, the ramifications of performance have grown more significant. States, districts, schools, grades, classes, and students are now ranked and compared to one another based on test scores. Although various subgroups of students are also disaggregated in an effort to increase attention to groups of students whose performance has previously been ignored, the expectation remains that every

child in every group will make progress with the goal being that all students will achieve proficiency as measured through AYP gains. If all subgroups do not achieve AYP, the school faces sanctions such as restructuring, reorganization, or closure. Students that do not make AYP or perform at the level designated as proficient by their city or state are at risk of being held back. The composite of these possible consequences of less than acceptable performance have elevated the importance of standardized test performance to a previously unmatched level.

As hard as Lorena has worked to keep them from being so, the tests have taken center stage at The School of Academic Excellence, driving and often supplanting time for teaching and learning. The daily memos that greet teachers upon arrival each day attest to the strong emphasis placed on testing at the school. For the months of school leading up to the fifth grade Social Studies test, the Daily Memo provides a gentle reminder that “social studies should be included as part of weekly lessons as prescribed in June planning guides.” Grade level meetings conducted by the Principal and Assistant Principal also mirror this focus as every intermediate grade meeting for weeks leading up to the Social Studies test included a direct focus on instruction in this content area. Similar observations were made as the Mathematics and Language Arts tests loomed on the horizon. The significance of the Language Arts test is even more evident in the daily memos that assert that daily writing conferences and reading assessment through running records must take place at all grade levels. The month before the important Mathematics test brought with it reminders on the Daily Memo that

Math must be taught every day in addition to Reading. One of the teachers commented on the ways in which test preparation impacts their normal curriculum:

Before the winter break, I was told not to do anything except for math. I was told that by the math coach. I'm sure that if you told anyone I was told that, they would deny it, but I was literally told to do nothing but math.

I looked around the table in the room to see others' opinions and was met by a row of nodding faces. The same teacher continued to explain that things like that were never stated at staff meetings, but that, individually, they would be directed to focus on whatever content area was coming up to be tested, especially after expressing concern about their students performance. Delivery of such messages was never observed during this case study, but the teachers across all the testing grades were quite sure they were receiving the message to focus solely on certain areas of the curriculum as the tests grew closer.

The influence of the upcoming tests did not end with the Daily Memos and grade level meetings and individual coaching sessions. Preparation for and performance on these tests was a key focus of every school-wide professional development session. Lorena would choose her words carefully at each of these meetings as she and the Assistant Principal impressed upon the teachers that these assessments were a measure of the entire school and that, in order to maintain their current "A" ranking on the NYC School Report Card and to remain off the

city's Schools In Need of Improvement (SINI) list, the students needed to perform not just at the level they had worked so hard to achieve during the previous year, but that they had to exceed those levels of performance. The stress and feeling of defeat in the room was nearly palpable as the teachers looked around to one another.

Kara has concerns about the tests and how they are influencing all schools, not just The School of Academic Excellence, saying:

The schools are ranked based on how the students score on the tests so the school has a very big interest in having the students score higher. That is why when I first started at this school I think 56% of our population was Special Ed. Well, that's not the case anymore. I don't know what the current statistic is but I think it's probably 20% or less. Why? Schools don't want to accept Special Ed students anymore because they bring down the test scores. We have a big challenge now because the English language learners are now counting. You used to have a five year window for them when they didn't get tested until they had been here for five years. Now, if they are here a year, they are tested.

This change in testing policy for ELLs is of particular concern to both Vanessa and Kara as the bilingual fourth-fifth grade class was recently disbanded since there were not enough students to justify an entire class. Now, these students have been added to the general student population in Vanessa and Kara's classrooms, but neither of them received any training or support on how to serve

the bilingual children in their classroom. These children have to take both the regular ELA test and the NYSESLAT. Neither Vanessa nor Kara has seen these tests or has any idea how to prepare their students for it. Kara explains:

They [the Administration] talked about having training for the teachers in the NYSESLAT tests, which would be great because, to tell you the truth, I have no idea what the format is. I've been teaching ten years. I think almost every year I've had kids that took that test, but nobody's ever showed it to me. To be fair, I've never gone out of my way to look at it, though. They don't get tested in my room and nobody used to care about the tests so much. Now they do.

The shift in emphasis on standardized tests is not limited to just the NYSESLAT. All of the tests have moved from the status of being something "nobody used to care about" to something that people care about very much. When there were no stakes attached to the tests, the teachers and students invested very little into enhancing performance on them. They simply went about teaching as they had in the past, the tests just being a slight interruption once or twice a year that typically had no effect on their instruction other than taking up instructional time on the day of the test. The children took the test and the booklets disappeared and the teachers rarely gave the test another thought. Kara had no reason to go out of her way to support her bilingual students' as there was never any follow-up to their performance on the test. Since there were no stakes attached to test results previous to NCLB, testing preparation consisted of a reminder to eat breakfast the

morning of the test and a quick rearranging of the furniture. The results were typically not returned to the school until the following school year when they were no longer of value to the teachers since their students have moved on to the sixth grade in another school. The DOE has invested efforts into more rapid turnover in test scores, but according to Vanessa and Kara, the scores still come in too late for them to do much about them, plus the students have already taken the test and it doesn't really matter since they did well enough and will go to sixth grade, or they didn't and will end up staying for summer school. They see no purpose in going back to the tests for instructional guidance since the high stakes have already dictated the children's future. The students will either move on and learn the sixth grade curriculum or will remain and repeat the fifth grade curriculum.

In an effort to support teachers like Kara and Vanessa so that they can make use of assessment data, the DOE has instituted an interim set of two assessments that are intended to provide teachers with information that will predict how their students will do on the formal standardized tests. The ACUITY tests are meant to parallel the content and format of the state tests. The results of these tests are to be rapidly returned to the teachers so that they can be used to inform classroom instruction. Each comes with a student-specific itemized analysis and instructional suggestions.

Unfortunately, the DOE computer system cannot handle the massive burden placed on the system as 1000's of teachers try to load and access their data

simultaneously. During one of the weekly after school sessions with the data team, I observed efforts to access the ACUITY data for instructional purposes. Seven of us met in a room that had more than enough computers for every one of the members, yet they were only able to log three computers to the site at any given time. After two of those were continually knocked off, they reduced their efforts to a single computer and the team clustered around the single monitor that maintained a connection with the DOE database. After over thirty minutes of frustration and largely wasted time, the testing coordinator turned to me in despair and exclaimed, “Are you writing this down? Please write it down. How can they expect us to do this work if we can’t even get on the data website?”

Eventually, the data team was able to access the information and determined areas of weakness according to the ACUITY program’s analysis. The data from the literacy ACUITY test was then used to inform instruction, but not necessarily as intended. The data was not used to impact literacy instruction, it was used to impact upcoming test prep for the next practice test in preparation for the formal ELA test. Classroom trends that showed weaknesses in ability to infer were responded to with more test prep activities related to making inferences from test-like passages. Trends that showed weakness in note-taking skills were responded to by an increase in practice taking notes while test-like passages were read. The era of high stakes testing has clearly changed the relationship that teachers now have with these tests. The underlying intent of the tests is to ensure that the mandated curriculum is being taught, but more attention in classrooms

seems to be placed upon instruction in service of test performance itself as failure to perform on these tests holds ramifications for student promotion and school performance designations. Kara and Vanessa are both frustrated as the ACUITY tests and other practice tests are just one more addition to their already overfull schedules. Both feel that all of the preparation that goes into the tests takes time away from opportunities to teach their children about reading, writing, mathematics, and social studies and to focus on the development of other critical areas beyond those tied to academics.

Later, Vanessa shares other thoughts on these tests and their ramifications. She recognizes that results are used to measure students' and the school's performance, but that they are also a measure of the quality of the teacher:

Well, nobody wants to see a kid not do well. This is my fourth year of teaching fifth grade. My first year, all my kids passed which was like the best feeling in the world. My second year I had five or six that had to go to summer school and then three of them got held over. Last year they all passed again. This is my profession. If they fail, I fail. It's as much as people say, "Oh, it's not your fault!" But, it is my fault. It's a reflection on me. I don't want to have a kid that got a one. I mean who wants to see that?

Vanessa sees her students' performance as a reflection on herself as a teacher. She also sees the importance it carries for her students: "If they don't do well on the test they go to summer school. If they pass the test at end of summer school, they

can move on. Who wants to go to summer school? I don't!" Vanessa also harbors fears of the standardized test scores that matter so much to the future of her children. However, she also knows that there is often a wider gap between a child's performance on a test and what he or she is capable of doing in the classroom. She says:

I have some kids who definitely don't belong in fifth grade. I don't know how they got here. They're just not at the level. I mean if you're in fifth grade going to sixth and you're reading at a third grade level and your writing is not even up to fourth grade then you shouldn't be in fifth grade. I'm almost thinking that they lucked out on the tests and if they got a two on the test then okay you can go to the fifth grade.

Vanessa continues on to share her concerns that these same children may "luck out" again and move on to middle school.

See, this is what's going to happen. Half of these kids in my class do not deserve to go to Junior High School. They've been passed along every year because they got a level 2 on this test. I don't know what they do with those tests once they get their hands on them. I say to myself, "How did this child get a level 2 on this test? He can't read. He can't write." I don't know how he did it. But, then, what is a level 2? You know?

Again and again Vanessa and Kara share stories of children who arrive in their fifth grade classrooms without the basic skills necessary for them to perform on a fifth grade level. They are concerned that children are routinely passed through

the grades solely on the merits of a test score. If a child receives a 1 on the state test, teachers are given the opportunity to argue on a child's behalf if they feel that this score misrepresents that child's true abilities. After presenting a portfolio of that child's work and defending his performance in the classroom, some students are allowed to move on to the next grade even though they have not met the score required per the standardized tests. Kara and Vanessa are frustrated that the same does not hold true for the opposite. They see far too many students passed on to fifth grade who have managed to secure a 2, but are incapable of the skills that are needed to perform on grade level. It seems that teacher discretion is not valued when it comes to arguing against a test score that shows that the minimum standard has been met. Vanessa has fears for what will happen to these students who are passed from grade to grade without the necessary skills, yet are moved on because their test scores dictate that they should. She looks to their near future and exclaims:

What's going to happen to them? We know they don't belong in this grade. But, here they are because they passed some test. They don't know how to read. They don't know how to write. And they'll get frustrated and before they hit sixth, seventh, or eighth grade. And they'll drop out.

That's what's going to happen. They'll stop going to school all because of some stupid test and no one cares. Nobody cares about that so. Klein doesn't care about that. Bloomberg doesn't care about that. Nobody does. Nobody cares. It's not fair.

Less emotional, but making a similar point, Kara comments, “What can we do at this point? They’re in fifth grade. If they can’t read by now they’re in trouble and test prep won’t help that.”

Vanessa and Kara are both deeply concerned by this overemphasis on tests, test scores, the test prep that comes along with it, and the impact it has on their classrooms. They both explain how their classrooms turn into test prep factories on the days leading up to the tests and that in between, the content of the upcoming test squeezes out other content area instruction. Although they try to integrate content area instruction into their literacy block, they both find that the test preparation takes up an enormous amount of their time, and to what end? After co-teaching a test preparation lesson with the math coach, Vanessa shares their feelings: “I just don’t think they take it seriously. The Math Coach felt the same way when she was making the speech here about how important this is. She was like, ‘These kids, they don’t care’.” In a final expression of frustration about the test preparation she has done, Vanessa exclaims, “I’ve given so many tests this week I don’t even know what I’m doing anymore.” How can this be productive? How can this type of instruction truly expand children’s educational opportunities?

There are many educational researchers that point to the dangers of over-emphasizing the importance of standardized test performance. In addition to the consequences of passing without merit voiced by Vanessa and Kara, the consequence of failure on these snapshots of performance can also be significant.

Rabinowitz, Zimmerman, & Sherman, critics of high-stakes standardized testing, argue that "failing a high school exit exam, or, even, just anticipating such a failure can push some students over the academic edge, causing them to quit school" (2001, p. 2). Although Kara and Vanessa's students are still years away from high school, the greater threat of retention in NYC schools today enhances the chances that students will drop out of school.

Expanding educational opportunity for these students should focus primarily on keeping them in school and providing the education they deserve. Over-emphasis on standardized tests was intended to do just that, but in many cases it has distracted schools and teachers from those efforts. The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle cautions against assessing both performance and progress at the same time- it is simply impossible to simultaneously determine the position and momentum of a particle. The same is true for our students and the problem becomes more significant when high stakes are attached to these measuring efforts (Amrein & Berliner, 2002c). Overemphasis on the test scores both distorts what is being assessed and leads to practices that detract from the standardization process and are no longer an accurate means of measurement (Abrams, Pedulla & Madaus, 2003; McNeil, 2000; Sacks, 1999).

When Tests Overshadow Basic Life Needs

This overemphasis on testing to the detriment of other areas of importance in the lives of children may best be found in the stories of two of Vanessa's students.

The ELA test takes place almost immediately after the winter break. Part of this break includes New Year's Eve, a night that is celebrated gleefully throughout New York City and across the world. The celebrations that night ended terribly for one of the students in Vanessa's classroom. Returning to school on the 2nd of January, Vanessa was dismayed to find out that Sergio's uncle had been shot and killed on New Year's Eve. Less than 24 hours after this horrible event, the boy came to school- a safe haven for him where he could access the counseling that his mother and grandmother requested for him. When asked how he is doing, Vanessa shares:

He's been kind of sad lately. Very quiet. Very to himself. But, you know, that's expected. And the guidance counselor's been pulling him out. She's been talking to him. He's a little quiet, but that's expected.

Feeling that it would be inappropriate for the child to take the ELA test at this time, Vanessa asks me whether she can suggest to the parents that they keep him home. Fortunately, the guidance counselor interrupted at the moment to ask about the boy and Vanessa was able to ask the guidance counselor about the policy in such situations. After asking about his recent behavior and whether he had been hysterically crying, the guidance counselor shrugged sadly and said, "If he's coming to school every day he has to take the test." How can an assessment at such a time be an accurate representation of this child's achievement? How are the educational and life opportunities of Sergio being expanded when there is more concern for and attention to a standardized test than to the emotional needs

of this child? Sen (1992) and Rothstein (2002, 2004) would argue emphatically that the attention placed upon achievement over freedom to achieve and attending to the real needs this child has at this time are grossly misplaced and that in order to expand educational opportunity for this child, his true life needs must take precedence over the test that is looming overhead.

NCLB has directed its efforts to improve achievement towards to cognitive aspects of child growth. The law focuses on teaching and testing as a method to close the achievement gap and improve teaching and learning for all children. In focusing efforts so narrowly in the direction of cognitive development, NCLB has ignored other essential areas of child development: social, emotional, and physical. These are areas that cannot be ignored if children are to grow and develop into fully functional members of society. Sergio has just gone through a major life crisis. The loss of his uncle in such a dramatic manner has taken a severe emotional toll on Sergio, whether or not he is “hysterically crying.” Requiring this child to take a cognitive test less than a week after his uncle was brutally murdered will most likely produce skewed results of his actual abilities as well as ignore other critical areas of development that NCLB does not address in its quest to close the achievement gap through attending to the cognitive domain and no others. Urban schools that serve impoverished youth have classrooms full of children whose development in the social, emotional, and physical realms are ignored by NCLB in its narrow efforts to close the achievement gap by looking solely at academic growth.

Vanessa shares another story of a child whose life needs were placed second to the demands of the standardized tests in January. Jacqueline is a bright, enthusiastic girl in Vanessa's class. Vanessa wondered where she was on the Friday before the test since she had not indicated that she would be missing school so close to the days during which the test would be administered. At lunchtime, Vanessa found a note in her mailbox with a message to call Jacqueline's mother as her daughter was sick and would probably be going to the hospital. When Vanessa got home and called that evening to follow up, she found that Jacqueline had been admitted to the hospital for a very serious urinary tract infection. After providing an overview of Jacqueline's condition, the child's mother told Vanessa not to worry about the upcoming ELA test. She explained to Vanessa that a woman from the DOE had already been to the hospital to work with Jacqueline and that she would be taking the test in the hospital during her stay. Vanessa was horrified to learn that a DOE representative had been working with Jacqueline and had her taking practice tests in the hospital bed, writing with a hand that was also connected to a machine delivering intravenous fluids. Vanessa was infuriated and demanded that the parent tell this woman no.

I told her under no circumstances. Do not let this child take the test and tell that woman that her teacher said so. She will just make it up when she gets back. I also told her that even if she gets out of the hospital, because she's been through so much do not, if you as the mother know, if you feel she's not ready to take that test, don't send her to school.

Through Vanessa's insistence, Jacqueline was allowed to focus on her recovery and not the upcoming standardized test and she was allowed to make up the test at a later date. Vanessa continued to express anger and frustration about the situation long after it had been resolved. Her intent is to serve the children in her classroom to the best of her ability and placing a standardized test ahead of a student's health was simply unacceptable to her, even if it would boost the average scores of the class and the school. Vanessa gets tears in her eyes and asks, "Who cares about these kids? They're just kids. And who cares? Not some stupid test. I care, though. I care."

Vanessa's actions would be applauded by both Sen and Rothstein who agree that this emphasis on tests to the detriment of health and other fundamental needs is utterly unacceptable if the aim of our schools is to close the achievement gap and expand the educational opportunities of all students. The lack of humanity displayed by the decision of the DOE employee working at the hospital when Jacqueline was admitted was reprehensible in Vanessa's opinion. Yet, this woman was most likely doing her job as mandated by NCLB and required by the DOE- every child must be tested every year. To her, this ten-year-old girl lying in a hospital bed was reduced to a scantron sheet that needed to be completed and submitted.

What is the Impact of Increased Accountability?

NCLB Assumption: Increasing Accountability Will Narrow the Achievement Gap

Vanessa & Kara's Belief: Too Much Paperwork
Gets in the Way of Good Teaching

NCLB has brought schools, districts, and states to a whole new level of performance expectations. Each school is measured every year on the progress and performance of every child in the school. Accountability for students is gauged by their performance on standardized tests. In New York City, if a student's performance does not meet the level of proficiency dictated by the state, the child must attend summer school and then retake the test at the end of the summer school session. If they pass the test at that time, they can move on to the next grade. If they do not pass the test, they must repeat the current grade the following year unless the school can present a very strong argument that would allow the student to move ahead to the next grade. Schools that are not making AYP as measured by the required standardized tests are also held accountable and will be held up to an increasingly punitive series of sanctions (Center on Education Policy, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2002b).

In New York City, these accountability efforts have been partnered with two local initiatives, in addition to submission of disaggregated test scores, that allow the DOE to monitor and track school effectiveness. One effort is the School Quality Review that is conducted over a week-long period by an overseas company based out of England. Each school is assigned one or more reviewer, depending upon the size of the school, and after an intense visit with the school

that includes review of school documents and procedures, observations, and interviews with teachers and administrators, the Quality Reviewer provides the school with an evaluation and a designated performance level paired with goals for the following year. This review is largely subjective and qualitative in nature. The DOE has also adopted more quantitative and qualitative methods for school review called the School Report Card. This effort to hold schools accountable measures schools on their academic performance and progress as measured by test scores and attendance, and using subjective data collected through school environment surveys submitted by parents and staff.

Although the Department of Education did an extensive search before hiring the team from England to evaluate their schools, the teachers in the New York City Public Schools do not necessarily agree with their choice. Vanessa shares:

Last year we had this man from Britain come in and check to see what we were doing and make sure that we're following the rules. I don't agree with that. Why should we have somebody coming in from another country telling us what to do? What do they know about our kids? Our country? What we do? Can't you find someone in New York that can do that? When he comes, he observes you and he looks through your records. He comes in one day and he decides what score you should get. These people don't even come into the classroom to see what you're actually doing. They didn't even meet the kids.

Kara mirrors Vanessa's frustrations as she views the work she does as something far more complex and important than something that can be quickly and fairly assessed by an outside evaluator:

One of the buzz words of the Board of Ed is accountability. It's one of those words that somebody latches onto and you hear it so much you don't ever want to hear it again. The other word is data. It's all we care about - data and accountability. We have to hold people responsible, they say. Well, if you ask me, if you're holding all these people responsible I guess you're implying that we're going to fail. It seems to be a bad attitude.

NCLB asserts that accountability will make a difference in schools and by holding schools accountable, the achievement gap will be closed. It is the intent that, collectively, the School Quality Review and the School Report Card will together provide a healthy assessment of the current performance of the school and through this measure of accountability, the school will be motivated to make the changes necessary to improve and expand educational opportunity for students. After receiving both of these evaluations, the principal is left with two resources that indicate areas in need of improvement as identified by the reports. These are then to serve as roadmaps for school improvement efforts over the next year. In 2006, the School Quality Reviewer at The School of Academic Excellence spent the most time directing the attention of Lorena and her staff to the need for increased collection and use of data at the school site. As a result, Lorena hired a special school consultant that helped her leadership team design a very detailed

tracking sheet that included a space for every piece of quantitative data collected by the teachers.

Vanessa shared her strong opinions about the consultant who was hired to construct the tracking sheets:

We have this guy coming in. I don't even know who this guy is. He's doing a computer spreadsheet for the entire school. They're paying him thousands of dollars to do something that anyone in this school can do.

And he's over here making all these comments about the kids: "Well, the teachers should do this. The teachers should do that." I've never even met this guy. Who are you to tell me what I have to do with my kids?

You don't even know who we are.

He'll come in and sit with the coaches, and, I guess, with the principal and assistant principal. He does the spreadsheet and then he decides, "Oh you got to do this... You know, your teachers are..." Who are you to tell us what we're doing or we're not doing? You didn't even meet us. That pisses me off. You're making mucho dinero sitting on a computer and you think you can judge us?

Vanessa was not alone in her frustrations with this stranger coming in and making decisions about their school and after almost a year with this consultant and a document that grew larger and larger, the decision was made to let the consultant go and to take the work on internally. Although this had some positive financial repercussions, it also left some sources of frustration. Kara shares her annoyance

with the internal efforts on the tracking sheets and over the increased paperwork that has come along with greater accountability:

I'm not against assessment. I'm not against tracking my students. We need to. I'm frustrated that I already made a tracking sheet but I'm not being asked to help with the school sheet. I'm frustrated that the "teacher participation" part of the team is a first year teacher. I'm frustrated that there is so much paperwork, but I don't see it helping me teach.

Kara goes on and shares a metaphor that captures the way she feels:

I feel like, what if a cop arresting someone had to go home and do paperwork at home on their free time? Or, if garbage men had to take all the garbage they collect home and sort the recycling?

When she pauses for me to respond, I reply, "I'd probably stop arresting people and recycling the garbage." "EXACTLY!" she exclaims! "You get it. Too much paperwork means we don't have time to do the job we're supposed to!"

Kara and Vanessa are both overwhelmed and frustrated by the paperwork that is suddenly required of them. The School Quality Review report identifies as a goal that the school "make more strategic use of data." The teachers have seen the impact of this goal as their paperwork has increased exponentially, yet they do not see how collecting and recording all this data will help their children. Kara begs for more functional use of data and assessment: "I don't mind collecting data, but let's make it logical. Let's make it effective." Vanessa mirrors this frustration. She shares:

The whole paperwork thing. The whole assessment thing. It's a little annoying. I understand that we have to do it, but it shouldn't be the focus and it suddenly became the focus. If we are doing all this paperwork and assessment, when do we have time to teach? For example, yesterday the math coach came in and said, "These are the papers that you have to fill out." I haven't even filled out the papers that she wanted last week. When am I supposed to do all this paperwork if I am supposed to be teaching? It just becomes annoying.

Vanessa and Kara's frustrations are well grounded. If the intent of our efforts in school are to provide educational opportunity for our students, how does it help if all of our time is spent collecting and recording data, but not using that information to inform our instruction? If too much time is spent focusing on paperwork and bubble sheets, what energy will be left to invest in our children? Accountability is certainly important, but as Sen (1992) asks "Equality of what?" we must also ask "Accountability for what?" Current efforts are focusing accountability towards achievement and performance on standardized tests. Sen's argument to consider the question "Of what?" is central to this notion of accountability. How would the students at The School of Academic Excellence perform if the teachers had the time and support to use all this data to actually inform their instruction? In what ways would school change for the students if their social, emotional, and physical growth received as much attention as their cognitive development? How would the school be different if public institutions

beyond the school were held accountable? How would the students fare if the staff at the school were held accountable for their efforts to expand educational opportunities? What might change if accountability was measured not by test scores, but by how children's freedoms to achieve were expanded?

How Do Highly Qualified Teachers Expand Educational Opportunity?

NCLB Assumption: Highly Qualified Teachers Will
Increase Students' Opportunities to Achieve

Vanessa & Kara's Belief: Alternative Certification Programs Do Not
Necessarily Produce "Highly Qualified Teachers"

Like many other urban schools, The School for Academic Excellence struggles to recruit and maintain an exceptionally skilled faculty. It is not easy to secure extraordinarily qualified teachers to work in urban settings given the challenges that teachers face simply arriving at schools that are often in dangerous areas. Once there, the teachers face even greater challenges as they work to address the needs of the students they meet in their classrooms. As a result, The School of Academic Excellence, like many other schools that are home to poor students of color, has a number of teachers on staff that have followed alternative routes to certification such as NYCTF and TFA. Given the current principal's disappointing experiences with alternately certified teachers in the past, she has not hired any of these teachers during her brief two-year tenure and is committed to continuing this practice because she does not want to have to constantly retrain new cohorts of teachers. Her past experiences show a lack of commitment from

alternately certified teachers and Lorena is trying to build a cohesive staff with little to no turnover from year to year.

Both Vanessa and Kara celebrate this decision, but in the meantime are frustrated by the residue left behind from previous alternately certified teachers. At the beginning of the school year, both Kara and Vanessa struggled mightily with classroom management as a result of the bad habits their students had established while in fourth grade. Kara explains, “Last year’s fourth grade teacher was from TFA and she let them run wild.” Vanessa goes further to explain why she thinks the TFA teachers are so different:

All they did was come here and complain and complain and complain and complain. This one teacher complained for the two years she was here. What are you complaining about? You’re leaving! A rich little girl from Florida and you have no connection with these children because you don’t know them! A lot of teachers who work here came here because they wanted to be *here*. They wanted to help. All these TFA teachers. They do it just for their Master’s. How could you go into teaching and say I’m going to do my two years get my Master’s paid for and then get out? You’re not working with paper and computers and phones you’re working with people’s lives!

In order to expand educational opportunities for students, highly qualified teachers are a necessity (Cunningham & Allington, 1999). NCLB mandates putting a highly qualified teacher in every classroom. Good teaching is critical to

expanding educational opportunity for children who benefit least from the schools they attend. Vanessa, Kara, and Lorena have not found that the alternative certification programs produce highly qualified teachers. All three of them agree that these teachers are not of the caliber necessary to expand educational opportunity for their students and, further, that the damage they do to the children and the to the school cannot be easily undone. Vanessa and Kara found themselves again dealing with the effects of suboptimal teaching when they discovered that the previous third and fourth grade TFA teachers had neglected to cover important Social Studies content before abruptly ending their tenure at the school. Vanessa comments: “You can’t expect fifth grade teachers to do what should have been done for two years in two months. It’s not going to happen!”

How Can Students Achieve Their Potential?

NCLB Assumption: All Students Can Learn and the
Achievement Gap Can Be Closed

Vanessa & Kara’s Belief: Many Students Have Exceptional
Life Challenges That Limit Educational Opportunity

NCLB is based on the assumptions that schools can increase achievement by focusing on achievement only. Further, if they do this, the achievement gap can be closed. The law identifies several areas of attention that will ensure that efforts to close the achievement gap will be successful. Specifically, the law identifies, the placement of highly qualified teachers, high standards for all students, and school and student accountability as measured by standardized tests

(Center on Education Policy, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2002b). The staff at The School of Academic Excellence agree with this underlying premise of NCLB- that all children can learn and that the achievement gap can be closed, but they disagree that the burden of responsibility to make this happen rests solely upon the schools. This belief is the core of many conversations held between Kara and Vanessa as they try to understand why so few others understand that the lives children live outside of school have a significant impact on their potential within school.

Kara and Vanessa enjoy the opportunities they have to talk during their rides to and from school together on a daily basis. Their time together at the bookends of every school day provide them the opportunity to process and plan their work. Oftentimes, their conversations are focused on school, lessons, planning, and upcoming events at The School of Academic Excellence. It also provides a time for reflection and as they leave behind the projects in Bed-Stuy and make their way across the Verrazano Bridge on their way to their homes in safe and secure neighborhoods, their conversations often turn to reflections on the “haves” and “have nots” in their world. Frequently, these conversations revolve around stories they share of Vanessa’s young daughter who leads a life of privilege and opportunity far different from the lives of the students that Vanessa and Kara serve between the hours of eight and three every day. When they talk of what they want for their students, it is not unlike what Vanessa wants for her daughter. Vanessa shares her hopes for her students: “The most important thing

for me is to get through to these kids the importance of education. I don't think they realize how important it is." Kara reinforces this desire, "If I could just get these kids to want to learn I'll be happy. I only have them a year and then they go off. I want them to think about the decisions they make. That's really what it's all about." She tells a story of a student who returned to visit her:

The other day I had a kid, Jamal, come back. We had this multi cultural festival and Malcolm from my second class came back. He's six foot two now! I said to him what are you a senior in high school now? He said, "No I'm in college." So I was like, oh thank you! He's a freshman or sophomore at Queens College. I said what are you studying and he said, "Teaching." I was just so happy, but something struck me as I was standing there with two other teachers. We were all fawning over him, but it was like as soon as he said he was in college they were done. Nobody cared what he was studying. I'm really happy he's studying teaching, but I think that's the way we deal with the kids. We ask them a question, they answer it, we're done. There's no real conversation and we're doing them a big disservice by not having conversations with the kids.

Kara is thrilled that Jamal has gone on to college and, especially, that he is studying teaching. He stands as a role model for other young men and women in the area, a testimony to what one can accomplish regardless of their background. Kara's disappointment in this interchange is in how her peers' responded to the student. She sees far too many adults having limited and superficial

conversations with children and feels that this is unacceptable. She was saddened that her peers did not have the time or interest to dig deeper into this young man's aspirations. Kara sees the role of a teacher as developing multiple dimensions within children. To her, it was unacceptable that the surface level questions of "What are you doing now? Where do you do it?" were the extent of the conversation they held with Jamal. She believes that children are valuable and need to be nurtured and validated and is disturbed to see many of her peers choose not to engage in conversational efforts that will build the children's egos and characters.

Both Vanessa and Kara want more for the students in their classroom than for them to simply pass the tests that will allow them to continue moving on through the years. They see each of these individuals as human beings, not as numbers on a bubble sheet and they choose to interact with their students accordingly.

Vanessa recognizes the critical importance of addressing multiple dimensions of child development that extend beyond a narrow focus on academic pursuits. She reflects on the contradictions she faces within herself as she prepares her own child for entering school, "How horrible do I feel that I'm a public school teacher and I'm not even thinking of sending my daughter to public school. What does that say? That's horrible." She continues on to explain what she wants for her child: "I'm pushing her. I don't know if I should. Is it right? It's such a competitive world and I want her to be a leader? Is that wrong?"

Most of these feelings of conflict arose for Vanessa after visiting a school nearby her home. She had her daughter in mind, but was unable to let go of the stark differences she saw at this private Catholic school and the school where she works to expand educational opportunities for the students in her classroom. She explains what she thinks her students want:

To be honest with you, I think what they really want is to get the hell out of here. It's so different here. They haven't been anywhere else, but they just know. I think they've seen it on tv, maybe. Education may not be important to them, but they want more.

I wrote to visit an open house in a school in Staten Island. A Catholic school for my daughter who is only two years old, but this school is so competitive and you have to go early. So I went to the open house and I had this young lady who was in eighth grade show me around the school. This little girl, the way she spoke and told me how happy she was because she's going to high school and she can't wait and this and that- it was amazing. All this enthusiasm she has was amazing. I went home and I told my husband about all that enthusiasm. That's what I want my daughter to have. Not one of these kids in my class has that. Not one. It broke my heart.

Vanessa's epiphany helped remind her of the incredible obstacles that the students in her classroom face. Most of them do not benefit from the financial security, family stability, safe and healthy living conditions, and time and attention that

Vanessa and her husband are able to give to their child. Vanessa and Kara's students largely experience the opposite, a debilitating consequence of the social, racial, and ethnic structure: poor students of color are limited by exceptional unfreedoms that restrict their opportunities to achieve what is important to them. In contrast to the life of relative privilege that Vanessa's daughter is exposed to, Vanessa and Kara each have stories of numerous students in their classrooms who face serious obstacles that limit their freedom to focus on education in the ways that their more privileged peers are able to.

Kara's students benefit from the sense of humor and tolerance that she consistently demonstrates. Student behaviors that would be admonished and punished severely in many classrooms are handled seriously, but with a healthy educative approach because Kara understands the challenges that many of her students face. For example, Kara has worked tirelessly to keep Bethanee, a deeply troubled student, engaged in school. Kara struggles to find ways to connect her with the rest of the students. Bethanee's current efforts to do so usually revolve around passing notes to others in the classroom with questions like, "Do you think Ms. O'Meara has a little butt?" Intended to be an insult to the size of Kara's back-size which is considerably smaller than what is considered attractive by Bethanee's standards, Kara laughs this off. She realizes that there are more important issues in Bethanee's life that need time and attention. Bethanee is fortunate to have a teacher with a self-esteem and character that is strong enough to shoulder Bethanee's unkind words and attempts to insult her. Later, Kara

intercepts another note that Bethaneess circulates that asks her friends, “Do you think Ms. Peterson looks like a man?” Trying again to insult her teacher, Kara is again nonplussed by the attack on her physical appearance and directs her energies towards helping Bethanee rather than getting angry at her for personal attacks. Having a strong sense of self like Kara’s is a helpful quality at The School of Academic Excellence and it serves Kara well. She is dealing with children who face great obstacles and must remain strong to support her children in their academic pursuits as well as their efforts to overcome challenges they face in other domains.

Initially, Kara was frustrated by Bethanee’s lack of engagement with her schoolwork. She sent home a number of letters to Bethanee’s mother explaining the problems and asking that the mother make sure her homework is completed. After a long series of notes that were met with no response, the principal supported Kara and the parents were summoned in for a conference. As a result of this meeting, Kara learned that Bethanee’s mother works from 4:30am to 10:30pm on a daily basis and that she wakes up at 3:30 to get to work. A recent death in the family required that they travel south for a funeral that then turned into a double funeral for the grandmother and another relative that unexpectedly passed away. Upon returning from the funerals, Bethanee’s mother learned that they had been evicted from their apartment and now no longer had a place to live. Kara explains the best solution the family could come up with to their new homeless status:

They just got evicted from their apartment. Now they're living with the other grandmother, I think, in the same building. The grandmother also had to take in some of the cousin's children because ACS [Administration for Children's Services] took them away from the mother. The 13-year-old daughter of the cousin keeps cursing out the grandmother, kicking her and she punched her in the face the other day.

Although concerned about this situation, Kara realizes there is little that she can do about it. In relation to other situations that students at The School of Academic Excellence find themselves in, Bethanee's situation is actually somewhat better. At least she has a home to go to, no matter how despicable. According to Kara, Bethanee's parents are doing the best they can, "They're actually great parents because you say, "Jump!" and the parents say, "How high?" These are parents operating as best they can under conditions that are far from optimal. At conference time, the parents are working and unable to attend so they send their 18-year-old daughter. They do what they can to help. Unfortunately, the help they can offer is limited. Kara shares the conversation she had with the mother:

She said "I get up at 3:30 I have to be at work at 4:30." I don't know what she does but she says, "I'm there till 10:30 at night." So I said to her as she was leaving she said, "Tell me any way I can help." I said just do me a favor and open up her book bag every day and just see what's in there. She said, Well, I don't get home until 10:30." I said she doesn't have to

be there just open it up. And she was like, “I know. It’s just it’s so late.” I said well do me a favor- assign somebody to check it.

Both Kara and Bethanee’s mother are struggling to find ways to best support this child, but the challenges faced by both of them seem impossible to overcome.

How is this child’s freedom to focus on education being expanded by securing a highly qualified teacher, having high expectations, and holding her accountable?

This child has fundamental safety and security needs that ought to be addressed before or, at least in tandem, with efforts to focus on academic achievement.

Kara defends the mother saying, “I think a lot of the times we misunderstand. It’s real easy for teachers to be like, ‘Well, their parents don’t care.’” Kara sees that not all of her students have the opportunities that Vanessa’s daughter and others like her have. Kara’s experiences with children at the school have led her to agree with Rothstein (2002b, 2004). Although schools have a powerful influence in expanding educational opportunity, she does not believe that the achievement gap can be closed by focusing on test scores and achievement only.

Vanessa shares the stories of two of her students who are virtually inseparable. The two girls, like Bethanee, are deeply troubled and challenged by the unfreedoms that plague them outside of school and are carried into the classroom with them every day. She gives some background on the two girls:

I have two girls that just got suspended, Roshanda and Precious, for disgusting behavior and just bullying the other kids. One of them was

saying dirty things. Like sexually harassing things to other kids and the other one was like touching other kids. The parents don't care. They don't care. Never even came to the conference. I don't even know what their parents look like. And one of them, Roshanda, lives in a homeless shelter with her mother.

Vanessa paints a sad picture of what life is like for each of the girls. The art teacher at the school lives in the neighborhood and is able to share with Vanessa some of the aspects of the unfreedoms that Precious is exposed to outside of school.

These kids' lives are so different from ours. Some of these kids probably don't even eat Dunkin Donuts. We take it for granted. You know, it's sad when I think about it. The art teacher lives around the neighborhood and she always tells me where Precious lives. "You should see how disgusting it is," she'll tell me. She told me the hallways are disgusting. At the front door there's a big space and you can see right through the person's apartment. She lives in an apartment with her mom who has kids from like five different men. Every year she's pregnant and doesn't even care for the big ones any more. It's sad.

Vanessa pauses for minute to think about Precious and then adds, "And then I think, I just finished screaming at the kid because she didn't do her homework. How can I do this? How is this fair?"

Roshanda's life outside of school is slightly different than that of Precious, as she is currently living in a homeless shelter with her mother. Vanessa describes Roshanda:

She tries to get close to me and she tries to do the right thing, but she just can't. Sometimes you have those parents that really care, and then you have those that just don't give a hoot. That's what Roshanda has.

Roshanda is all anger, anger, anger. I mean anger.

Vanessa explains the ways she tries to support the girls, but finds that she struggles to do so. "I know for a fact that these girls don't get any love at all. And they can't develop that now. They're 10 years old." Vanessa has a deep, motherly love for all of her students and grows deeply frustrated when she sees children, especially girls, who have been refused the privilege of building the kind of bond she has built between herself and her daughter. Vanessa tries to connect with Roshanda and Precious the way she does with her own daughter and the other girls in the classroom, but she finds that she is unable to successfully do so. She explains:

They don't know how to get close to you like my other girls. The other girls know what it is- that motherly thing. So they get close to me.

They'll come next to me. Those two, they just don't know. All my other girls, they know I'm a mother and I have motherly tendencies and stuff like that. They understand that. My other girls will be next to me and they'll laugh with me and we'll joke around, but with Precious and

Roshanda, it's hard. They don't know how to react to that... I think if I touched them or tried to give them a hug, they would like go like this- [Vanessa jumps up and shrinks back in distaste.] I don't think they're used to being loved.

Vanessa contrasts the experiences these girls have had with those she shares with her daughter:

When I think about it, it's so different for them. I love my daughter and yesterday I was putting her pajamas on before bed. We gave each other a big hug and said I love you. How many times have I told my daughter I love you? And hugged her? Or she sits on my lap and we kiss each other and she brushes my hair? Those girls probably never had that. And that's not something you can do at this stage.

Vanessa summarizes her fears about the life that lies ahead for Precious and Roshanda by reflecting on a recent news article featuring a brutal attack on a young woman by two girls:

I was just reading in the paper about those girls that beat up that woman. I said to myself that's awful and then it turns out that the girls videotaped it while they beat up a 24 year old woman. I said to myself that's Roshanda and Precious beating up people in the train. I realize that and I said to myself that's sad that they'll probably end up like that. When I know those things it breaks my heart because no kid should go through that.

The reality of the students in Vanessa and Kara's classrooms and many others is just that, though. Thousands of children enter classrooms across America every day carrying baggage not unlike that of Roshanda, Precious, and Bethanee. These three girls are not unique for children from poor urban communities, although their situations do stand out. The birthright of a child who is born into poverty and who happens to be of color is handed a basket full of challenges and unfreedoms to be faced. Anderson (2004) cites Amartya Sen, saying: "In poor communities, where there are limited opportunities and numerous obstacles to achieving, equal or valuable choices are not as abundant as in economically privileged communities where individuals are better situated to explore a host of options" (p. 115). He further goes on to assert that "any approach to supporting an individual in need or suffering with deprivations should be concerned primarily with expanding capabilities or freedoms to achieve" (Anderson, 2004, p. 126).

This finding directly contradicts the universalist notion (Larson and Ovando, 2001) of NCLB, asserting that all children can achieve provided they have access to highly qualified teachers, high expectations and proven methods of instruction. It is simply not enough to focus on the academic development of children and to hang all our hopes on the hours within the school day and expect that this is sufficient to close the achievement gap. NCLB focuses attention on the cognitive aspects of development to the exclusion of other essential areas of growth: emotional, social, and physical. All of these areas need to be addressed, both within and outside of the school day in order to expand educational

opportunity for these children. The countless unfreedoms and inequities that lie outside of the boundaries of the school day are carried into the classroom in invisible backpacks. Ignoring them and focusing solely on academic achievement is problematic. The problems that children like Precious, Sergio, Roshanda, and Bethanee face are simply too great for students and teachers to overcome within the boundaries of the school day and in classrooms that focus narrowly on academic growth only.

Concluding Remarks

The challenges that Vanessa, Kara and their students face are not atypical of those found in other schools serving poor communities in urban areas. They meet, on a daily basis, obstacles that they must conquer if they are to enhance educational opportunity for children. Unfortunately, their aims to expand educational opportunity are not supported by the narrow aims of NCLB that looks to achievement only, and not to the freedoms these children have to achieve.

At the conclusion of a particularly emotional interview with Vanessa, I asked her, “With all these frustrations why are you still here? Why do you come back every day and every year? You keep coming back. Why?”

Vanessa’s emotional response captures the frustration and anger she feels as she watches children fail:

I don’t know. I guess I feel like I’m making a difference. I guess that’s what it’s about, right? It’s been a really hard week for me. It’s so hard, but

we just can't give up on them. I feel bad, though, because nobody really cares, you know? Nobody cares. They don't care downstairs. They don't care at the DOE. They don't care anywhere. It's sad. I don't know what they care about. I really don't know if they just want to see those numbers go up and they're just you know looking out for themselves, but nobody really cares about these kids. When you think about it, how can you not care? What the hell are they doing in fifth grade when they can't even read and they can't even multiply two times three? I mean, where is the justice in this? And, these are kids that are Hispanic and African American. What are you doing? Are they setting them up to fail? Is that what they're trying to do? Because, if they are, they're doing a damn good job of it.

CHAPTER IX

CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

In this chapter I pull together the findings in each of the participants' stories in this case study in an effort to make meaning of the experiences these educators have had and to make sense of the stories they have told. In this chapter, I examine how these educators believe they can expand educational opportunity for children in this school. I also examine the life circumstances of the students and situations that limit these educators in their ability to expand educational opportunity for children in this school. Through these stories, I discuss the unfreedoms that limit the life chances of poor urban youth in this school, and show why current educational policy is failing to expand real opportunities to achieve for many children. The findings of this study reveal the dilemma that the principal and teachers at this school face when they are required to focus on the cognitive development of their students to the exclusion of other critically important areas of development.

This case study attempts to show how and in what ways federal, state and local achievement policy is impacting teaching and learning at one urban school serving impoverished youth in New York City. The findings of this study reveal that the teachers and administrators at The School of Academic Excellence

celebrate their students and are confident in their students' potential to learn. They applaud the underlying premise of NCLB and they would like to see their students perform as well as their more privileged peers. However, the lived realities of the adults and children at The School of Academic Excellence reveal the limits of that lofty goal.

Lorena and the teachers at her school share similar goals and desires for their students. Their hope is for the children to be able to come to school every day, safe and ready to learn. However, the findings of this study reveal that high hopes are not enough. The staff at The School of Academic Excellence face many challenges in their efforts to meet the achievement demands of NCLB. The mandate that their students perform on par with their more privileged peers living in other parts of the city is daunting. The staff at The School of Academic Excellence feels the pressure of meeting achievement standards while supporting students and families who often struggle with meeting the most basic life concerns: food, shelter, and safety. Lorena and her teachers all struggle to find a balance between their personal beliefs about what the children in the school need and the external demands that are imposed upon them by central administration and NCLB. To the educators in this study, the design and ambition of NCLB are highly problematic given the lived realities and life needs of the students at The School of Academic Excellence.

At the local level, the NYC DOE has worked to honor its responsibilities in supporting the implementation of the mandates of NCLB at the district and

school level. Unfortunately, the DOE-level implementation efforts often mirror the limitations of NCLB in terms of its narrow, universalist approach by focusing on achievement while ignoring the social and economic diversity of the students being served in schools across the City. This cross-case analysis identifies the ways in which NCLB's approach has been replicated at the district level, and how this narrow focus on achievement is impacting the educators who work at and the children who struggle to learn in The School of Academic Excellence.

The findings of this study reveal that at The School of Academic Excellence, students' opportunities to achieve are limited both by the lives they live outside of school, as well as by the impact of NCLB and DOE achievement policy on practices within the school. In the following sections, I reveal how and in what ways life circumstances and universal federal, state and local education policies focused on achievement impact educational opportunity for the students at The School of Academic Excellence.

Life Circumstances that Influence Educational Opportunity

The School of Academic Excellence is located in an area of Bed-Stuy that is populated by a dominant Hispanic population, many of them immigrant, and most of them with limited English proficiency. Similar to other children that attend schools in similar urban contexts, many of the students at The School of Academic Excellence experience inadequate housing, lack of health care, limited food and clothing, and fears for personal safety. The staff at the school see

evidence of these threats to bodily integrity and existence every day, yet they are required by law to focus on academic achievement. Larson and Murthada (2002) argue that “physical integrity and comfort are essential. Yet current directions in school reform generally ignore issues of bodily and emotional integrity” (p. 154). NCLB does just that. Through its narrow focus on achievement as measured through standardized test scores, NCLB disregards the basic human capabilities and functionings that are necessary precursors of optimal achievement.

The staff at The School of Academic Excellence supplements the heavy focus of current education policy on test scores and accountability by working to address the life needs of their students. The staff recognizes that poverty is not a choice but a circumstance of life that many families in this country endure. Therefore, Lorena and her staff work consistently to support parents and students to overcome the challenges they face. Two of the most significant challenges faced by students at The School of Academic Excellence are found in inadequate housing and personal safety. The response of the staff to these obstacles varies.

The Impact of Inadequate Housing on Educational Opportunity

Given the current economic downturn, poverty rates can be expected to increase even further as will the ill effects of poverty on the lives of children and families. In New York City, the rates of families entering homeless shelters between July and November of 2008 increased 40% increase over the same period in 2007 (Sard, 2008). Vanessa and Lorena refer frequently to students whose life

situations are so dire that they are currently living in homeless shelters. The challenges faced by Vanessa's student, Roshanda, are not unusual at The School of Academic Excellence. Roshanda is homeless and lives in a shelter with her mother. At times, Lorena and the staff find that parents who are forced to move their family into a homeless shelter are supportive of school efforts. More often than not, though, the same life circumstances that forced them to have to move into the shelter are the same ones that continue to limit life and educational opportunity for these students. Homelessness is one of the most dire consequences of extreme poverty and it wreaks havoc in the lives of many families and children at The School of Academic Excellence.

Roshanda's mother and other parents who live in shelters struggle so significantly that they often find it difficult to ensure that their child is awake and off to school on time. Lorena has found a caseworker at one of the local shelters that she can call on to support and motivate the parents. She recognizes that for some parents, simply getting their child out of bed and off to school requires a significant act of faith and hope given their current life circumstances. Therefore, she does all she can to support the children who are negatively impacted by the chaos of poverty and homelessness. Lorena works to figure out what she can do to influence the broader life circumstances and situations of children and their families in the school. She knows that young children should not bear the responsibility for waking themselves up and getting themselves off to school, but also realizes that many of their parents find themselves overwhelmed and

sometimes paralyzed by life circumstances brought on by poverty. This realization compels Lorena to call on a caseworker for support in hopes of keeping homeless children like Roshanda engaged in school.

The majority of the students at The School of Academic Excellence are fortunate enough not to live in homeless shelters, but are faced with their own set of obstacles nonetheless. Vanessa refers to Precious and the appalling living conditions she endures, as does Kara's student, Bethanee. Neither of these girls are homeless, but each finds herself in a living situation that is far from optimal for studying or sleep- two conditions critical for success in the fifth grade. Their living situations are crowded, dirty and dangerous. Such living situations are not desired life choices- they are an unfortunate outcome of poverty and these situations limit parents' and children's abilities to focus on education. NCLB stands oblivious to these differences and expects students living in such situations to perform on par with their more privileged peers. At The School of Academic Excellence, teachers' efforts to expand educational opportunity take the low ground of Kara's plea to Bethanee's mother who works multiple jobs and long hours to just open her daughter's book bag and look at what is inside. This minimalist type of parental support is a far cry from the experiences of more advantaged students living in more privileged environments overflowing with support and opportunity. Yet, this is the maximum support that parents like Bethanee's mother are able to offer when they are forced to work long shifts that extend into the hours during which their children are sleeping.

Like Bethanee's mother, many low-income parents find it difficult to support their child's education. Not because they are uninterested or do not care about education, but because poor parents are more likely to work multiple jobs with longer hours that do not offer paid leave or flexible scheduling (Gorski, 2008).

Jason finds similar unfreedoms in the living situations of his students. Particularly, Anita and her brother, who are forced to live in an apartment that endures cycles of infestations by bed bugs brought on by their father whose illegal immigrant status has forced him to make a living through the finding and reselling of discarded mattresses. The assault on these children's physical integrity does much to limit educational opportunity. Jason does what he can in reporting this to Lorena who, in turn, does what she can by accessing social service organizations that work with her to provide clean mattresses and help the family end the current infestation. But, Anita's father must pay the rent and keep his family fed, so he resorts once again to selling mattresses and the cycle repeats itself. Lorena and Jason can only provide a temporary solution to this systemic problem that extends far beyond the boundaries of the school. Improving living conditions for children and families is one of many tasks Lorena takes on in her effort to enhance the life opportunities of children at her school. Each time Jason and Lorena intervene to improve the health and living situations of children like Anita they create the opportunity for the children to attend school again. Such actions result in a short-term, but critically important effort to keep the door to educational opportunity

open for those students. In this case, simply because children with head lice and bed bugs are not allowed to attend school, ridding the problem, even temporarily, ensures that these children have more access to learning through increased attendance.

Lorena believes it is her role to support children and families in this way because she sees that the parents are sometimes not able to meet the needs of their children, because they do not have the means to do so. In this case, Anita's father must choose between paying the rent and putting food on the table or keeping his home pest-free. In order to meet some of his families needs, he must make a deformed choice, a choice he would not make if he had the freedom to pay the rent, put food on the table, and engage in work that does not put his children at risk for lice infestations and likely expulsions from school. This is not a choice a parent should have to make, but it is the best choice Anita's father can make at this time. Lorena recognizes this, and also sees that no one else seems to be aware of or focused on attending to these very real needs of children and their families.

Whose role is it in our society to ensure that children have a safe and clean place to live? If this is a role that Lorena feels that she must take on to support children and their families in her school from going under, why is this role not recognized in any of the policy focused on enhancing academic achievement at the federal, state, or local level? And, if this is a role that principals must play in poor urban communities, can they also serve as effective instructional leaders?

The challenges of earning a steady income and securing a safe and healthy life are daily quests for all impoverished families, but especially for those with immigrant status. The U.S. born children of immigrant families are rightful citizens, but their parents are not. Therefore, these adults cannot secure the benefits that other, legal citizens enjoy and their children are forced to suffer and to endure limited education opportunities as a result. In such situations, federal policies on the working rights of undocumented citizens have a profound effect on the educational opportunities of their children.

Kara, Jason and Vanessa are acutely aware of the hardships many of their students endure due to inadequate housing, yet the role that these unfreedoms play in children's freedoms to achieve are entirely overlooked in NCLB policy. The teachers forge ahead, doggedly, in their efforts to get their children to perform as required by NCLB, regardless of the many obstacles lying in their path.

How Concerns for Personal Safety Limit Educational Opportunity

Physical integrity and emotional comfort are essential to individual well-being. Larson and Murthada (2002) assert that:

Not having one's emotional development blighted by overwhelming fear and anxiety, or by traumatic events of abuse or neglect, is critical to well being (Larson & Murthada, 2002, p. 155).

The School of Academic Excellence is located in a area of Bed-Stuy where physical integrity and emotional comfort is threatened every day. Staff meetings

regularly include warnings and reminders to the staff of potential dangers in the neighborhood. They are told not to park in the same location or walk in the same routes so that their personal routines and patterns cannot be identified and in order to avoid being followed. Even within the school, teachers are reminded not to leave personal items of value unattended. The staff is cautioned by Lorena and the school security guard to be alert at all times and to take care in the neighborhood as they enter and leave on a daily basis. Given their income, the staff at The School of Academic Excellence have greater choice in where they live than most of the parents of their students. At the end of the day, they retreat to their homes in more safe and secure neighborhoods.

Economically impoverished parents have few choices about where their family will live. Parents must often make deformed choices, bringing their families into neighborhoods that they would not choose to live in if they had a real choice. Similarly, the students at The School of Academic Excellence can not choose to leave this neighborhood at end of the day as their teachers do. They must remain in a neighborhood where they are often unsafe, and where drugs are readily available. Recall that one pre-kindergarten student's father is a known local drug dealer and the children often find condoms and hypodermic needles strewn on the local playground. The local gangs prowl the area outside school hours and evidence of their influence on the students is seen in the gang tags that have shown up on auditorium seats and on bathroom stalls. Teachers promptly report these to Lorena and she is swift to have them removed and talks sternly to

intermediate students, cautioning them against involvement with gangs. However, the children are particularly vulnerable to the negative influences of the neighborhood as they are often left to themselves for long hours after school and do not have monitored or school sponsored activities to fill their afternoons. This is further exacerbated by the continuous budget cuts that force Lorena to make the unconscionable choice of canceling the after school programs that were created to keep children who have no place else to go off the streets and engaged in meaningful learning opportunities and play activities.

Sometimes, the negative influences of the neighborhood leave the streets and enter the homes of the children in the form of domestic abuse. The effects of poverty are more significant than those that can be counted in dollars and cents. Constant financial struggles lead to differing degrees of frustration, hopelessness and despair and many resort to physical violence as a result of these pressures. Reported cases of child abuse and neglect are 6.8 times more likely in the homes of impoverished families (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Sometimes this abuse emanates from other family members as seen in the home of Kara's student, Bethanee, whose cousin routinely attacks her grandmother. Other times, the abuse targets the student directly as in the homes of the nameless students in both Jason and Katie's classrooms whose parents resort to physical violence as a form of discipline, possibly out of absolute frustration in response to their inability to provide for the basic needs of their children.

Responding to violence in the home is beyond the scope of Jason and Katie's influence and they immediately release themselves of the responsibility by reporting the abuse to Lorena. They still carry the weight in their hearts, but surrender the legal responsibility as required by law. Lorena then deals with individual families by reporting them to ACS. As she observes an increase in reports of domestic abuse at her school, and under the shadow of the highly publicized death of a child in a nearby neighborhood as a result of abuse, Lorena brings the issue to the Crisis Response team at the school. Together, they are concerned about other students who experience physical violence in their homes and as well as in the community. Lorena's current response is to support the children and educate the parents on the illegality of physical abuse and to educate them on finding alternatives to violence. A child's ability to develop well-being and to focus on education is severely hampered by abuse and neglect, yet these are symptoms of the greater problem plaguing so many families and children at The School of Academic Excellence: poverty. The efforts of Lorena and her staff are significant, but not sufficient to overcome the effects of poverty and violence on the lives of children.

Whether within the boundaries of the home, or outside on the streets of the neighborhood, threats to bodily integrity are not conducive to optimal learning and further limit educational opportunity for the students who are forced to live in these homes and neighborhoods. The mind simply cannot learn if the body and spirit are threatened (Larson & Murthada, 2002). Although developing awareness

of and alternatives to domestic violence is not where Lorena would prefer to invest her time, she believes that educating the parents will enhance life opportunities and, therefore, educational opportunities for her students and she persists in her efforts to influence their lives outside of the school day.

Lorena and her staff view life circumstances outside of school as powerful influences on educational opportunity. Since life needs outside of school are not addressed by NCLB, it can be assumed that the policy is grounded in the belief that children come to school healthy, well fed, rested, and prepared to learn and that the job of the school staff is to teach the children. In contrast, Lorena's primary mission is to try to create a context that supports children so that they are ready to learn. She wants to ensure that her students "come to school ready to learn" and able to focus on education while they are in school. The stark contrast between Lorena's focus and NCLB's problematic assumption about readiness to learn points to the enormous gap between what policy makers believe and what educators experience in schools serving children living in impoverished communities. Every one of the teachers at The School of Academic Excellence shares Lorena's hope to provide a school that supports the physical, emotional and academic needs of children.

The New York City DOE recognizes that children of poverty often come to school hungry and, therefore, provides breakfast to children at a free or reduced price, depending on their socioeconomic situation. At The School of Academic Excellence, 87% of the students receive free lunch and 2% receive lunch at a

reduced price. These students also receive breakfast provided by the school, at no charge. The assumption is that, after breakfast, these students are then prepared to learn and perform in the same ways that their more privileged peers do. It becomes clear that the students at The School of Academic Excellence and others like it in similar impoverished, urban contexts are grossly unprepared to focus on powerful learning, even after being served breakfast, no matter how stellar the opportunities provided within the school.

As Rothstein (2004b) argues, although schools can make a powerful difference in the lives of children, the influence of children's lives outside of school are simply too powerful for schools to completely overcome. Schools can make a difference but in order to meet the needs of all students, education policymakers must recognize that the school cannot and should not shoulder sole responsibility for expanding educational opportunity.

Efforts to Expand Educational Opportunity Within The School of Academic Excellence

Regardless of NCLB's universalist approach and gross indifference to unfreedoms faced by impoverished youth, the staff at The School of Academic Excellence strives to expand educational opportunity for the students they serve. Every day they struggle against the mandates of local and federal policy that directs attention away from what Sen would call the "real needs" of their students. They operate as best they can, hoping that their efforts to expand educational opportunity will make a difference in the lives of their students, even if their

efforts are not satisfactorily reflected in test scores. In addition to having to cope with and respond to the life circumstances of their students, these educators often find themselves pitted against the system itself. Educational opportunity is further limited for students as a result of problematic district policies on how to serve bilingual students, the qualifications of teachers that are hired in schools in impoverished communities, subjection to a curriculum that revolves around testing, and a focus on academic achievement to the exclusion of other equally critical areas of human health and development. The staff at The School of Academic Excellence struggles to meet the *real* needs of their students under policies that often punish them for doing so.

The Influence of Limited English Proficiency on Educational Opportunity

The School of Academic Excellence is located in a largely Hispanic portion of Bed-Stuy. Many of the families are immigrants and most of them speak Spanish. The majority of the students are bilingual in English and Spanish, some are monolingual in English, but there are numerous students at every grade level that speak Spanish only. Spanish-speaking students who find themselves immersed in an English-only curriculum are seriously disadvantaged when compared to their peers, yet, other than a single year grace period before being required to take the standardized tests, NCLB offers no recognition or extension of support for this vast and growing population of students whose needs far exceed those of English-speaking students.

At The School of Academic Excellence, there are no bilingual classes at the intermediate grade levels, yet 33% of the student population is bilingual and there are numerous bilingual students at each intermediate grade who would benefit greatly from such classes. In October, the intermediate grade bilingual class was closed due to low enrollment of students in need of bilingual instruction at those grade levels. The students that were originally in the multi-grade bilingual class were then dispersed across English-only classrooms. Lorena did not have the funding to offer a cross-grade bilingual section with such low student numbers. Unfortunately, the remaining bilingual students were not able to benefit from instruction in the sheltered bilingual format that was necessary to expand educational opportunity for these Spanish-speaking students. Without adequate funding at the school level, Lorena was unable to meet the students' needs for a bilingual education and was forced to disperse the Spanish-speaking students across the remaining English-only classrooms. This decision worked better for some students than others.

For the students who entered Vanessa's classroom, the potential for negative impact was diminished given that Vanessa speaks Spanish and was able to communicate with her students whether they spoke English or Spanish. For these students, educational opportunity was still limited by the loss of the truly bilingual classroom setting designed to develop competency in English, but the students' learning was not wholly impaired. Educational opportunity for the bilingual students who were not placed with a Spanish-speaking teacher was

considerably diminished. For example, the students who were assigned to Kara and Katie's classrooms suddenly found themselves in English-only classes with teachers who did not speak Spanish. Kara was overwhelmed by students who did not speak English and she was not able to communicate with them academically or otherwise. She struggled to determine if the learning problems she saw in her students were the result of a lack in language proficiency, or if they were academic in nature and in need of remediation, not translation. Because of this, educational opportunity was even further diminished for those students who had a true learning need in addition to a lack of proficiency with the English language.

Maria, a child from Katie's third grade classroom, for example, suffered significant negative consequences as a result of insufficient bilingual programming. Being placed a grade behind in an English-only classroom reduced educational opportunity exponentially for this Spanish-only speaking fourth grader who was moved back an entire grade level because there was no one who could teach her in Spanish at the fourth grade level. Therefore, she was placed in a monolingual third grade classroom with the assumption that she would learn English on her own and "pick it up" through the help of her teacher. Katie, however, did not speak Spanish.

NCLB recognizes the unique needs of ELLs only through the one-year grace period it offers to them before requiring them to take a translated form of the required standardized tests. Other than this extension, NCLB avoids addressing the learning needs of ELLs entirely and after three years in the

country, ELLs are required to take the tests in English. At the local level, the New York City DOE parallels this policy and does nothing systemically to meet the needs of these students as it does with Special Education students, who get bused around to different parts of the city so that they can learn in an environment that is best suited to meet their needs. The oversight of the DOE in not availing bilingual classes and teachers to all students in need has reduced educational opportunity for bilingual children at The School of Academic Excellence.

“Highly Qualified Teachers” Are Not Sufficient in Urban Contexts

One of the ways NCLB sets out to ensure that all students will achieve and that the achievement gap will be closed is through the highly qualified teacher mandate. Lorena has taken it upon herself to add another layer of qualification to the standards mandated by NCLB and works to hire teachers who can relate to and understand the needs of her students and the neighborhood they live in. This is a challenge for Lorena as there are few individuals who are born and raised in this area, earn a college degree in teaching, and then return to serve in the neighborhood. Lorena and Vanessa have an advantage over many other staff members since they did grow up in the area. Therefore, they are able to relate to the lives of their students after growing up in similar situations or in close proximity to the kinds of situations they see surfacing in the lives of students at The School of Academic Excellence. Katie, Kara, and Jason are unable to do so. They can empathize with their students, but not in the way that Lorena and

Vanessa are able to. Lorena realizes this and works hard to make sure that, minimally, the staff she hires is able to appreciate the challenges their students face.

It appears that Lorena has been successful in her targeted efforts to hire teachers who will be able to appreciate the life situations of impoverished youth. Several teachers recently left The School of Academic Excellence, unable or unwilling to take on the inherent challenge of working in an urban context. All of the teachers who left because they felt overwhelmed were alternately certified teachers who were hired before Lorena's tenure began. Kara and Vanessa complain vocally and often about these teachers whose lack of commitment has undermined the education of children in the school.

Lorena, Vanessa, and Kara have strong opinions about alternately certified, TFA teachers. They question the commitment and background of teachers who appear to be interested in little more than getting a quick Master's degree while getting paid to teach. Research by Kane, Rockoff and Staiger (2008) support their assessment, finding that teachers certified through TFA are prone to short careers in schools given their minimum two-year commitment. In contrast, they found that teachers certified by traditional routes and through NYCTF have similar retention rates and tend to remain in schools for longer than TFA teachers (Kane, Rockoff & Staiger, 2008). Lorena, Vanessa, and Kara have all been frustrated by TFA teachers who departed after fulfilling the required two-year commitment and are generally opposed to any teacher who achieves their

certification through an alternative route. All three point out Jason as an exception to this pattern of poor teachers being produced by alternative certification programs. Research by Kane, Rockoff and Staiger (2008) supports this observation. Their findings show that NYCTF teachers not only display a higher retention rate than TFA teachers, but also that the NYCTF retention rate parallels that of traditionally certified teachers (Kane, Rockoff & Staiger, 2008).

Regardless of the recognized difference in retention rates between different alternate certification programs, Lorena generalizes to all alternately certified teachers and finds that the influx of these teachers into urban schools has added to her already heavy workload. She reports that she has to hire and train new teachers every time one of the alternately certified teachers departs. Similarly, Vanessa and Kara find their workload increased by the lack of content instruction and classroom management structures provided by the majority of alternately certified teachers. These women see the limited teaching skills of alternately certified teachers as a serious problem for students who, typically, spend a year with a poorly trained teacher, reducing educational opportunity for children in those classrooms.

Kara and Vanessa's unmasked dislike of alternately certified teachers is challenged by their consistent and unmitigated praise and respect for Jason. Although certified through NYCTF, they see Jason as an anomaly in the teachers they have worked with who have been certified to teach through alternative routes. Kara and Vanessa respect the long-term investment that Jason has in the

lives of his students and they wish that more teachers were like him. It is particularly interesting to note that both teachers display frustrations with alternately certified teachers because they each entered into teaching through alternative pathways and would not have been recognized initially as highly qualified teachers by NCLB. Vanessa entered teaching during a teaching shortage crisis that allowed her to start teaching and then earn her degree and Kara entered the profession in a field that did not fall within her area of expertise and certification. Katie, on the other hand, entered into teaching fully credentialed through a traditional teaching program. Yet, of all four participants, Katie is the weakest teacher even though she entered the profession with the strongest credentials per NCLB's definition.

The question then, is "What really makes a highly qualified teacher?" And, most importantly, is NCLB's definition of a highly qualified teacher sufficient for teachers who will serve in urban contexts? The findings of this study reveal that the answer to the second question is an emphatic "No." Having a degree or taking a test proving competence in the subject area to be taught is simply insufficient for teaching in urban contexts. The lived realities of the students in impoverished communities impact their education and educational opportunities in such significant ways they cannot be ignored and qualifications for teachers serving them must recognize this. Lorena has taken this on as a personal requirement she adds to her list of desired teacher qualifications. However, there is another dimension of teacher quality that is necessary for

success at The School of Academic Excellence that Lorena has not addressed: the need for proficiency in Spanish.

The School of Academic Excellence is home to a vast and growing population of Spanish-speaking students. In order to expand educational opportunity for these youth, teachers must be able to communicate with both the students and their parents. Lorena, Vanessa, and Jason are both fluent in Spanish and are, therefore, able to communicate with both students and parents with great ease, fluctuating between English and Spanish as the situation requires. Unfortunately, Katie and Kara are unable to do the same and they struggle to meet the needs of their students. At conference time, Katie and Kara are forced to find translators for their parent meetings. Lorena tries to make bilingual staff members available, but when the need for translators exceeds the number of translators available, Katie and Kara and other English speaking teachers are forced to struggle through conferences leaving the responsibility for translating up to a family member or the student. The teachers struggle further as they are concerned that their messages may not be delivered in the way that they intend.

There are further language challenges beyond the acts of teaching and conferring that impact educational opportunity for students on a daily basis. Kara and Katie lament the fact that their lack of Spanish proficiency prevents them from writing a quick note to a parent to be sent home with a child. It is inconvenient and sometimes impossible to find a translator at the last minute who can translate a note to go home with a child and the teachers are left with no

choice but to send home a note written in English and hope that the child translates it accurately. Some messages are timely in nature and the delay that comes with having to find a translator makes it either inconvenient or unlikely that the teacher will do so. Such notes are especially important to teachers in their efforts to maintain ongoing communication with the parents of students in their classrooms- especially if the note is related to a problem with behavior or academics that is urgent in nature.

At The School of Academic Excellence, significant amounts of instructional support for the teachers was provided by the coaches that Lorena placed in leadership positions in the school. The qualifications of these coaches are not delineated beyond those for the classroom teachers and quite often the positions fall to the most senior teacher, or ones who have good rapport with other teachers or good classroom management skills. Lorena has worked hard to ensure that the coaches she places in positions of instructional leadership exceed those qualifications and are highly knowledgeable in their content area. As can be seen from the ineffective support provided to both Vanessa and Katie, the coaches need more than content knowledge- they need coaching skills and abilities. The challenges the coaches face is exacerbated both by the significant demands placed on teachers charged with making great gains with students that have significant needs outside of school, and by the limitations of the teachers that are often hired in hard to staff schools.

Simply put, at The School of Academic Excellence, to be highly qualified and capable of expanding educational opportunity for students, one must not only have the mastery of the content and the skill set required of teaching in general, as required by NCLB; and be able to relate to the life circumstances of their students, as preferred by Lorena. To be successful in expanding educational opportunity at The School of Academic Excellence, a teacher must speak Spanish. Lorena realizes this and her definition of highly qualified exceeds that of NCLB's as she strives to find teachers that can relate to and communicate with her students. She explicitly cautions potential teachers on the challenges of working in an urban context and only hires those she feels to be truly capable of doing so. Unfortunately, the stack of resumes she receives every year does not reflect all of her desired qualifications and she has yet to hire a teacher who speaks Spanish. NCLB's definition of a highly qualified teacher is far from sufficient for meeting the needs of the students at Lorena's school and others like it in urban contexts.

*Curriculum That Revolves Around Testing:
The Impact of Accountability on Achievement*

NCLB is unprecedented in its emphasis on accountability at the school and student level. The intent of the high stakes testing associated with NCLB was to motivate teachers to teach and students to learn and to measure the results. According to NCLB, this would ensure that all students were making progress and that the achievement gap would be closed. As often happens with policy implementation, the effect of NCLB's emphasis on accountability has had

numerous unintended effects and consequences, none of which expand educational opportunity for students. At The School of Academic Achievement, these effects are recognized in the significant time that is dedicated toward the tests that takes time away from other important activities, the over-collection and under-use of data, and the decrease in teacher discretion in making educational decisions for children. At The School of Academic Excellence, the focus on accountability proved to be so significant that it actually decreased educational opportunity for students.

How Time Spent on Testing Reduces Educational Opportunity

NCLB's focus on accountability in the areas of social studies, science, math, and literacy has resulted in drastic reductions of time dedicated to teaching and learning in other, non-tested areas including the arts. Since the math and literacy tests occur every year, instruction in those areas takes precedence over other areas of learning. At the fifth grade level, preparation for the social studies test results in a heavier instructional focus there than on science, for example. At the fourth grade level, preparation for the science test results in a greater teaching emphasis on science rather than on social studies. At The School of Academic Excellence, daily memos, teacher lesson plans, and the focus of grade level professional development sessions all reflect the current priority of the school and these priorities were consistently matched to whatever test was next on the horizon. Teachers admit to focusing their efforts in a narrow fashion and share

that at times they chose to do so on their own, but at other times, they were explicitly told to do so by their coaches. Teachers qualified these statements by making the point that, if asked, the administration would probably deny this. The high stakes attached to the tests simply made them feel that they were unable to honor other areas of study or to make instructional decisions based on the needs of their students that exist outside of the content domains of the tests. Their school and students will be measured according to the test and if they do not pass, the sanctions are severe. Therefore, the staff sees no choice but to focus their efforts singularly on performing well on that test.

At the fifth grade level, this became abundantly clear since there were three tests in a six-month period. The instruction observed in Kara and Vanessa's classrooms across the duration of the seven-month study was virtually broken up into three two-month phases that were aligned with the weeks that led up to each test. Every two months, there was another standardized test and the fifth grade curriculum become progressively more and more narrow so that by the time the test came around, the teachers were focusing on little beyond the content area linked to the upcoming test. The exception is at the third grade level where reading instruction has a protected time under the Reading First program that The School of Academic Excellence participates in. This program mandates 90 minutes of reading instruction that is tied to a scripted program that Katie must follow, regardless of what test is coming up or what she identifies as current needs of her students.

Throughout the observed cycles of intentional teaching towards the content of whatever test loomed next on the horizon, Lorena took a back seat. She delegated the responsibilities for most of the work surrounding preparation for the tests to the Assistant Principal and to the coaches that she trusts implicitly. Lorena knows the importance of the tests but worked hard to make sure that the preparation for them was relegated to the fringes of the day and largely took place during the before and after school programs offered for the children. She states that test preparation should not alter or infringe upon classroom instruction, but given the pressure for performance, this is exactly what the teachers and coaches chose to do. Kara and Vanessa quickly realized that not all children came to the before and after school sessions and did not feel that it was fair for these students to miss out on test preparation. In their view, expanding educational opportunity meant that all the students needed to benefit from the test preparation activities. They appreciated Lorena's efforts to protect instructional time, but given the pressure to increase student test scores, they did not see that they had the choice to do so. Further, they were encouraged by the coaches to do exactly what Lorena directed them not to do. In response to the personal pressure from coaches and their desire to help their children pass the test and not be retained, the teachers succumbed to the pressure of the coaches and opted to let go of classroom instruction in favor of packaged test prep curriculums designed to help students pass tests.

Given the increase in test preparation and its increasing role in driving classroom instruction, the validity of these tests ought to be questioned. If the purpose of tests is to measure the academic learning of students and the effectiveness of teaching, how can performance resulting from overt and explicit test preparation be helpful in assessing curriculum mastery? Standardized tests at The School of Academic Excellence and thousands others like it no longer measure student learning in various subject areas. Instead, they are a measure of the quality of test prep programs. As a result, test preparation programs and practice tests take time away from valuable learning within and across the content areas and negate the underlying purpose of such tests, which is to measure student learning. As a result of the high stakes attached to tests, teachers in this school found that there is increasingly less time for teaching the content, skills, and strategies that students actually need to learn. Instead, they feel pressured into using prepared tests that no longer measure what they were originally intended to measure.

The staff at The School of Academic Excellence sadly acknowledges this fact, but they feel trapped. Their efforts to expand educational opportunity and to enhance the potential for achievement have been thwarted by the very tests that were ostensibly designed to measure student learning.

The Over-collection and Under-use of Too Much Data

As a result of one of the recommendations of the 2006-2007 School Quality Review, Lorena has focused significant attention and effort on addressing one of the areas of weakness identified by the reviewer: collection and use of data. In response to this area identified as a weakness for her school, Lorena has required teachers to collect and record significant amounts of data in all content areas. This data, along with information on the students' ELL, poverty, special education, special services, and attendance status is recorded in tiny boxes onto an 11 by 14 inch chart, one page for each classroom. These charts may provide an impressive display, but this study reveals that these data are of little use to any of the teachers in the school. To the teachers, time demands for data collection are significant, but the value is minimal. The collection of data is a constant source of frustration the teachers who are overwhelmed by paperwork in this new era of accountability. Lorena, too, is overwhelmed but feels obligated to collect all the information to fulfill the goal set out by the reviewer: to improve the school's collection and use of data. However, it appears that Lorena has focused narrowly on the collection of data with only minimal attention to the use of data. In repeated conversations, she referred to using the data as the next step, but was intent throughout the duration of the study on simply capturing all the data on a single piece of paper that would provide a snapshot of performance in each classroom.

Overwhelmed by the demands of the testing and data collection required by Lorena and by the Reading First program, Jason responds by rearranging his week so that the bulk of the required testing would occur on a single day providing the least disruption possible to his instructional time. However, he is still mandated to continually assess students throughout the week through the required electronic progress monitoring. Every day Jason collects data on his students that he submits weekly. The data that is captured in an impressive and colorful chart on the computer screen is then printed out and returned to Jason as a black and white printout lacking the colors necessary to decipher the content. The expectation is that he will be able to use this data to inform his instruction. Unable to make sense of a colored graph that is returned in black and white, Jason returns to the coach for help. She in turn directs him to the manual.

Katie, Kara, and Vanessa receive similar feedback in the form of summaries of performance of periodic practice tests. Teachers are supposed to use this data to predict how students will do on the next test and then to teach to the needs the data identifies. Each of these teachers cycles through vocal frustrations over the time required to collect and record data, followed by equally vocal and frustrated pleas for help in using this data they are required to collect, yet see little use for.

Decrease in Teacher Discretion

The problem of over-collection of data is magnified by the fact that teachers do not know how to utilize the data they receive and find that the coaches are of little help when the teachers turn to them for support. This is in part due to the fact that the assessment tools themselves are limited. It is very difficult to capture higher level thinking skills through multiple choice and short answer question formats that are easily scored. The reports provided by the test makers themselves are also flawed. In observing a coaching session when the intermediate teachers were being taught how to use the results of the periodic Predictive ACUITY test, one of the coaches showed how the report indicated that many children missed a certain question because of their lack of note-taking skills. They then planned and subsequently co-taught elaborate lessons that would support and develop note-taking skills.

As I looked more closely at the question, I discovered that notetaking was only one of many competencies required in order to answer this question correctly. By focusing on the skill identified by the print-out generated by the test company, the teachers could very well be putting their students at a significant disadvantage. In this case, the question was about identifying the main idea of a passage that was read to them. The test makers assumed that they would need note-taking skills in order to do this and categorized all incorrect answers as an indication that those students needed to learn notetaking skills. In reality, the question required sophisticated abilities in making inferences in order to identify

the main idea. By focusing instruction on developing notetaking skills the teachers actually provided a disservice to their students. These students were actually struggling with the reading strategies related to determining importance, making inferences and identifying the main idea of a passage. Instead of receiving instruction on strategies that they actually needed, the teachers dutifully followed the assertions of a computer printout indicating that they needed to spend more time on developing note-taking skills.

At times, it appears that the coaches and teachers are simply too limited in their knowledge of content areas and testing as a genre in order to make sense of the data they receive and use it in powerful ways to influence instruction. At other times, they are simply not allowed to do so. The Reading First coach is limited by the boundaries of the program the teachers are required to use. The ongoing progress-monitoring produces print-outs that slot children into ability groups that the teachers are to use for instruction. The flaw here is that the DIBELS assessment tool only assesses accuracy and rate of reading and ignores many other components of effective reading. This narrow assessment tool focuses only on a finite sliver of what literacy encompasses, yet it is used as the compass to dictate the groupings that are to be used for all differentiated instruction in reading. Jason realizes the contradiction, but when he goes to the coach for help, she can only reiterate the mandates of the program that indicate that the child should be taught according to the data printout. How can a teacher teach when a computer printout takes precedence over his own insight and

professional logic? The crisp, clear printouts that are produced in an effort to capture the complex learning they purport to measure are simply ineffective at doing all that a teacher can do who looks at students in multiple situations and contexts. The DOE required Acuity tests and the Reading First mandated DIBELS assessments have reduced the measurement of effectiveness of teaching and learning to the scores that are regurgitated by a computer. This frustration is shared by Vanessa and Kara who encounter students again and again who can pass the tests, but are still unable to read, write or compute at the fifth grade level. They are infuriated by the system that takes away their power as teachers who know their students and replaces it with the wisdom generated in an inanimate computer printout.

*Focusing on Academic Achievement and Ignoring Other
Aspects Vital to Child Health and Development*

The staff at The School of Academic Excellence works hard to meet the needs of their students across all domains of healthy child development. This becomes clear in the assertions each teacher and Lorena makes about their aims for the students at The School of Academic Excellence. When asked what is important to them, each suggests that they want their students to come to school, that they are prepared to learn, and that they feel safe. All of their dreams and desires for their students are situated in the affective domain. Not one of the teachers, nor the principal, suggested that academic achievement was their first priority. Every one of them did qualify their hopes for their students by adding

that they also want their students to “do well” on the tests. For Lorena, “doing well” on the tests means that her school will not be labeled as a failing school according to NCLB requirement of all subgroups making AYP and will maintain its status off of the district’s SINI list, thereby escaping the sanctions that come along with being labeled a failing school. For the teachers, “doing well” means that their students will escape the DOE’s sanctions at the student level. Students that fail to perform proficiently on the standardized tests are required to go to summer school and then retake the test. The consequence of not passing the test the second time is retention. Jason’s feelings expressed about the test best capture those shared by his colleagues: “I want them to pass the tests because I don’t want them to fail in this system, but I don’t really believe that, that’s what they need.” According to NCLB, doing well on the test is “what they need.” Sen (1992) argues that this narrow focus is not “what they need” and, like Jason, would argue that we need to support and enhance the whole child in order to expand their life choices and educational opportunity.

The staff at The School of Academic Excellence recognizes the problem of NCLB’s narrow focus on academic achievement as they work to expand educational opportunity. They are deeply concerned about other dimensions of their students’ development that fall outside of the cognitive realm and work hard to support and protect the social, emotional, and physical development of their students as they prepare them not just for the tests, but for success in life outside the boundaries of the school and school day. Efforts to address such needs are

seen largely in Lorena's relentless efforts to engage the parent community with the school. She realizes the importance of connecting with the parents who must adequately support their children if they are to do well in school. By engaging parents through school events and activities, she increases her ability to influence them and the chances that students will come to school regularly and ready to learn.

Lorena works hard to make sure that The School of Academic Excellence is not "all about test scores." She strives to provide numerous opportunities for parents and students to come together in settings that focus on other aspects of development. Lorena recognized a need and now works to ensure that assemblies, events and celebrations at The School of Academic Excellence are all engineered to support and honor the diversity of cultures. From food that is served on movie nights to the content that is translated so that all can participate, Lorena strives to honor the range of languages and cultures and expand educational opportunity at her school. The staff at The School of Academic Excellence recognizes the importance of the arts, specifically, dance and music, to their students. It is in these non-academic areas that all children can experience pleasure and success.

Nurturing and protecting the emotional integrity of students is central to Lorena's efforts to expand opportunity for the students at The School of Academic Excellence and the teachers actively support this through their participation in and support of events and activities aimed towards development

in non-cognitive and affective domains. According to Kara, “Dance is part of who they are. It’s in their culture and it’s what they do.” Vanessa and Katie also recognize the essential nature of the dance programs at the school in terms of the social and emotional benefits it provides their students. All three are dismayed when they learn that DOE budget cuts are affecting the school and that it is the non-academic after school programs that will be cut. Katie describes the impact as devastating to the students. For many of the children, the dance program is their anchor to the school and provides a teacher-student bond that the teachers are unable to establish in the classroom. These after school programs also provide a safe and productive place for the students during the after school hours when they would otherwise be subjected to the potential negative influence of the community they live in.

Jason holds a unique set of beliefs not voiced by the other teachers. He feels that his primary responsibility to his students is to help them develop character. Jason recognizes the importance of developing skills in reading, writing and mathematics, but repeatedly references the importance of making sure that his students are capable and confident in their ability to assert themselves and express their opinions. Ensuring that his students are able to solve problems on their own without resorting to verbal attacks or physical fighting is a priority in his classroom. He has a vision that his students become active and successfully participatory members of society.

The efforts of the teachers at The School of Academic Excellence do not take place in a vacuum. The educational opportunities of their students are impacted on a daily basis by the circumstances they encounter at home and through the decisions they make as teachers every day. Tying these two worlds together are two forces: NCLB and Lorena. NCLB imposes influence by pushing aggressively towards huge achievement for all, regardless of circumstances. Lorena pushes right back in her efforts to enhance life and learning circumstances of and for her students, cognizant all the while of the inequities and hardships that her students must overcome in order to achieve according to NCLB's standards. Lorena works to operate her school every day under the logic proposed by Larson and Murthada (2002) that is often contradictory to that proposed within the education policy she is forced to operate under. According to Larson and Murthada:

The core idea is that children and parents are human beings first, not simply students and parents. Human beings need material support, and without such support people cannot come into full being (Larson & Murthada, 2002, p. 154).

Lorena and her staff try to live this on a daily basis existing under the umbrella of a policy that problematically reduces their school and students to numbers on a computer printout.

CHAPTER X

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

This case study examines how one urban school interprets and implements the mandates of federal, state and local education policies focused on achievement. By examining the assumptions underlying these policies and the efforts made at the school level to comply with and implement them, we gain greater insight into how the assumptions underpinning these policies play out in the experiences of the staff and students at The School of Academic Excellence. The findings of this study reveal how these educators make sense of these policies and how they are impacting teaching and learning at The School of Academic Excellence.

NCLB is based on the assumptions that all students can learn at the same level, based on age, and that the achievement gap can be closed by focusing on academic achievement. A secondary set of assumptions underpinning this policy is that greater equity in achievement can be attained by establishing high standards, hiring highly qualified teachers, and holding schools and students accountable for learning on standardized tests (U.S. Department of Education, 2005; U.S. Department of Education: National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). The findings of this study reveal that there is a serious disconnect between

what is assumed and mandated by NCLB and the lived realities and actual needs of the poor students that this policy purports to serve. As a result, the teachers at The School of Academic Excellence struggle to make sense of and balance the demands of this achievement only policy and the needs of their students. The Principal and teachers at The School of Academic Excellence simply did not have the luxury of focusing on academic achievement only because the forces of poverty directly impacted their abilities to do so.

In this chapter, I identify specific recommendations for policy and practice at the federal, local, and school level. It is important to remember that this is a case study, therefore, the findings of this study may or may not be generalizable to other settings. However, many schools share the life circumstances and situations illuminated in this study. Therefore, it is important that the readers of this study use their experiences of other schools to assess which of these findings may be unique to this setting, as well as which findings tap into more widely shared issues and concerns that are arising in schools and communities similar to the one.

With that said, I turn my attention to what we can learn from this study. First, I identify limitations in and recommendations for policy at the federal level. Next, I identify possible areas for improvement at the local level as leaders in the NYC DOE work to make sense of and implement the mandates of NCLB while simultaneously striving to expand educational opportunity for over a million students within the districts' 1500 schools. Finally, I conclude the chapter by

presenting several unintended consequences of the implementation of current educational policy.

Recommendations for Federal Education Policy

In the next section, I identify specific recommendations for federal educational policy based on the findings of this study. NCLB is currently up for reauthorization. Failure to incorporate and address the findings revealed through this study as well as others that have reached similar conclusions will result in renewing a policy that will continue to be ineffective in its efforts to improve academic achievement for impoverished youth.

Federal Education Policy Must Be Reframed Under a “Politics of Difference”

The universalist nature of NCLB policy fails to address the needs of the children who attend The School of Academic Excellence. In order to expand educational opportunity for these students, the hardships they endure every day cannot continue to be ignored. Following the logic of Amartya Sen, it makes little sense to do so. He (1992) argues that:

the effect of ignoring the interpersonal variations [between humans] can, in fact be deeply inegalitarian, in hiding the fact that equal consideration for all may demand very unequal treatment in favor of the disadvantaged (p. 1).

The needs of students at The School of Academic Excellence run deep. As a policy, NCLB assumes that all children can learn, regardless of their circumstances. The staff at The School of Academic Excellence would argue that the broader physical, social, economic and emotional needs of children and their families must be addressed if NCLB's concern for academic achievement is to be attained. Simply put, the findings of this study reveal that difference matters and that policies intended to bring about greater educational equity must recognize and address those differences.

If federal education policies are to be successful in expanding educational opportunity, then universalist approaches must be called into question. Policies designed to address the needs of diverse groups, especially policies that expressly intend to ameliorate inequalities between groups, must recognize the inherent differences between human beings. Ultimately, these differences require varied responses and treatment as identified by Sen above. Simply put, current education policies need to be restructured, rewritten, and reauthorized under a framework that will explicitly recognize and address the real needs of children and their families in schools and communities.

Address the Debilitating Effects of Poverty on Educational Opportunity

According to Rothstein (2004a), "low income and skin color themselves don't influence academic achievement, but the collection of characteristics that define social-class differences inevitably influences that achievement" (p. 106).

Children living in poverty are exposed to life circumstances that simply do not allow them to reach their potential. There are countless parents who work tirelessly to support their families, yet, they are still unable to provide adequate housing, nourishment, health care, clothing and other basic life necessities. Federal policies in other health and human services need to be developed and coordinated with education policies in order to ensure that children are not left behind their more affluent peers, academically, because their physical, social, and emotional needs have been neglected.

Addressing such needs falls outside of the current directions in federal Department of Education policy, but the findings of this study reveal that the real needs of impoverished youth cannot be ignored if we are to increase academic achievement, particularly, for poor immigrant children and children of color. Parents who are not able to make an adequate living to support their families are forced to make deformed choices about where and how to live their lives. These choices directly affect their children and undermine their academic potential. Therefore, education policymakers must find a way to incorporate such provisions into the laws they construct or work closely with other agencies to ensure that we do not increase pressure to achieve without providing the support children need to do so. The education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2003) that has accrued over time for those suffering the effects of poverty cannot be easily overcome and certainly cannot be ignored. Federal monies should be used to support unique local programs that have a proven track record of success such as those being

implemented in the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) in New York City. The HCZ program stands as a model of how social service organizations can work within a community to drive the expansion educational opportunity for children within the community. HCZ has instituted prenatal care and parenting workshops through its Baby College program. Children and their parents continue to receive support through the Harlem Gems pre-school program. Programs and resources offered for parents and children through the HCZ charter schools at the elementary, middle and high school level continue to expand educational opportunity for participating children and families. Recognizing the impoverished children are often at risk for health problems, the HCZ runs health care programs targeting issues like asthma and obesity, supporting children and their families to overcome challenges that limit educational achievement. Collectively, the programs aim to break the cycle of generational poverty that impacts life circumstances and opportunities for the 1000s of children served by HCZ (Canada, n.d.).

Create Opportunities for Immigrants and Their Children

The effects of poverty may be most significant for the parents and children who face additional challenges such as those related to immigration. The immigrant population is one of the fastest growing demographic groups in the United States. Children of immigrants are often poor and their parents often lack the language skills, knowledge, and ability to intervene in schools on behalf of their children. Like economic policies that address the rights and needs of

impoverished Americans, immigration policies fall outside of the direct influence of education policymakers. Yet, the impact of immigration policies and the rights of immigrants are critically important when it comes to expanding educational opportunity for children of immigrants. Education policies need to be reframed to focus on the unique needs of immigrant children that must be addressed if we are to expand their ability to thrive and their freedom to achieve. Policies relevant to improving life circumstances for those who are limited by poverty as mentioned in the previous section must be put into place and efforts must be made to ensure that immigrant parents are made aware of the rights that their children have as U.S. citizens. Policies must be put in place that will find programs designed to help immigrant children and parents orient themselves to U.S. customs, policies and practices related to public schooling. Children with immigrant status or of immigrant parents must, minimally, be recognized through education policy and their needs must be addressed either within education policies or in other social policies that are explicitly tied to education policy, protecting these children and expanding educational opportunity for them.

*Recognize the Challenges of Limited English Proficiency
and Define Bilingualism as a Strength*

The School of Academic Excellence and increasing numbers of schools across all socioeconomic classes are welcoming rapidly growing populations of students with limited English proficiency. In order to expand educational

opportunity for ELLs, their specific needs must be acknowledged and addressed in ways that far surpass current federal education policy. NCLB provides LEP students one single year of grace before they are required to take the standardized test that their English-speaking peers take. For their first three years in the country, they are allowed to take the test in a format that is translated to match their native language. After that, they are required to take the tests in English. Other than these considerations, there are no provisions for how and in what ways the learning needs of English language learners will be met.

Federal education policy needs to provide a structure and guidelines for best practices with English language learners that is based on research on the needs of bilingual learners, not based on research that was based on other populations and then wrongly generalized to them as was the case with policies related to reading instruction under Reading First. These policies need to be constructed in a way that reflects the variance of languages represented by students in U.S. schools and that takes into account differences between oral and written language acquisition. Lastly, education policy related to English language learners needs to be constructed in a way that recognizes and celebrates the benefits of being bilingual rather than focusing on developing English language proficiency to the detriment on a child's native language skills.

Redefine Standards for Highly Qualified Teachers

The findings of this study reveal that the definition of highly qualified teachers per NCLB is simply inadequate in urban schools serving impoverished youth, especially in schools serving ELLs. It is admirable that standards for high quality teaching have been set, but those standards need to be even more rigorous for teachers serving students with limited English proficiency and for those students with exceptional life circumstances related to poverty. ELLs have a right to instruction in their native language that will support content knowledge development at the same time they develop proficiency in the English language. Teachers of ELL students need to have fluency in their students' native language and school and district structures should be held responsible for ensuring that this is supported through system level practices in teacher allocation and in student assignment to schools and classrooms. Teacher quality standards should be established as a minimum and state and local education policies should further define what it means to be highly qualified according the needs of the specific student populations to be served.

To maintain highly qualified status, educators must be required to continue to grow and learn through professional development opportunities that should be funded by federal and local monies. Given the constant expansion of knowledge relative to how learning occurs and how it can best be nurtured, and given the changing nature of the student population in many schools, educators need to be engaged in a continuing cycle of professional growth and learning.

Quality professional development is necessary for teaching professionals to perform optimally in the classroom and must be a primary focus of education policy designed to expand educational opportunity for students. It is rare that professional development needs of teachers can be met from within the schools and districts themselves. It is essential that schools and districts look to colleges, universities, and professional development companies whose primary foci are on identifying best practices for students and in targeting the learning needs of teaching professionals. These institutions are on the cutting edge of research and knowledge that are necessary for teachers and administrators to have as they work to expand educational opportunity and improve academic achievement for their students.

Recommendations for Local Education Policy

In the following sections, I provide specific recommendations for the improvement and implementation of policy at the local level. Education policy in New York City impacts over one million children across five boroughs. The variance in student demographics is great, but all children have a right to a quality education that will support expand their potential and opportunity to achieve. Unfortunately, there is great disparity across the schools in New York City and as the findings of this study show, the needs of many learners are simply not being addressed. There are far too many children in schools run by the DOE that are not being provided the education they deserve. I suggest that the following

strategies ought to be incorporated in education policy to meet the more holistic needs of children.

*Create Educational Programs that Effectively
Address Issues of Poverty in Schools*

To fully expand educational opportunity for impoverished youth, comprehensive programs need to be put in place to target all aspects of a child's life that could be negatively impacted by living in low wealth families and communities. Programs such as HCZ, identified in the previous section, show significant potential for changing life circumstances for children by more broadly addressing the real needs of poor families. HCZ addresses many of the unfreedoms faced by poor families ranging from chronic health problems to ensuring prenatal care to adequate housing. The underlying intent of the collective of programs that are part of the holistic mission of HCZ are designed to touch all aspects of a child's life that have potential for expanding educational opportunity. Canada has proven success with the HCZ program that targets all areas of unfreedom in young children's lives with the aim of ultimately breaking the cycle of generational poverty, providing every child with real freedoms to achieve (Canada, n.d.). Cities communities that are home to large populations of children at risk for academic underachievement as a result of the effects of poverty must aggressively work to alter the life circumstances and opportunities of these children and their families. HCZ is a proven model that should be

replicated in other areas of NYC as well as in other similar cities across the country.

Fully Integrate the Range of Social Services Provided for Families and Children

Because the unfreedoms faced by impoverished youth are so significant, Rothstein argues that the responsibility for closing the achievement gap cannot rest solely on schools. This case study clearly demonstrates that the life needs of students within The School of Academic Excellence are beyond what the staff is capable of influencing in order to adequately expand educational opportunity. Until basic life needs are met that serve to protect the emotional and bodily integrity of these children, they will struggle to learn and will not be able to achieve what they are truly capable of doing. Rothstein emphatically states, “Better school practices can no doubt narrow the gap. However, school reform is not enough” (Rothstein, 2004, p. 109). There is a clear and pressing need for improved integration of the social services available to support the needs of impoverished youth and their families. School administrators should not have to struggle to access the other social service agencies that are in place to expand life opportunities for their students. The government needs to step in and align these services in a meaningful and productive manner. Unless this integration occurs and children’s basic life needs such as adequate housing, nourishment, clothing, and health care are met, there is little hope for closing the achievement gap.

The NYC-DOE also needs to work with other social service agencies in the city to ensure that such integration occurs. Principals who are forced to navigate the cities myriad of agencies in search of student services are pulled away from the school and are less able to provide instructional leadership in their schools. School leaders should not have to choose between meeting the immediate life needs of children and families in their schools or being instructional leaders. Both of these roles require significant amounts of time and both roles must be filled if we are to help children who need it the most. The DOE would do well to work with other City agencies to better integrate the social services that impact educational opportunity for students and free Principals to concentrate on and provide stronger instructional leadership within their schools. The integration of programs operating in concert with the HCZ serve as an excellent model of such integration of social services.

Provide Adequate Support for English Language Learners

At the local level, there is no system level process that ensures that every Spanish-speaking child has access to the bilingual teaching they will need in order to prosper. Thus, Lorena, like administrators at countless schools across the country, is forced to make decisions about the assignments of staff and students that meet the needs of some, while disadvantaging others. Local and federal educational policy simply cannot ignore the needs of children who are not proficient in English and assume that their language problems will simply disappear within the

grace period provided by the law. Not speaking English upon entering school may be most debilitating for students in Reading First schools that are utilizing mandated curriculum that was never designed with the unique needs of ELL students in mind. Expanding educational opportunity for these students requires that they have access to instruction that will support their English language acquisition needs as well as their academic needs. In order to truly serve these students, educational policies need to honor and nurture bilingualism as a strength.

Improve Access to Highly Qualified Teachers

The heart of any school is comprised of the people who thrive within it. This study focused on the experiences of five individuals within The School of Academic Excellence: Lorena, the principal; and four of her staff members, Jason, Katie, Kara, and Vanessa. Each of the teachers in this study is characterized as “highly qualified” per NCLB’s standards, yet the definition of a highly qualified teacher according to NCLB is grossly inadequate to meet the needs of learners at The School of Academic Excellence. In urban contexts, teachers need more than a degree in education and content area expertise. The findings of this study reveal that successful teaching in this context requires specified knowledge of the language and culture of the students, enough experience, inner strength and maturity to navigate the obstacles faced by students inside and outside of the school, an awareness of social service providers outside of the school that can

support students in need, and, according to the teachers at The School for Academic Excellence, a healthy sense of humor. Teachers in schools that serve ELL students require the additional qualification of bilingualism. All of these are essential traits of a teacher who serves impoverished youth, yet none are addressed in current federal policy. Educational opportunity for children simply cannot be expanded if the teachers that are hired to serve them are inadequately qualified. The basic diversity of human beings that Sen (1992) brings to our attention leads us to the understanding that all humans are not equal and, therefore, to meet their needs, we may have to provide services and structures that are inherently unequal, in favor of those who are most disadvantaged.

At the local level there are no provisions or systematic efforts by the DOE regarding the distribution of teachers, nor are there district-wide efforts to match teacher skills to student needs. It is most often the least experienced and least skilled teachers that end up in schools serving those students with the greatest needs and efforts should be made at the district level to ensure that this does not happen. Educational policies constructed with the intent to serve the needs of disadvantaged youth must incorporate policies and practices that will better ensure that the qualities of teachers are matched to the setting and population they will be serving and also that a more equitable distribution of experience and talent is allocated across schools.

It is not always possible to find teachers who have experienced and overcome the challenges their students are facing in impoverished neighborhoods.

Students in urban schools are often learning from teachers with very different backgrounds. School districts that serve these students have the responsibility for providing extensive professional development that will better support the teachers to understand the needs of their learners that are influenced by life circumstances outside of school.

Teacher distribution within and across schools is also an area of consideration for school and district leaders. In this case study, it was observed that the newest and most inexperienced teachers were shuffled into the most undesirable positions or were shifted from grade level to grade level as student enrollment changed. It makes little sense to require the most novice teachers to repeatedly take on the challenging work of learning new curriculum and grade level appropriate behaviors. It makes far more sense for the established, veteran teachers to take on the responsibility of changing grade levels and positions in response to changing enrollment. In order to expand educational opportunity for students, they need to be served by the teachers most capable of meeting their needs and placing inexperienced positions that do not match their background or constantly rotating them through positions that become available does not let them establish themselves as strong and effective educational practitioners and is ineffective in meeting the needs of the students they are assigned to work with.

Rethink Troubling Priorities Regarding Achievement

Perhaps the saddest story of all of those that were told throughout this study is the one about a student named Jaqueline. Days before the all-important ELA test, Vanessa received a message during her lunch break that she needed to call the parent of one of her students who was sick. Vanessa waited until the end of the school day to return the call so that she could do so uninterrupted. It turned out that Jacqueline, one of Vanessa's fifth grade students was in the hospital with a serious urinary tract infection. Vanessa's primary concern was the health of the child and consoled the mother and told her to focus on helping Jacqueline to get better and not to worry about school and homework at that time. The DOE had a very different set of priorities for Jacqueline.

With the ELA test on the horizon, a DOE representative assigned to hospital had approached Jacqueline's mother impressing upon her the importance of continued preparation for the test. In between the few hours it took Vanessa to respond the message she received during lunch, Jacqueline had already been visited by the DOE agent who took it upon herself to begin to administer practice test items to a child who had been admitted to the hospital only hours before. Jacqueline's mother explained that she watched the DOE representative coach her daughter on test preparation as the child lay in the bed with a needle inserted in one arm delivering much-needed intravenous fluids, her other arm was being used to take a practice test. Upon hearing this, Vanessa demanded that the child be left

alone, but this seriously troubling story stands as a sign of the DOE's complete failure to keep these achievement tests in proper perspective.

This overemphasis on testing and data is not only seen at the local level. It is replicated both at the school and classroom level and at the federal level as well. The art of teaching children seems to have been lost in this drive for accountability and achievement. Jacqueline's story is a frightening indicator of the ways in which federal policy has turned schools into test preparation and performance factories and somewhere, in all of this, the children have, in fact, been left behind.

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APPENDIX A

LETTER REQUESTING PARTICIPATION

During the 2006-2007 academic year, I will be conducting a research study at your school as part of my doctoral dissertation at New York University. I am interested in learning more about how federal policy impacts the teaching and learning of poor children of color. Participation will include a series of interviews and classroom observations over a six to eight month period. Please complete and return this survey if you are interested in volunteering to participate in the research study she will be conducting. Please feel free to contact me via phone or email if you would like more information, or have any further questions.

Regards,
Lisa Dellamora
917.690.4111
erd220@nyu.edu

Name: _____

Date: _____

Phone number: _____

Email address: _____

Preferred method of contact: _____

Grade level assignment for 2006-2007: _____

Years of experience in the teaching field: _____

Briefly summarize your experiences as a teacher (I.e. grades, positions, etc.):

Why are you interested in taking part in a study that explores the impact of NCLB on the teaching and learning in urban school classrooms?

Please return this survey in the attached, addressed and stamped envelope.
Please return the survey expressing your interest by Friday, August 18, 2006.

APPENDIX B
CONSENT FORM

Dear _____,

During the 2006-2007 academic year, I will be conducting a research study at your school as part of my doctoral dissertation at New York University. I am interested in learning more about how federal policy impacts the teaching and learning of poor children of color.

The study will take place over a six to eight month period and will consist of at least one formal interview that will last approximately 90 minutes. In addition, at least two additional informal interviews will take place, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. I will also visit your classroom 3-4 times during the duration of the study for a minimum of one period in order to observe you working with your students.

The interview sessions will be audiotaped and transcribed, and classroom observation notes will be recorded by hand. These records will be confidential and will be destroyed within three years of the completion of the study. You may request to review the audiotapes, transcripts, and notes. Any or all portions will be destroyed upon your request. Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. Interested individuals accepted as participants in the study will receive a formal consent form with additional details about the study.

If you are interested in being considered for participation in the study, please complete the attached survey and return it to Lisa Dellamora in the attached, addressed and stamped envelope. Please return the survey expressing your interest by Friday, August 18, 2006.

Thank you for your consideration. Please feel free to contact me via phone or email if you would like more information, or have any further questions.

Regards,

Elizabeth (Lisa) Dellamora, Primary Investigator
53 E. 97th St. #5C
New York, New York 10029
917.690.4111
erd220@nyu.edu

Date

APPENDIX C
INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Teacher interview questions.

- Tell me a little bit about your self as a teacher.
- How long have you been teaching?
- How did you get into teaching?
- What brought you to this school?
- How long have you been here?
- At what grade levels?
- Tell me about your school.
- Tell me about the students here
- What's it like to teach in this school?
- What's it like to teach in your classroom?
- What influences what you do in your classroom?
- What is emphasized at this school? What's important here?
 - How do you know that?
 - What is it like to teach in your classroom?
- Tell me about changes due to the emphasis on standardized test performance.

- How has the school changed?
- How have your classroom practices changed?
- What does your principal expect of you as a teacher in an effort to increase achievement of students here?
 - What is she looking for? What does she want teachers to do?
 - How do you know this?
 - How is this influencing what you are doing in your classroom?
- What does your district or region require of you as a teacher in an effort to increase achievement of students here?
 - How do you know this?
 - How is this influencing what you are doing in your classroom?
- Tell me about the needs of your students.
- How are you trying to meet those needs?
- What challenges do you face in trying to meet their needs?
- How are your efforts to help your students affected by the requirements of the state? The district? The principal?
- What do you see as your greatest challenges as a teacher? What are you doing about those things?

Administrator interview questions.

- Tell me a little bit about your self as an administrator.
- How long have you been a principal?

- How did you decide to go into education and eventually become a principal?
- What brought you to this school?
- How long have you been here?
- In what capacity?
- Tell me about your school.
- Tell me about the students here
- What's it like to work in this school?
- What are the important things going on in your school right now?
- What is emphasized at this school? What's important here?
 - How do you determine that?
 - How do you share that with the staff?
 - What is it like to work in your school?
- What is important to your staff?
- How does what the staff sees as important compare to what you see as important?
- Tell me about changes here due to the emphasis on standardized test performance.
- How has the school changed?
- How has your role changed?
- What does the district require in an effort to increase achievement of students here? How is this influencing what happens in your school?

- Tell me about the needs of your teachers.
- How are you trying to meet those needs?
- Have you faced any challenges in trying to meet their needs?
- How are your efforts to help your teachers affected by the requirements of the state? The district? The region?
- What do you see as your greatest challenges as a principal in this new period of increased accountability? What are you doing about those things?

APPENDIX D
CRITICAL EVENTS RECORD

Date:

Time:

Location:

Name/Role of individuals involved:

What background/history preceded the event?

What immediately preceded the event?

What happened?

What immediately followed the event?

What was the outcome later that day (Or, the next period, day, week, month)?

Any comments from the individuals involved?