On Becoming a Teacher (or Not): Students of Color's Perceptions of Teachers' Work, Consideration of Teaching as a Career, and Implications for Diversifying the Teaching Force

Amanda Lee Winkelsas

Graduate Center, City University of New York

Recommended Citation
Winkelsas, Amanda Lee, "On Becoming a Teacher (or Not): Students of Color's Perceptions of Teachers' Work, Consideration of Teaching as a Career, and Implications for Diversifying the Teaching Force" (2014). CUNY Academic Works.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/127

This Dissertation is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact deposit@gc.cuny.edu.
On Becoming a Teacher (or Not): Students of Color’s Perceptions of Teachers’ Work, Consideration of Teaching as a Career, and Implications for Diversifying the Teaching Force

by

Amanda L. Winkelsas

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2014
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

©2014

AMANDA WINKELSAS

All Rights Reserved
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Nicholas Michelli, Ph.D.

____________________
Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Anthony Picciano, Ph.D.

____________________
Date

Executive Officer

Nicholas Michelli, Ph.D.

____________________
Terrie Epstein, Ph.D.

____________________
Wendy Luttrell, Ph.D.

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

On Becoming a Teacher (or Not): Students of Color’s Perceptions of Teachers’ Work, Consideration of Teaching as a Career, and Implications for Diversifying the Teaching Force

by

Amanda L. Winkelsas

Adviser: Dr. Nicolas Michelli

The racial/ethnic demographics of the American public school teaching force stand in contrast to the racial/ethnic demographics of the students and families who are served by our public school system. In an effort to understand the racial/ethnic demographic disparities between the teaching force and the public school student population, this study explores the perceptions of students of color as they relate to teachers’ work, authority, and power. Utilizing a participatory, mixed methods approach in one public, urban, college preparatory school, I analyze the experiences, cultural models, and knowledges that shape students’ perceptions of teachers’ work and their own consideration of teaching as a potential career. I reflect on the value and transformative power of a truly diversified teaching force and the relationship between teacher diversity, social justice, and the emerging American democracy.
“We are concerned with possibility, with opening windows on alternative realities, with moving through doorways into spaces some of us have never seen before…We are interested in breakthroughs and new beginnings, in the kind of wide-awakeness that allows for wonder and unease and questioning and the pursuit of what is not yet.”

–Maxine Greene, *Variations on a Blue Guitar*
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Acknowledgments

I would first like to acknowledge my colleague-friends, the people who supported my struggles, frustrations, joys, and passions. Their work and the conversations over razzles not only made this possible, but inspired me to do and be better. I want to especially thank John DePasquale. From the moment he joined me on the train at Lorimer, all the way to the 148th Street depot, he engaged me and challenged my thinking in all of the most important ways. He called me crazy when I was. His encouragement, as well as his companionship at various eating and drinking establishments between the Lorimer and Graham L stops, was critical to helping me understand just what I was trying to do. Kelly, thank you. When we were young, I took care of you, and now that we’re older, you take care of me. I’m grateful that you have continued to entertain my rants, encouraging me all along to just get it done! Lum. To the rest of my family—you let me play school, indulging all my requests for “answer books” and chalkboards, staplers, and even a pointer. Not only did I inherit the sensitivity that attuned me to educational injustices, but you gave me the tools to pursue my passion. I would also like to acknowledge the members of my committee. Nick, at the end of year one, I wanted to give up, but luckily, I began year two and met you. Your encouragement and belief in my work inspired me to keep going. Wendy and Terrie, your voices lived in my brain, as I planned, enacted, and worked to understand my research. Finally, I am forever grateful for the girls—Abena, Djenne, Keshuva, Niambi, and Shanntoya. Not only did I learn from you, but I’m pretty sure we had some fun, and if it weren’t for you, I might never have had the motivation to finish.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Table of Contents

List of Tables ............................................................................................................................................. ix
List of Figures ............................................................................................................................................... x
Chapter 1: Introduction and Context ........................................................................................................... 1
  Personal Context ....................................................................................................................................... 4
Chapter 2: Teacher Diversity and Demographic Trends ............................................................................... 11
  National Teacher and Student Characteristics ...................................................................................... 12
  New York City Teacher Population Trends .......................................................................................... 17
  Discussion of the Trends ....................................................................................................................... 20
Chapter 3: Framing Demographic Trends and Students’ Perceptions: Literature Review ......................... 23
  Theoretical Discussions of School-Home-Community Relationships and the Social Reproduction of Inequality .................................................................................................................... 24
    Tools, Capital, and Group-Based Deficit Perspectives ........................................................................ 29
    Dialogism: Individual Identities and the (Re)Shaping of Perceptions in Social Worlds .................. 32
  Perceptions of Schooling Experiences and School Climate ................................................................ 36
  Empirical Studies on Decisions to Consider, Pursue, or Reject a Career in Teaching ....................... 41
  Popular Discourse, the Media, and Teacher Identity ............................................................................. 47
  Research Lens ........................................................................................................................................... 51
Chapter 4: Who, Where, Why, and How: Methodology .............................................................................. 53
  Knowledge Frameworks .......................................................................................................................... 54
  Inquiry Frameworks ............................................................................................................................... 56
  Who I am Here ......................................................................................................................................... 58
  Knowing the Place: Views of the School ................................................................................................. 61
    Data Snapshot ..................................................................................................................................... 62
    Getting to Essential Matters ................................................................................................................ 64
    A Tour of the School ............................................................................................................................. 66
  Data Collection ....................................................................................................................................... 75
  Data Analysis .......................................................................................................................................... 81
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

List of Tables

Table 1: National Data on Teacher and Student Characteristics—Race/Ethnicity (Public Schools)..............................................................................................................................................................................14
Table 2: National Data on Teacher Characteristics—Age and Sex (All Public Schools)........15
Table 3: Teacher Characteristics in Schools Where 75% or More of the Students Qualify for Free or Reduced Lunch............................................................................................................................................................................16
Table 4: National Data on Teacher Characteristics—Teacher Experience (All Public Schools)..17
Table 5: NYC New Hires by Race and Ethnicity (Hired between 8/25 and 10/31 of the Calendar Year)...........................................................................................................................................................................19
Table 6: Participant Racial or Ethnic Background..................................................................................................................86
Table 7: Likelihood of Pursuing a Career in Teaching..........................................................87
Table 8: Participant Responses on Family Encouragement..................................................102
Table 9: Perceived Respect for the Teaching Profession....................................................117
Table 10: Perceived Respect Afforded to Teachers by Students..........................................118
Table 11: Perceived Respect Afforded to Teachers by Parents...........................................122
Table 12: Perceived Teacher Salary....................................................................................124
Table 13: Perceived Respect Afforded to Teachers by Administrators..............................127
Table 14: Perceived Teacher Autonomy.............................................................................129
Table 15: Perceived Resources Available to Teachers.......................................................130
Table 16: Perceived Value of the Teaching Profession.......................................................133
Table 17: Strategies and Substrategies for Increasing Teaching Diversity.........................140
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

List of Figures

Figure 1: Participant drawing of teacher with lesson elements.................................94
Figure 2: Participant drawing of teacher at chalkboard.............................................95
Figure 3: Participant drawing of a teacher in front of the class....................................95
Figure 4: Participant drawing of teacher speaking with student.................................96
Figure 5: Participant drawing of female teacher.........................................................97
Chapter 1: Introduction and Context

“There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and brings about conformity to it, or it becomes ‘the practice of freedom,’ the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. The development of an educational methodology that facilitates this process will inevitably lead to tension and conflict within our society. But it could also contribute to the formation of a new man and mark the beginning of a new era in Western history.”


The relationship between teacher quality and student performance has perhaps never been as widely discussed as it has been in the past decade (Murnane and Steele, 2007; NCTAF, 2003; NCLB, 2001). Both from within education and outside of the field, questions have been raised and programs created with the goal of improving student achievement (Boyd et al., 2005; Boyd et al., 2007; Goldhaber and Brewer, 2000; Zeichner and Schutte, 2001). While there has always been attention centered on the role of education and educators, there has been growing concern over who is teaching, how they are teaching, and their effectiveness (which has largely been measured by students’ results on hotly contested standardized tests). Further, there has been increased attention given to issues of school climate and culture, and their relationship to student
achievement, student identification with school, and graduation rates (Azzam, 2007; Cohen, Pickeral, and McCloskey, 2009; National School Climate Council, 2007). The heightened concern and attention to such issues are, many would argue, overdue. In an era where a four-year graduation rate of just over sixty percent (http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/mediarelations/NewsandSpeeches/2009-200920090622_grad_rates.htm) (with the four-year graduation rate for Black and Hispanic students at 51.4 and 48.7%, respectively\(^1\)) is touted as an accomplishment by the New York City Department of Education, we must recognize the role of teachers, schools, school systems (which are embedded within unjust social structures) in perpetuating such collective failure. The solutions and proposed ‘fixes’, have been wide-ranging: charter schools and the privatization of education, merit-pay schemes that presume that teachers already know exactly how to improve student achievement, programs that recruit Ivy league graduates to teach for two years in the schools most desperately in need of a strong, well-prepared, stable, and committed force of educators.

Rooted within nearly all conversations about school reform, though, remains the most fundamental issue: Who are students learning with and from? Less prevalent, though, in the dominant social discourse around matters of education, are the goals to which Shaull, in his foreword to Freire’s (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, alluded. How can education function as

\[1\] It is important to note the inconsistency and unreliability of reported graduation rates. A 2008 policy brief from the Alliance for Excellent Education referred to the issue as “The Graduation Rate Charade” stating that, “misleading, inconsistent definitions and poor implementation have undermined the accuracy of graduation rates to the point at which the indicator is effectively useless in determining the success of a high school. Moreover, [NCLB] does not hold schools, districts, or states accountable for meaningfully improving graduation rates, in contrast to its strong emphasis on improving test scores” (http://www.all4ed.org/files/ESA_GradRateAcct.pdf).
an emancipatory force, where “men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (in Freire, 1970, p.14)?

Understanding that to be the goal of education raises even more complex questions about who does this work. No longer can we simply ask “Who are students learning with and from?” but we must confront more complicated questions. What kinds of tools, skills, and dispositions should teachers have in order to make school what it should and could be for more students? How can we ensure that education becomes ‘the practice of freedom’ for all of our students?

Many scholars have attempted to refocus our national preoccupation with narrow academic goals (which, while worthy in many respects, are too limited). Jonathan Cohen (2006), of the Center for Social and Emotional Education, wrote:

In fact, driven by federal mandates, the primary focus of teacher education and pre K–12 schools is increasingly on linguistic and mathematical literacy. This paradox is all the more striking because recent studies have shown that research-based social, emotional, ethical, and academic educational guidelines can predictably promote the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that provide the foundation for the capacity to love, work, and be an active community member. Social, emotional, academic, and ethical education can help children reach the goals their parents and teachers have for them: learning to “read” themselves and others, and learning to solve social, emotional, and ethical problems. (p. 202)

The skills, knowledge, and dispositions to which Cohen refers are critical to life in a democratic community, and they must be deliberately fostered because, as Benjamin Barber (1992, p.5) reminds us: “Democracy is not a natural form of association; it is an extraordinarily rare
contrivance of cultivated imagination…For true democracy to flourish, however, there must be citizens. Citizens are women and men educated for excellence—by which term I mean the knowledge and competence to govern in common their own lives.” Thus, for the advancement of our emerging democracy, we must ask even more difficult questions related to the education of our citizens. We must not care narrowly, but broadly and beyond the more easily measured achievement results. We must approach an analysis of our educational process and more specifically, its teaching force, with the same critical and complex lens that we would expect all citizens to analyze the issues that arise within democratic life.

**Personal Context**

James Banks (2010) wrote that, “Because education is a moral endeavor, educational researchers should be scientists as well as citizens who are committed to promoting democratic ideals…Intellectuals should be knowledgeable about the values that are exemplified in their research” (p.52). These values are inevitably shaped by personal histories and positioned experiences in systems and social structures. Sociologist C. Wright Mills discussed the relationship between personal milieu and social issues and structures. He argued that, “It is the political task of the social scientist -- as of any liberal educator -- continually to translate personal troubles into public issues, and public issues into the terms of their human meaning for a variety of individuals” (1959, p.187). In an attempt to explore the assumptions and values that undergird this research, it is important to share the personal context and history that shapes my research perspectives and preoccupations. The “personal troubles” that have shaped my inquiry
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

relate to my own experiences with education, both as a child, and later as a teacher working within the New York City public school system.

My first experiences with school were somewhat magical. I flourished in Mrs. Moffett’s Pre-Kindergarten classroom at School 80 in the Highgate Heights neighborhood of Buffalo, New York. Our classroom fluttered with activity, singing, making art, and learning what it meant to share! My teacher, classmates and the parents of my classroom friends, regularly engaged outside of school. We came together for visits and parties, which at my house took place mostly on the back deck that protruded from our family’s lower apartment, one of two apartments in the relatively small house. We were a classroom community, a family. We were safe and happy, a diverse classroom family, at School 80, nestled in a working class neighborhood, bordering the lush lawns of the state university. Mrs. Moffett, the following year, was named Teacher of the Year by the Buffalo Public Schools.

The same year that Mrs. Moffett was recognized for her excellent teaching, I began Kindergarten in the same school, with a teacher whose name escapes my memory. I remember overhearing kitchen conversations between my parents, who, for some reason or another, were unhappy with my teacher. Shortly thereafter, they attended a conference with her. As I played quietly some distance from the table where they sat, I remember sensing my parents’ frustration. We left the conference and my parents discussed options—putting me into another teacher’s class, or leaving the school altogether. Ultimately my mother and father were dissatisfied with the quality of their child’s teacher and they were in a position to do something about it. My parents, for a variety of reasons, but surely including educational ones, began looking for houses
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

and, with the help of our family, were able to buy a small home in the closest middle-class, suburban neighborhood whose schools were well-reputed. I remember asking aloud once or twice about the students who remained in that Kindergarten class, whose families didn’t have the means to move out of the Buffalo public school system. I can’t be certain about that teacher’s quality, or even my parents’ grievances against her, but I can recognize the privilege that my family had when it came to advocating for their children’s educations. What I took away from this experience, as well as subsequent moments in schools, is that teachers matter and that some families have the means and access to secure an education that they deem appropriate, while millions of others do not.

For as long as I can remember, though, I aspired to become a teacher and what began as childhood play developed into a professional passion. The privilege of such early understanding led me to an undergraduate teacher education program, to a teaching career that began when I was just twenty one, and then on to graduate school. Not being from New York City, but raised in both Buffalo, New York and Ocala, Florida, I was mostly unaware of the alternative pathways into education and was surprised to find that my colleagues in my first year of teaching in New York City were mostly teachers who had not studied in traditional teacher education programs. The staff, in addition to being (mostly) alternatively certified, was largely inexperienced in teaching. While I have come to understand some of the benefits claimed for such alternative licensing programs (increasing the diversity, i.e. age, race, class, of the teaching force), I also witnessed the shortcomings that exist when teachers are not given adequate time or training to learn how to teach. In addition, these shortcomings seem to be multiplied when new teachers are
navigating the challenges that exist within many of the urban schools where they are expected to teach (including, but not limited to large class sizes, inadequate resources, dysfunctional administrations, etc.), and when teachers have left unexamined (sometimes through the faults in their missing teacher education coursework) their own conceptions about race and culture and are unfamiliar with the cultures and knowledges that students bring with them into school.

After my first year of teaching, I spent seven years in another school, which, in many ways was more successful than the first. The teaching staff was more experienced (however, there were still a great number of new and/or alternatively certified teachers), there were stronger partnerships between the school and community groups and students’ families, and students were regularly graduating and going on to college. These professional experiences, paired with my developing personal and public passions, have led me to my research preoccupations. In both of these school environments, when I would ask students about their own aspirations, very rarely would students profess an interest in teaching. When we engaged in casual, after-school discussions about their perceptions of teaching, many ideas came up—respect (from parents, students, administrators, the community), the relatively low status of the profession, the stress they believe the job requires, and more. These responses prompted me to wonder about the ways in which their perceptions of teachers (and what it means to be a teacher) are formed and developed. What happens when students attend a series of schools like the first one in which I worked, where teachers were largely inexperienced and un(der)prepared for their work, and where, by the end of the year, almost half of the faculty had left the school? Students witnessed teachers struggling, in some instances breaking into tears, or simply not returning to school on
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Monday. Or what kinds of ideas about teachers and their work develop out of experiences like those of the students at my second school? While there was some respect for teachers, students seemed still to view teaching as a less than desirable career option, saying, on some occasions, that they ‘couldn’t tolerate’ the disrespect of parents, students, or the administrators; they wanted to do something ‘better’ than teaching.

Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) articulated the relationship between the researcher and her inquiry:

The identity, character, and history of the researcher are obviously critical to how he or she listens, selects, interprets, and composes the story…Even the most scrupulously “objective” investigations reveal the hand of the researcher in shaping the inquiry. From deciding what is important to study, to selecting the central questions, to defining the nature and size of the sample, to developing the methodological strategies, the predisposition and perspective of the researcher is crucial; and the researcher’s perspective reflects not only his or her theoretical, disciplinary, and methodological stance but also personal values, tastes, and style. (p.11)

My own curiosity about students’ conceptions of teachers’ work and lives has surely been shaped by my personal history, passion, and concern about the kinds of experiences that students and their families are having every day in school. I have come to this research informed not only by my own experiences of being a student, but with my own values, assumptions, and curiosities. I also come to my research with a desire for a more diverse (specifically in terms of race, class, gender, and age) professional community, having researched, witnessed and experienced the
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

benefits of such diversity on the profession, the community that the school serves, school culture, my own personal and professional development, and, perhaps most importantly, student achievement (and not just in the easily-measured standardized test and graduation-rate means of measuring achievement) and development. One of my presumptions and deeply-held beliefs is that students and the education profession are missing out on attracting teachers who bring different knowledges and ways of knowing into schools, which, by their presence, could become an important part of changing the experiences of students, faculty members, administrator, parents, and other stakeholders. We miss out because some students become either too disenfranchised with the incarnation of education that they experience or because students learn that teaching is not, in many cases, a ‘respect’ed profession.

My research aims to connect the experiences of students in schools with their perceptions of teachers’ work and the teaching profession, specifically considering how the experiences of students in school shape their perceptions of teachers’ work and the profession overall. Embedded within this larger aim, though, are the conditions of schools and school systems. For decades, researchers have discussed and examined the relationships between teacher turnover, years of experience, student achievement, and experiences in schools (Boyd et al., 2007; Earley and Ross, 2006; Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll and Smith, 2003; NCTAF, 2003). Just how these factors shape the experiences of students, their perceptions of the education profession, and their consideration of teaching as a career choice are the questions I have studied with the aim of discovering how we can attract and recruit, support, and retain an even stronger, more talented force of teachers, those who believe that education is the ‘practice of freedom’. Specifically, I
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

consider the following: 1) What are students’ perceptions of teachers’ work, authority, status, and power? 2) What specific experiences, cultural models, and knowledge shape students’ perceptions of teachers’ work and the teaching profession? 3) What weight do students place on their school, family, and community experiences in their decision to pursue, consider, or reject a career in teaching? and 4) How, if at all, do these perceptions bear on students’ consideration of teaching as a career choice?
Chapter 2: Teacher Diversity and Demographic Trends

While the diversity and demographics of the teaching force had long been a concern of some communities and interested groups, in 1986 the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy published their concerns, focusing increased national attention on the diversity (or lack thereof) of our nation’s schoolteachers. Underlying the report was the clear argument that it was problematic for our diverse democracy to, in one of its most aspirationally democratic institutions, expose children to a homogeneous teaching force.

More than ten years after the Carnegie Forum, then-U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley (1998) wrote, in an article entitled “Our Teachers Should be Excellent, and They Should Look Like America”:

Our teaching force should be excellent, but excellence alone is not enough. If we are to be responsive to the special demands and great opportunities of our nation’s pluralistic makeup, we should develop a teaching force that is diverse, as well. Many of the increasing numbers of students who will be filling our schools in the next decade will be children of color. Many will be sons and daughters of immigrants. Children need role models—they need to see themselves in the faces of their teachers. We need teachers who can relate to the lives of diverse students, and who can connect those students to larger worlds and greater possibilities. We need teachers from different backgrounds to share different experiences and points of view with colleagues…Education is learning to think and stretch one’s mind. Teachers and students bring important cultural differences
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

to the ways in which they think and learn. These differences are important and they are part of the educational process. We should build on them as we educate ourselves and our children. (p.20)

Just how well the United States has fared in recruiting, preparing, and supporting a diverse teaching force can be explored by analyzing U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics data on student and teacher demographics.

National Teacher and Student Characteristics

In order to analyze national trends in teacher characteristics, data from the 2003-2004 and 2007-2008 Schools and Staffing Survey was reviewed. In addition, to compare student demographics to teacher demographics, data from the NCES Common Core of Data 2007 was reviewed. The data from the 2003-2004 and 2007-2008 Schools and Staffing Survey demonstrated that the percentage of white public school teachers has remained the same, at 83.1%. The percentage of public school teachers who are Black declined 0.9% from the 2003-2004 school year to the 2007-2008 school year while the percentage of public school teachers who are Hispanic rose from 6.2% in 2003-2004 to 7.1% in 2007-2008. Asian teachers accounted for 1.3% of the teaching force in 2003-2004 and 1.2% in 2007-2008.

There are some vast discrepancies, though, between teacher and student racial/ethnic populations. The percentage of the public school student population that is white dropped to 55.9% from 58.4% in 2003-2004. Black students accounted for 16.1% of the total student
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

population in 2003-2004 and accounted for 15.3% of the student population in 2007-2008. Hispanic students accounted for 18.6% of the student population in 2003-2004 and comprised 20.9% of the student population four years later. The percentage of Asian students grew from 3.7% to 4.1%. Most striking in this data are the differences between student and teacher racial and ethnic identity.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Table 1

National Data on Teacher and Student Characteristics—Race/Ethnicity (Public Schools)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>83.1%</td>
<td>58.4%</td>
<td>83.1%</td>
<td>55.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black, African American, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaska Native, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic, regardless of race</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more races, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teachers, on average, are also slowly becoming younger. The average age of public school teachers in 2003-2004 was 42.5 and in 2007-2008, 42.2. There was also a slight change in the sex of teachers, which were 25% male in 2003-2004 and were 24.1% male in 2007-2008.

Table 2
National Data on Teacher Characteristics—Age and Sex (All Public Schools)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average Age of Teachers</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>42.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>25% Male</td>
<td>24.1% Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>75% Female</td>
<td>75.9% Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Interestingly, and perhaps more worrisome, is that in schools that serve a school population with 75% or more of the students qualifying for free or reduced lunch, 79% of the teachers were female and 21% were male, making the teaching force even more homogenous by gender in the most impoverished schools.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Table 3

*Teacher Characteristics in Schools Where 75% or More of the Students Qualify for Free or Reduced Lunch*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average Age of Teachers</td>
<td>No data</td>
<td>42.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>No data</td>
<td>21% Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No data</td>
<td>79% Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Finally, teachers nationally are increasingly less experienced, with 19% of teachers having less than 4 years of teaching experience. Additionally, to understand further trends, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that of the roughly 6% of new entrants to the teaching force in both the 1987-1988 and 2007-2008 school years, 2.6% were delayed entrants or recent graduates in 1987-1988, while that percentage rose to 4.3% in 2007-2008, indicating that the force is comprised of a less experienced teaching population (U.S. Department of Education, NCES).
Table 4  
National Data on Teacher Characteristics—Teacher Experience, All Public Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Experience</th>
<th>2003-2004</th>
<th>2007-2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 4 years</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


New York City Teacher Population Trends

Zooming into the demographic milieu of the New York City public school provides another important frame. Since the 1997-1998 school year, the number of White new-hires in New York City schools grew, with an almost 8% increase (53.3% in 01-02 and 61.1% in 02-03) in the number of White new hires between the 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 school years. The percentage of Black new hires peaked in 2001-2002, and percentage of Hispanic new hires peaked in the 1994-1995 and 1995-1996 school years. The NYS Regents required that all teachers in NYC be certified by September 2003, with temporary licenses no longer permitted. Boyd et al. (2005) reported that teachers who held temporary licenses were disproportionally Black and Hispanic, explaining, at least in part, some of the demographic shifts of the early 2000s.
In addition, the shifts coincided with Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s takeover of the schools in 2002. Most recent data on new hires indicates that as of 2006-2007 0.3% of teachers were American Indian, 6.1% were Asian, 14.1% were Black, 11.7% were Hispanic, 65.5% were White, with 2.3% unknown\textsuperscript{2}. (It is important to note that this data represents new hires, and not the entire teaching population in the city. Demographic data for the entire teaching force could not be located.) Most recent reports indicate that the student population in the New York City public schools is 36.7 percent Hispanic, 34.7 percent Black, 14.3 percent Asian, and 14.2 percent White.

\textsuperscript{2} It is important to note that this data represents new hires, and not the entire teaching population in the city. Demographic data for the entire teaching force could not be located.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Table 5

NYC New Hires by Race and Ethnicity (Hired between 8/25 and 10/31 of the Calendar Year)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>American</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990-1991</td>
<td>.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991-1992</td>
<td>.1</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992-1993</td>
<td>.3</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993-1994</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994-1995</td>
<td>.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>53.9</td>
<td>.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995-1996</td>
<td>.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996-1997</td>
<td>.3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997-1998</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-1999</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>57.5</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-2000</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2001</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2002</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-2003</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-2004</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Table 5 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>.3</td>
<td>.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>63.3</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>65.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. NYC Department of Education, cited in *The Amsterdam News*

Discussion of the Trends

Richard Riley, former U.S. Secretary of Education, aptly entitled his 1998 article in the journal *Education and Urban Society*, “Our teachers should be excellent, and they should look like America”. Why are the previously noted trends alarming? Riley (1998, p.18) wrote that:

Perhaps more than anything else, public education is what brings us together as a nation. It is one of the best and most enduring symbols of our nation’s pluralistic, democratic history. All Americans—rich and poor; black, brown, and white; male and female—deserve a quality education. Nothing else offers as significant an opportunity to create a better future—and nothing else so limits and individual’s future when it is denied.

Before and since Riley’s publication, scholars have studied the various factors that contribute to that quality education, with many dedicating efforts to understanding the kinds of experiences that can enhance the quality for all students, but with special attention to those who have been historically underserved by our nation’s schools. An array of scholars have identified the
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

contributions that teachers of color can make to the experiences of students of color (Dee, 2004, Quirocho and Rios, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). The major arguments cited in Villegas and Irvine’s (2010) review of the literature on diversifying the teaching force are that 1) teachers of color can serve as role models to all students, both students of color and White students; 2) academic and overall school experiences are enriched by the presence of teachers of color; and 3) teachers of color can address the teacher shortage that exists in many urban areas. Additionally, as several other scholars have written, new teachers of color, particularly those who have experienced injustice in their own lives and school experiences often approach the classroom with greater support for antiracist education and often employ an emancipatory pedagogy (Carr & Klassen, 1997; King 1991), becoming, “agents of change” working to transform the educational process (Villegas and Lucas, 2001).

Focusing on the argument that teachers of color can improve both academic outcomes and school experiences, the relative homogeneity of the teaching force is especially disconcerting. If we value the cultural links between homes, schools, and communities and believe in the benefits of such culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum (Heath, 1983; Moll et al., 1992) then the studies that have demonstrated the positive effects that teachers of color can have on the achievement test scores of students of color (Dee, 2004; Hanushek, 1992; Ehrenberg and Brewer, 1995) should be no surprise. Additionally, scholars have documented the positive effect of teachers of color on both college matriculation and attendance rates (Farkas et al., 1990; Hess and Leal, 1997). Further, studies conducted on teachers’ expectations of students have similarly delineated both the relationship between high expectations and student achievement
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

and the relationship between teachers of color and expectations for students of color (Dee, 2005; Irvine, 1990). The caring, trusting, relationships with students and their families as well as the ability to serve as advocates and cultural brokers that teachers of color are able to build and sustain (Darder, 1993; Foster, 1993; Irvine, 1990) are important to improving the school experiences of students who have historically been underserved by their schooling experiences, which also undoubtedly contributes to the more outcomes-based and academic measures of effectiveness.

Not only is the diversity of the teaching force essential to our system of public education’s fulfillment of its democratic ideal of pluralism, but also to the aim of truly providing a quality education for all of our nation’s children. In their discussion of the public purposes of education, and what could be considered some indicators of the quality of an education, Jacobowitz, Michelli, and Marulli (2010), draw on the goals of the National Network of Educational Renewal to argue that there are four public purposes of education: 1) Providing access to knowledge and fostering critical thinking; 2) Preparing students for critical democratic participation; 3) Helping students to have full access to life’s chances; and 4) Preparing students to lead rich and rewarding personal lives. Research has demonstrated the effects that teachers of color can have in each of these domains. The question then, remains, how can our aspirationally democratic system of education be simultaneously transformational for students of color and transformed by educators of all colors?
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Chapter 3: Framing Demographic Trends and Students’ Perceptions: Literature Review

In Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*, Binx Bolling says:

What is the nature of the search? you ask. Really, it is very simple, at least for a fellow like me; so simple that it is easily overlooked. The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. This morning, for example, I felt as if I had come to myself on a strange island. And what does such a castaway do? Why, he pokes around the neighborhood and he doesn’t miss a trick. To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair. (1960, p.13)

The search for understanding students’ perception of teachers’ work and their considerations of teaching as a career choice requires exploring several facets of students’ experiences in the social, historical, and educational worlds. Thus, relevant research includes the following: the social reproduction of inequality and home-school-community relationships; student-centered research that centers on students’ perceptions of their school experiences, including school climate; empirical studies on decisions to pursue or reject consideration of the teaching profession; and research related to teacher status and image, encompassing popular discourse around teaching and cultural studies. These bodies of literature together provide the “prefabricated parts” (Becker, 1996) that I have used to consider both demographic trends in the teaching force as well as students’ perceptions of the field. Finally, it is worth noting that in this
literature review, I have attempted to foreground research that focuses on urban students as well as students of color given the demographics of the student population at the research site as well the goal of understanding both the impact of and contributing factors to the demographic trends in the teaching force.

Theoretical Discussions of School-Home-Community Relationships and the Social Reproduction of Inequality

To fully understand the career conceptions and subsequent decisions of children of color\(^3\), it makes sense to examine the ways in which scholars have examined the social reproduction of inequality and the subsequent discussions of school-home-community relationships. The process of deciding on a career is at the same time personal and social, situated within the larger social context of education. How children come to shape an idea of a profession is, like all other learning processes, culturally mediated (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 1997).

---

3 I would like to take note of the limitations of language here. I am reminded of several sentiments that remain with me as I write. The first of which is Adrienne Rich’s poem “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” in which she writes: “this is the oppressor’s language/yet I need it to talk to you”. Bill Ayers (1997), wrote that, “Just the thought of being numbered and labeled makes each of us, I think, want to rebel; the poisonous impact of casual categorization (at least when applied to ourselves) causes us to recoil. And yet schools are built on labeling, categorizing, sifting, and sorting.” Additionally, in Tatum’s (1997) *Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* she writes, “The original creation of racial categories was in the service of oppression. Some may argue that to continue to use them is to continue that oppression. I respect that argument. Yet it is difficult to talk about what is essentially a flawed and problematic social construct without using language that is itself problematic. We have to be able to talk about it in order to change it. So this is the language I choose.” Borrowing from the work of Landsman (2009) and others, I use the terms students of color and teachers of color to describe those peoples in the United States who have been historically oppressed by racist structures and institutions. I acknowledge the inadequacy of the term in capturing the diversity of experiences that exist for individuals with various social and cultural identities, but feel the limits of language in expressing the concepts and issues I attempt to explore.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

2003). Various ways of examining and viewing culture have been explored in the literature and subsequently employed by schools in order to achieve the wide-ranging and contested aims and purposes of schooling. Modern sociological and anthropological explanations for the reproduction of inequality, with specific attention to the role of culture, are useful in thinking about the socially and culturally-mediated processes of education and relationships between schools and communities.

Swidler (1986) theorized culture as a “tool kit” that aids in the construction “strategies of action”. In her terms, culture is viewed as more like a style or set of skills and, drawing from the Parsonian “value orientations”, she explains how culture informs actions by helping to define what people want. Swidler argues that “one does better to look for a line of action for which one already has the cultural equipment” (p. 275). Thus, culture plays a significant role, then, in defining what one values and the actions or steps to be taken in achieving certain goals.

This idea of “cultural components [being] used to construct strategies of action” (Swidler, 1986, p. 273) is one way of looking at the school experiences of low-income youth and youth of color and the “strategies of action” that are constructed in relation to schooling and other life plans. Low-income students and students of color are most certainly equipped with tools, sets of skills, or ‘cultural equipment’, but often may find that there are only narrow spaces within schools to put particular tools to use. If, as Swidler, notes, “action and values are organized to take advantage of cultural competencies” (p. 275), then this does well in attempting to explain, at least in part, why low-income and/or children of color pursue or reject specific pathways as they proceed through the school system. If the cultural competencies of students are ignored or rejected, or only used in limited ways throughout their academic lives, then school can easily
become a place, path, or action that is not pleasant, that is not the line of action that will be most comfortable. However, if schools are able to capitalize on the cultural tools that students bring with them, the actions and values of particular groups will be better matched with the aims of education. Schools, however, should be charged with the task of better understanding the cultural equipment that children are bringing with them and making adaptations in curriculum and pedagogy in order to narrow the gaps that can be difficult, if not discouraging, for children to navigate.

Swidler’s analysis of cultural reproduction, while useful in considering the ways in which individuals strategize future actions, does not center attention on the ways in which many schools and educational institutions have not simply ignored, but engaged in or facilitated “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu, 1990) against the competencies that children of non-dominant groups do bring into schools. Deficit models, paired with institutional structures that do symbolic violence to the competencies of students are bound up in the power relationships, contested aims of education, differences between school and home (or community), and the structures and dispositions, or habitus, required for each location (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu (1984) noted that “individuals do not move about in social space in a random way, partly because they are subject to the forces which structure this space and partly because they resist the forces of the field with their specific inertia, that is, their properties, which may exist in embodied form, as dispositions, or in objectified form, in goods, qualifications, etc.” (p. 110). When individuals and organizations with a particular set of dispositions and qualifications (constructed largely through social-class-based experiences and habitus) meet individuals and groups with different dispositions and qualifications, how do those with the economic, cultural,
and symbolic capital understand and come to value the dispositions and capital that the other
group possesses? Bourdieu noted that, “The distribution of the different classes (and class
fractions) thus runs from those who are best provided with both economic and cultural capital to
those who are most deprived in both respects” (p. 114). This process, as mediated through the
organization of schools, curriculum, and pedagogy, is complex, and was studied in limited ways
until more recent research began studying and describing practices that fall under the label of
culturally mediated instruction. The literature demonstrates that historically, many teachers and
others involved in structuring educational institutions have largely maintained such deficit
models, viewing students (especially those who are of color and/or low-income) as devoid of
capital and devoid of skills that could enable the development of capital, engaging in processes
that facilitated symbolic violence against the knowledges and ways of knowing that children and
families possessed (Lee, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

The criticism of Bourdieu and Passerson, though, has been their somewhat deterministic
approach. Their analysis focuses attention on the institutions, but does less in the way of
explaining or describing the ways in which individuals and groups exercise their agency, and in
some instances, reproduce social relations. Levinson and Holland (2007), in their introduction to
*The Cultural Production of the Educated Person* have distinguished theories of cultural
production from previous theories of social and cultural reproduction.

Reshaped by the more recent focus on practice and production, the larger questions is
now one of how historical persons are formed in practice, within and against larger
societal forces and structures which instantiate themselves in schools and other
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

institutions. Cultural production is one vision of this process. It provides a direction for understanding how human agency operates under powerful structural constraints.

Through the production of cultural forms, created within the structural constraints of sites such as schools, subjectivities form and agency develops. (p. 14)

Willis’ (1977) *Learning to Labor* is the classic text that illustrates the exercise of group agency and production, and subsequently the (re)production of social class. The formation of a group enables the lads to connect to build “alternative maps of social reality” (p. 26), which actually contribute to the (re)production of class culture and structure. Willis (1977, p.175) wrote that, “Social agents are not passive bearers of ideology, but active appropriators who reproduce existing structures only through struggle, contestation, and a partial penetration of those structures.” The groups of social agents, and the knowledges and perspectives they provide “progressively place school at a tangent to the overall experience of being a working class teenager in an industrial city” (p. 26). School, as a rather annoying tangent to the experiences of these children, is a site for opposition and, ultimately, cultural and social reproduction. In his analysis of Willis’ text and McRobbie’s (1978) *Working Class Girls and the Culture of Femininity*, James Collins (2009), wrote:

Rather than reproductive processes that involve congruence across multiple levels of organizations and actors (e.g., by parents, teachers, and education bureaucracies), we instead find oppositional practices that nonetheless reproduce social relations. We have sophisticated accounts of how the winner loses. Adolescent class- and gender-based solidarities draw from parental legacies of class and gender struggles, and the students
building these solidarities develop considerable insight into the selective, class-biased nature of school curriculum and normative classroom conduct. They disrupt the logic of schooling, but their group- and practice-based insights are limited “penetrations” (Willis 1977, chapters 5 and 6) because their class expressions also reinforce ethnoracial antagonism, gender oppression, and educational failure.

Willis’ work provides an example of work centered on the cultural (re)productions of class- and gender-based groups. The process of individual identity formation, though also contributes to the ways in which inequality has been (re)produced in schools, and the subsequent oppositional relationships between some schools, communities, and families.

**Tools, Capital, and Group-Based Deficit Perspectives**

Deficit-centered literature and rhetoric abounds within the field of education. Much of the literature focuses on deficit models that are sometimes employed by teachers working in urban schools serving largely low-income and/or minority youth and how these models can be overcome (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Valencia, 1997). The effect of deficit perspectives has manifested itself in the relationships between schools and communities, which are, in many cases pitted against one another. If schools operate with deficit models, with the belief that communities and families are not providing students with what they need for success in schools, then oppositional relationships between schools and communities can be established. Teachers, then, are frequently those who both explicitly and in more subtle ways, convey the
message that there are gaps and deficits in the student, his/her family, and/or the community. Students can come to understand the teacher as being one who thinks little of the students, their abilities, and subsequently, the people and places that have shaped their academic identities. Rather than taking note of the “tools” that children bring to school, researchers have documented (Gutierrez and Rogoff, 2003; Lee, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Valencia, 1997) that many educators have viewed such tools and cultural ways of knowing (if they are able to see any at all) as hindrances to the educational objectives they are trying to pursue. These misconceptions and assumptions have allowed for the blame for school-based academic failure to be placed on communities, families, or individual children.

More recent research has been published that falls into the school-home mis-match framework (Gonzalez et. al, 2005, Lee, 2007; Moll et al. 1992; Lareau, 1990; Steele, 1992), which should be differentiated from the deficit frameworks that abound within educational literature. Carol Lee (2007) wrote that:

More often than not, educators believe that in contrast to middle-class White students, students of color and students from low-income communities do not bring experiences and world knowledge that are relevant resources for academic learning…Cultural displays of knowledge rooted in everyday practices of ethnic groups and other communities of practice generally viewed as unrelated to schooling can be scaffolded in service of domain-specific academic learning.

This is the notion that ‘cultural displays of knowledge’ can be utilized for school, for academic learning, and these practices are not irrelevant to academic achievement. If teachers can find ways to capitalize on the knowledges that students bring with them to school, then perhaps the
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

most fundamental school or academic relationship—that between teacher and student—can be transformed into one that is not oppositional in nature. This view, that of mining students for their strengths and knowledges rather than through deficit lenses, is in line with Swidler’s (1986) conception of culture and extends that notion to suggest building instructional frameworks out of the strategies of action that children already possess, again making space for the transformation of the perceived relationships between students and their teachers.

Bourdieu wrote that, “This anti-institutional cast of mind…points towards a denunciation of the tacit assumptions of the social order, a practical suspension of doxic adherences to the prizes it offers and the values it professes, and a withholding of the investments which are a necessary condition of its functioning” (p. 147). That some children in a given community or demographic have been so disenfranchised from the school system points to the collective disillusionment with school, an institution which, from their perspective, may not provide them with enough of the capital that is necessary to change their position in society. The showdown that has happened in schools has no doubt shaped the educational experiences of students, likely (for low-income and/or minority students) in negative ways.

4 Two empirical studies do well in illustrating these theoretical arguments. The work of Miron and Lauria (1998) provides some insight into how the social and educational systems have been viewed by students from non-dominant groups. Miron and Lauria (1998) found that a school’s connection to the wider society, and the perceptions of that connection on the part of students matters to students’ overall identification with school. When school is seemingly separate from the “outside world”, students demonstrate more resistance to the curriculum and instruction. Further, Honora (2003) studied low-income, urban, African American students and their perceptions of the relationships with and within the school community. She found that students mainly described teacher feedback as related to behavior and management. Students also reported limited support and access to teachers and disappointment with the depersonalization of teacher-student relationships. In particular, she found that boys spoke more frequently about distrust for teachers and the social hierarchies that involved distrust between teachers and students. Perceptions of distrust and uneven power relationships in schools can be detrimental to a student’s overall experience in schools.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

The idea of entering the institution responsible for such disparities, or one which perpetuates a hierarchy that does not privilege you, your socio-cultural identity or cultural ways of knowing, may likely be largely dismissed by low-income students or students of color. If schools do not value what I know, with teachers believing that they are “higher” than me, and systems that cannot or do not give me enough of what I need to get ahead anyway, why should I consider becoming a part of that institution?

Dialogism: Individual Identities and the (Re)Shaping of Perceptions in Social Worlds

Persons develop through and around the cultural forms by which they are identified, and identify themselves, in the context of their affiliation or disaffiliation with those associated with those forms and practices—co-development—the linked development of people, cultural forms, and social positions in particular historical worlds. (Holland et al., 1998, p.33)

How then, are individual educational and aspirational identities and perceptions shaped and re-shaped, particularly within educational contexts? How can an educational context that is imbued with deficit ideologies contribute to the ways in which students come to think of what education is or means and subsequently what it means to become a teacher?

The ways in which individual identities are constructed and reconstructed within and around school institutions have been discussed by many scholars. In reference to the ways in
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

which gender identities contribute to the learning of science, Brickhouse (2001), who draws from Lave and Wenger, wrote: "Learning is happening all the time—whenever a person engages in activity in the world. Learning is unavoidable. It is what is required in the process of becoming a person. Learning is not merely a matter of acquiring knowledge, it is a matter of deciding what kind of person you are and want to be and engaging in those activities that make one a part of the relevant communities" (p. 286). The work of Bakhtin, particularly his concept of ideological becoming, is helpful in understanding the ways in which positional identities are formed, or, in many cases “fashioned” (Greenblatt, 1980). Bakhtin wrote that “our ideological development is. . . an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values” (1981, p. 346). The ways in which students develop their world views (i.e. the process of ideological becoming), are dialogically connected to the social contexts in which these views develop. Bakhtin’s framework has been extended by Holland et al. (1998), who consider the various ‘ways of knowing’ in cultural worlds. They wrote that, “Clearly one’s social position—defined by gender, race, class, and any other division that is structurally significant—potentially affects one’s perspective on cultural institutions and the ardor of one’s subscription to the values and interpretations that are promoted in rituals and other socially produced cultural forms” (Holland et al., 1998, p.25). Individuals develop positional identities in response to perspectives and perceptions of that social position. These identities are made and remade in response to context, “depending on the others present, [perceptions] of her greater or lesser access to spaces, activities, genres, and, through those genres, authoritative voices, or any voice at all” (Holland et al., 1998, p.128).
Examining these social contexts and the activities and processes within them has been the work of sociocultural theorists, cultural-historical activity theorists, and, more recently critical sociocultural theorists such as Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007). Their development of a critical sociocultural theory extends the exploration of “the intersection of social, cultural, historical, mental, physical, and...political aspects of people’s sense-making, interaction, and learning around texts” (Lewis, Enciso, and Moje, 2007, p.2) to include more attention to issues of power, identity and agency. They write that:

It is important for sociocultural researchers to better understand the way that performances of social identity are cloaked in the fabric of power and ideology and economics...It is the performances themselves, and the material objects that imbue them with meaning, that instantiate the larger social politic. (Lewis, Enciso, and Moje, 2007, p. 9)

The ways in which these researchers have theorized literacy learning within school contexts can be extended to theorizing the ways in which students come to make and re-make their own educational and aspirational identities, as well as their understandings of the teaching profession, within the context of schools, communities, and families.

Learning thus involves both awareness of differences and distinctions, and, ultimately, an act of subject formation, that is, identification with particular communities. These identifications can be demonstrated through the enactment of particular identities one knows will be recognized as valuable in particular spaces and relationships. That is, as people acquire, appropriate, resist, or reconceptualize skills and knowledge within and
across discourse communities, they continue to be formed as acting subjects. Equally important—or perhaps more important—is the idea that as people move across different discourse communities, they enact identities that will be recognized in particular ways by those communities. (Lewis, Enciso, and Moje, 2007, p.19).

Choosing to identify with the institution of schooling, is surely mediated by the experiences in schools and how they contribute to the formation and re-formation of both academic, social, and aspirational identities. The ways in which schools render certain kinds of knowledge or skills valuable or not, shapes perceptions of what it takes or the kind of person it takes to teach, in many instances reproducing patterns within schools, attracting only certain kinds of people with certain kinds of skills to a profession that would benefit from a diversity of people with a wider repertoire of skills and ways of knowing.

Choosing to pursue a career in teaching, then, requires an understanding of the institutional and cultural worlds, an understanding that is shaped by experiences and perceptions that are collected and forged over time, and then a determination of whether or not a young person can imagine participation in those worlds. The choice requires not simply an identification with schools or particular role models, but instead with the models and forms that comprise those institutional and cultural worlds. Becoming a teacher or choosing to become a teacher is not simply a role socialization process by which a person learns the norms and skills of the profession. Cultural models inform the choices that young people make and how they come to imagine themselves, or not, within the teaching profession. Perceptions, self-concepts, and
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

models related to race, gender, and social class, thus inform young peoples’ abilities to identify with the institution of schooling and the professional world of teaching.

These ways of theorizing the making and remaking of individual identities frame the literature that follows, which presents the empirical studies that have been conducted on perceptions of schooling, the teaching profession, and consideration of teaching as a career choice.

Perceptions of Schooling Experiences and School Climate

Students have, periodically and/or historically, been viewed as naïve, passive recipients of education. Education, for centuries, was viewed as something done to children, not that which students and teachers do together. In more recent years, however, education and educational research have begun to take notice of the ways in which students actively construct knowledge about academic disciplines as well as their understandings of school, reform efforts, and their own academic identities. Cook-Sather (2002) wrote that students have “invaluable views on education from which both adults and students can benefit...[and] a unique perspective on what happens in school and classrooms and on the dynamics between their schools and their communities” (p.3). More recent studies of students’ perceptions have included perspectives on such topics as school rules, relationships between school and communities, the No Child Left Behind Act, educational aspirations, school climate, and, in limited ways, teachers’ work. (For
example see Cook-Sather and Shultz, 2001; Garcia et al., 2006; Koth, Bradshaw, and Leaf, 2008; Poplin and Weeres, 1997; Shaunessy and McHatton, 2009; Thompson, 2002; and Willis, 1977).

With the understanding that students’ perceptions of their academic experiences are of great value, many researchers have linked students’ perceptions of and identification with school to such issues as drop-out rates, academic achievement, educational aspirations, attendance, and more (Azzam, 2007; Fine and Rosenberg, 1983; National School Climate Council, 2007).

The work of L. Janelle Dance (2002), while not entirely centered on students’ perceptions of teachers’ work, does lend ‘street savvy’ students’ voices to discussions of what good teachers are like. The students in her studied described their favorite teachers as those who had the following qualities “a good sense of humor, makes learning fun yet educational, [were] understanding and encouraging, someone whom students can talk and look up to, [were] concerned about students and having time for them, believed in students’ ability to meet academic requirements…and the ability to convince students that they genuinely care” (2002, p. 75). Dance describes, though, that the students in her study describe their relationships with the overwhelming majority of their teachers as, “devoid of trust, devoid of caring, devoid of an viable information and therefore deficient in social capital resources that enable positive educational outcomes” (2002, p. 75). She writes further that the young people in her study recognize when teachers are “down” with kids, can understand the demands of street culture and the pressure to “be hard” and can forge stronger, more caring relationships with teachers, thus opening up greater possibilities for success. The perceptions of such ‘street savvy’ youth are disconcerting, and point to the failures of educational systems to find, prepare, support, and
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

retain teachers who genuinely care and can express their caring in ways that are recognizable to students.

Another study that brought students’ perceptions of their experiences in schools was the work of Gail Thompson. Thompson (2002) conducted a study of 271 African American high school students in California that utilized questionnaires and interviews. She gathered data on the elementary, middle, and high school experiences, focusing on such topics as reading habits, relationships with teachers, teacher attitudes and expectations, homework, perceived college readiness, racism in school, safety, and parental involvement. Thompson found that students did not “express contempt” (p.161) for the educational system or teachers, but rather disappointment. She wrote that, “African American students clearly want more from the educational system, their teachers, and the curriculum…The strongest messages from the students involve the effects of tracking, ineffective instructional practices, relationships with teachers and peers, problems with the curriculum, and preparing African American students for college” (p.161). Thompson’s study provided an overview of educational experiences, with some attention to perceptions of teacher-student relationships. She concluded that many African American students exhibited resiliency and focus, sometimes in spite of teachers who employed deficit perspectives, perspectives of which many students were aware.

Shaunessy and McHatton (2009) surveyed 577 students who were served through general education, special education, and a school-wide honors program at an urban high school. Students were administered a survey on teacher-student interactions and several small focus groups were organized. Shaunessy and McHatton found that students in special education
programs perceived more frequent punitive feedback than students in general education or honors programs. In addition, male students in all programs perceived punitive feedback more frequently than girls. Hispanic students in all programs perceived a greater frequency of supportive feedback than did students from other racial and ethnic groups. Students from each of the educational programs described caring teachers as those who greeted the students, exhibited respect for students, and took an interest in students beyond the classroom. Honors students were most likely to describe their teachers as willing to ‘go above and beyond’ in helping students to achieve. These findings lend important insight into the different experiences that diverse (in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and educational classification—i.e. general, special, honors) student populations have inside of the school building. Further, the experiences and perceptions of each different group are by no means singular. Nonetheless, in the eyes of students, schools and teachers are serving some students better than others, in more caring ways, and with greater interest in student well-being. Just what the effects of these experiences and perceptions are has been investigated by researchers looking specifically at dropouts, but remains an area for inquiry.

Perceptions of school climate have reinforced certain notions about who schools serve best. Koth, Bradshaw, and Leaf (2008) surveyed 2,468 fifth grade students in non-special education classrooms in 37 different elementary schools. The researchers found that, consistent with previous research, male and minority students looked less favorably at school culture, reporting lower levels of motivation to achieve and perceiving less order and discipline in their schools. Interestingly, school-level factors were examined as predictors of students’ perceptions.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

of the school environment and high faculty turnover was found to be related to lower perceptions of order and discipline. Further, in general, students in classes with more experienced teachers expressed more positive perceptions of school climate than did students in classes with newer teachers.

These findings are particularly noteworthy given the present situation for numerous students in large, urban school districts like New York City. The schools that serve greater numbers of children of color and/or lower-income students tend to experience teacher turnover at greater rates than schools that serve predominantly white and/or middle-class students. Further, perceptions of school climate have been linked to academic motivation, school identification, academic achievement, self-esteem, and the development of dispositions that are required for life in the 21st century (National School Climate Council, 2007). Given the importance of school climate, what does it mean that some students regularly perceive their schooling experiences to be less than ideal? And by extension, what does it mean when students’ perceptions of their schooling experience match achievement and other data that illustrates that low-income and/or students of color are most likely to be taught by the least experienced teachers who are also most likely to leave within just a few years of entering the field (Boyd et al., 2005)? Further, it is essential to consider the connection between these individual students’ perceptions and the larger questions related to school and community relationships, ideas about educational institutions, or what it means to become part of that institution.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Empirical Studies on Decisions to Consider, Pursue, or Reject a Career in Teaching

Several scholars have written about the declining number of minority teachers and have tried to uncover the reasons why the teaching profession is increasingly discounted as a career possibility (Gordon, 1994, 1997, 2000; Bastick, 2000; Su, 1997; Wilder, 1999, 2000). These studies have mainly focused on the career decisions of undergraduate or graduate students.

Su (1997) studied teacher candidates from one state university. The sample included 90 white students, 31 Asian students, 5 African American students, 21 Hispanic students, and 1 Native American student. Su found that when asked whether teaching was considered a profession, both ‘mainstream’ and ‘minority’ candidates replied that it was. From teacher candidates’ observations, the major roadblocks to improving the status of teaching were: low salary, issuance of emergency teaching credentials, the ‘uncertainty of teaching resulting from the complexity of the classroom’ and consistently encountering new challenges, misconceptions of teachers’ work time, and the gap between good teachers and bad teachers (‘that it is easier for the public to point to the bad teachers and claim that teachers are not professionals’). In identifying what makes a good teacher, the two major themes that were identified were ‘love of children’ and ‘love of learning’. In addition to these beliefs though, one third of minority students demonstrated an awareness of the need to challenge the existing curriculum and dominant culture in the society, and to develop critical thinking and social reconstruction skills. None of the white students mentioned such concerns when describing a good teacher.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Su also found that 68% of white students and 73% of minority students were either ‘very proud’ or ‘extremely proud’ to represent the teaching profession. Another interesting finding was that when asked to identify which, of four purposes (conservative, progressive, liberal, or critical), schools serve, 9% of white students and 0 minority students responded conservative, 43% of the white and 34% of the minority said progressive, 35% of the white and 48% of the minority responded liberal, and 13% of white and 18% of minority said critical. When asked whether their enthusiasm for becoming teachers remained the same, declined or increased throughout their teacher education program, 23% percent of white students and 15% of minority students said it declined, 38% of white and 28% of minority students said it remained the same, and 38% of white and 57% of minority students said it increased.

There were several other interesting findings from Su’s study. Minority students tended to support the establishment of national standards for teaching more strongly than white peers. Minority students disagreed more strongly with white peers about eliminating or phasing out undergraduate education courses. Su speculated that training teachers only at the graduate level might have turned away a large group of otherwise eligible minority teaching candidates for a variety of reasons, including economic ones. While all of the prospective teachers entered teaching for altruistic reasons, minority candidates were also motivated by awareness of inequalities, and the will to change institutions that have supported dominant histories and agendas. They also observed that minority parents were often intimidated by the school system and they saw the need for teachers to be involved in the community. Finally, emotional aspects
appeared to be the major cause for white teachers to leave, while minority teachers were more likely to leave when there are opportunities to do another, more rewarding job.

Gordon (2000) studied 160 teachers of color in three different urban areas over the course of three years. She found that in many cases, students of color were not being encouraged by their families, their communities, or their K-12 teachers to enter the teaching profession. Explanations for each of these groups’ discouragement (or simply lack of encouragement) is no doubt bound up in historical, political, social, and economic factors which vary for each group. There are a range of explanations for such discouragement, which Gordon (1994) categorized as educational experience (not graduating, lack of preparation, negative school experience, poor student discipline/lack of respect, teachers not prepared for diversity, lack of support in college), cultural and community concerns (lack of academic encouragement, racelessness, absences of role models, low status, too much education for the return, teaching as not attractive to some ethnic groups), and social and economic obstacles (low pay, negative image, poor school conditions, more opportunities elsewhere, racism). Interestingly, almost one third of the responses noted negative school experiences as a reason students of color opt not to stay in education for their life’s work and nearly one half noted the lack of respect.

Further, in a study attempting to understand the underrepresentation of minorities in the teaching profession, Wilder (1999) uncovered three major themes: 1) lack of patience for teaching 2) classroom behavior problems and 3) low salaries. As evidence for these reasons, the participants in Wilder’s study recounted details from their own elementary and high school experiences. Wilder found that the participants frequently used phrases such as “put up with,”
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

“go through a lot,” and take “crap” from students who misbehave in their interviews on why they would not consider a career in teaching. These reasons may point back to some of the relationships that have developed between schools, teachers, communities, and students.

King (1993) conducted a study of African American teachers and teacher candidates. She found that many of the decisions to become a teacher did not take place until college, or even after college, which suggests that it can take a great deal of time to decide upon a particular career (and she argues that the option to earn a graduate degree in education is important for this reason). She found that the major attractions to teaching were: “the opportunity to work with young people (83%), the feeling that their abilities were well-suited to teaching (78%), the belief that teaching contributed to the betterment of society (73%), the feeling that teaching provided one with the opportunity to be creative (66%), the perception that teaching provided the opportunity to work with students of diverse backgrounds with diverse needs (56%), the intellectual challenge that teaching provided (56%), and the desire for good vacation time (54%).” Interestingly, the factors rated the lowest were professional prestige (12%), a high demand for teachers (20%), good salary (20%), and community members who encouraged them to teach (20%). The factors rated the lowest may provide important additional insights into the decreasing number of people of color entering the teaching profession.

Perceived status and respect have also been relevant to the decision to consider, pursue or reject a career in teaching. King (1993) found that many people of color cited lack of prestige as a reason people of color were not entering profession. While many of the people in her study did not cite professional prestige as a reason for becoming teachers, it is important to note the roles
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

of prestige and respect in the career choices of people of color. Gordon (1997) studied over 100 teachers of color and found that nearly half felt that either the negative image or the low status of teaching was one of the main reasons students of color were not entering teaching. She found that there was strong value placed on professional image and perceived “class” in communities of color and that “the lackadaisical demeanor of many mainstream teachers, to this day, is an irritant to those raised with southern manners and memories.” She cited the recurrence of ideas like “teaching isn’t glamorous anymore”. She looked at the media as well as the feminization of the field as factors generally affecting the image of teachers. She argues that,

If mainstream America refuses to respect teachers, how can we expect “minority” cultures, who are asked to assimilate into the dominant culture’s values, to respect teachers? The dominant white liberal view claims that we should be respected based on our capabilities, not on the way we present ourselves. However, professional people of color are aware, first, that it is important to differentiate themselves from their own people based on class in order to demonstrate not only their personal success, but also a respect for the profession of teaching as traditionally held within ethnic minority cultures... (62).

In another study, Wilder (2000) conducted interviews and collected narratives of 12 African American undergraduate students who came from a variety of high schools that spanned socioeconomic strata. She found that the students valued fluid relationships with teachers that extended beyond the classroom. In students’ descriptions of their relationships with African American teachers, she did not find any language that connoted feelings of alienation or
marginality, but instead found that African American teachers were described as beneficial in increasing student confidence, providing opportunities to learn about African American culture and ties to Africa, and in helping students to see connections between education and the larger world. Wilder (2000) called for further exploration of African American students’ perceptions of how well their schools created environments that fostered a positive self-image, which in turn could help develop interest in the teaching profession.

The voices of African American teachers and their perspectives on teaching and the profession cannot be separated from the history of Black teachers and students in the United States. School segregation and de-segregation have had a tremendous impact on how communities (particularly African American communities) have come to view schooling and the teaching profession (Tyack, 1974; Foster, 1992; Tillman, 2004). Henig, Hula, Orr, and Pedescleaux (1999) noted that, “By the second half of the 20th century, Black teachers and principals were important role models and respected leaders in their communities. They also comprised a significant proportion of the African-American community’s middle-class” (p. 44).

Vanessa Siddle Walker (2001) described five beliefs that were largely held by Black teachers in segregated schools: teachers have a relationship with the community, are committed to professional ideals, care about the students and their needs, tailor the curriculum to meet students’ needs and interests, and are supported by the school and community in their efforts.

Whether or not desegregation policies intended to effect such changes in the lives of Black teachers, the fact remains that in the years immediately after Brown v. Board of Education, many African American teachers found it difficult (if not impossible) to find teaching positions.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Often when they did find teaching positions, they were not well-regarded or accepted by their White colleagues or administrators as professionals (Tillman, 2004). Socially, culturally, educationally, and economically, Black communities felt the effects of the loss of the teaching positions.

Popular Discourse, the Media, and Teacher Identity

Bakhtin wrote (1981, p.293), “All words have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context in which it has lived its socially charged life: all words and forms are populated by intentions.” The word teacher, no doubt conjures ideas and images that reflect all that teachers are, have been, or have been perceived to be. These ideas, these ‘tastes’ are likely amalgamations of experiences—experiences that have taken place in schools with teachers, and outside of school, with images of or talk about teachers. Weber and Mitchell (1995, p.21) wrote that:

Images are constructed and interpreted in attempts to make sense of human experience and to communicate that sense to others. Images in turn become part of human experiences, and are thus subject to reconstructions and reinterpretations. While images always maintain some connection to people, places, things, or events, their generative potential in a sense gives them a life of their own, so that we not only create images, but are also shaped by them.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

The accounts that students give of teachers and their perceptions of what it means to be a teacher are undoubtedly shaped by all kinds of experiences and do their part in the shaping of future experiences. Thus, several researchers have looked at how students’ perceptions are, at least in part, shaped by popular discourses, particularly around teaching and education.

Giroux and Simon (1989) have written that images and understandings gained through popular culture, and the aspects of a ‘collective imagination’ contained therein, can, at times, override, inform, or temporarily displace understandings constructed through personal experience. Further, both Waller (1932) and Lortie (1975) wrote extensively on both the stereotypes and popular images of teaching, and their effect on the profession. Lortie (1975, p. 10) wrote that:

Teaching seems to have more than its share of status anomalies. It is honored and disdained, praised as ‘dedicated service’ and lampooned as ‘easy work.’ It is permeated with the rhetoric of professionalism, yet features incomes below those earned by workers with considerably less education. It is middle-class work in which more and more participants use bargaining strategies developed by wage-earners in factories…Social ambiguity has stalked those who undertook the mission, for the real regard shown those who taught has never matched the professional regard. Teaching is a status accorded high respectability of a particular kind; but those occupying it do not receive the level or types of deference reserved for those working in the learned professions, occupying high government office, or demonstrating success in business.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

The ‘social ambiguity’ of the teaching profession has both shaped and been shaped by the various discourses that have permeated talk of education. Teaching has variously been described through images of war-- on the front lines or in the trenches; gardening--planting the seeds of knowledge; entertainment--putting on the show; religion-- you’re a saint; and law enforcement-- regulating or policing, among others. (See, for example, Tobin, 1990 or Weber and Mitchell, 1995). These images have been forged and/or reflected through the media, particularly through movies and television shows which are, from time to time, based on actual teachers, but for the most part reflect the dominant stereotypes of teaching and education. When these media representations are not fictitious, they reflect, in numerous examples, exemplary teachers who have been able to radically transform or (as it’s constructed to seem) save the students in her or his class. Through personal sacrifices, these teachers (for example Louanne Johnson of Dangerous Minds or Erin Gruwell of FreedomWriters) are presented as missionaries or saviors, heroes, while others, like several of those presented by Weber and Mitchell (1995), are cast as anti-heroes, or villains. Weber and Mitchell (1995, p.128) contend that:

The implausibility of some images and the juxtaposition of contradictory messages within the same image problematize our everyday conceptions of teacher. We end up, not with a sharp composite image of teacher, but with a kaleidoscopic collage of fuchsia shirts, hairnets and buns, bulging biceps, long shapeless dresses, scowling faces, sparkling eyes, magic wands, tender smiles.

And always, the eternal chalk dust, pointers, apples, numbers.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Their study, involving the drawings of children and student-teachers, demonstrated differences in the images created by boys and girls as well as the ways in which the images of both the children and the student-teachers drew upon popular images and concepts of teachers, even when those images contrasted with their everyday experiences.

The ways in which popular culture and discourse shape students’ perceptions of the teaching profession are certainly relevant to any discussion of who is entering teaching, what preconceptions they have about the profession, and why. Britzman (2003, p.27) noticed, “For those who leave this world to enter teacher education, their first culture shock may well occur with the realization of the overwhelming complexity of the teacher’s work and the myriad ways this complexity is masked and misunderstood.” Children and adolescents spend thousands of hours in schools observing teachers, and countless hours bombarded with popular images of teachers and the dominant discourses around education, but these images, both those experienced in everyday life and those imagined, either fantastically or through fictional or other media representations, combine to construct some meaning related to teachers’ work and their role and position in society.

Britzman (2003, p.27) further notes, “What occurs as well is the startling idea that the taking up of an identity means suppressing aspects of the self. So at first glance, becoming a teacher may mean becoming someone you are not.” With the force of their school experiences behind them, and with understandings about teachers’ status, and the popular images of education, students, those most connected with the institution of school, conjure their own
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

images and perceptions of what it means to teach and whether or not they are fit to take up that identity.

This literature is useful in understanding the particular forces that exist outside of individual experiences in schools. The ways in which the media and popular culture present teachers and the teaching profession are important to consider when attempting to understand students’ perceptions of the teaching profession, which inevitably contribute to students’ notions of what it takes and what it means to become a teacher.

Research Lens

A sociocultural analysis of the negative school experiences of minority students can provide insight into the particular reasons minority students do not choose to enter the teaching profession. In many cases, school becomes a place to be tolerated, where they must check their knowledge (and sometimes pride) at the door. Looking at the perceived and experienced disconnections, and socially constructed boundaries between school and not-school will hopefully aid in the development of an understanding of just how those gaps are influencing students’ perceptions of the teaching profession and their subsequent consideration of the profession as a career option.

The declining number of teachers of color has become an object of study and, as stated previously, many scholars have attempted to explain why the teaching profession is increasingly discounted as a career possibility (Gordon, 1994, 1997, 2000; Bastick, 2000; Su, 1997; Wilder,
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

1999, 2000). The current literature provides insights into perceptions of the schooling institution by communities of color (Thompson, 2008; Gordon, 1997) and the historical relationships between communities of color, teachers, and teaching (Siddle Walker, 2001; Tillman, 2004; Henig, Orr, and Pedesclaux 1999). The research also does well in describing the reasons that undergraduates and beginning teachers give for entering the teaching profession (King, 1993; Su, 1997, Gordon, 2000). There is some research into perceptions of the teaching profession, including descriptions of the perceived lives of teachers and the conditions and interactions that characterize their work (Wilder, 1999; King, 1993; Weber and Mitchell, 1995).

These descriptions, with the exception of Weber and Mitchell’s (1995) work, have come mainly from the voices of undergraduate students or teachers in the field. These individuals have (in many cases) already made their career decisions based upon perceptions of different careers. There has been little research that seeks the voices of high school students, those most closely connected to the experiences of K-12 education, and their perceptions of teachers’ work and the profession itself. They are not removed from their school experiences and are in the midst of career consideration processes. Listening to these voices yields some new insights, particularly into the school experiences that may influence students’ decisions to consider the teaching profession.
Throughout most of the literature on educators, preparing educators, and what makes some more successful than others, there is a large and noteworthy gap. The voices of teachers, teacher-educators, and other researchers who have studied student achievement data and teacher demographics abound within the published literature. These voices provide those of us with a vested interest in public education and student success and well-being with tremendous information about the knowledges, skills, and dispositions required of teachers who do well in serving their students. This gap can only be filled by those who experience education daily—the children who attend our public schools. Michael Apple, in his Foreward to L. Janelle Dance’s *Tough Fronts* (2002), points out that, “Unfortunately all too many current school reform efforts are beside the point. They are often based on a fundamental misrecognition of the realities both of schools and teachers’ lives, and even more damaging on an ignorance of the daily realities of the children who come to these schools” (xii). My research aims to, in Dance’s (2007) terms, “breathe students’ lives” and voices into conversations about teachers and their work. In this research project, I have aimed to inform teachers, teacher educators, teacher education students, and the wider educational and political community about the ways in which teachers and their work are perceived and the factors that shape those perceptions. Further, the experiences that many students of color have in urban schools matter to the ways in which teachers and teaching are respected or not. The increasing homogeneity of the teaching force (in terms of age, race, socioeconomic status, and gender) surely has some effect on the experiences that students are having in and with schools. Different individuals bring different sets of tools to the classroom.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

With the decreasing diversity of the teaching force, we are potentially missing out on teachers who may bring a different set of tools and perspectives to the field, tools that may be beneficial in reaching more students in more engaging ways. Thus, using a participatory methodology, we have aimed to understand students’ perspectives on teachers’ tools (or lack thereof), and the ways in which schools are or are not places for certain kinds of people with certain kinds of skills or tools.

The primary research questions guiding this study were: 1) What are students’ perceptions of teachers’ work, authority, status, and power? 2) What specific experiences, cultural models, and knowledge shape students’ perceptions of teachers’ work and the teaching profession? 3) What weight do students place on their school, family, and community experiences in their decision to pursue, consider, or reject a career in teaching? and 4) How, if at all, do these perceptions bear on students’ consideration of teaching as a career choice?

Knowledge Frameworks

This research on students’ conceptions and consideration of the teaching profession, drew from multiple research paradigms as well as my own personal experiences as a teacher in a large, urban, public school system. Primarily, this research utilized Interpretivist and Critical Theory frameworks, as it centered on the processes and experiences that have shaped students’ understandings of what it means to be a teacher. Working in the Interpretivist paradigm best positioned us to explore and make sense of the experiences that have contributed to the
construction of the concept of teacher, reflecting a hermeneutic stance that emphasizes that, as Schwandt (2003) notes “one must grasp the situation in which human actions make (or acquire meaning) in order to say one has an understanding of the particular action” (p.299). To understand why students are or are not interested in pursuing a career in the education profession, we worked to understand and interpret the meanings that were attached to those choices.

Elements of the Critical Theory paradigm became useful in both planning and executing this project. Essential to the research questions are notions of power and social injustice, as made manifest in the (often) oppositional relationships between schools and historically marginalized communities (Kincheloe and Maclaren, 2003). Further, I have explored the ways in which cultural and social representations of teachers’ work, identities, and profession contribute to the conceptions that students develop. Therefore, critical theory is used to explore some of the meanings attached to the choices to consider, pursue, or reject a career in the education profession. Through the lens of critical theory, I examine how certain representations of teachers and their work reproduced over time and to whose detriment.

Working within both the Interpretivist and Constructivist frames has meant that my work as a researcher has been about interpreting the accounts and portrayals that students and parents share and the ways in which they make meaning from their experiences with teachers and schools. The world that is “made real” for the student and parent participants in my research, the world that I attempt to interpret and explain through certain lenses, can be established as especially trustworthy or valid if the student-researchers, parent-focus-group participants, and the
participants themselves find my interpretations, garnered from multiple sources (surveys, focus
groups, individual interviews, and a blog), trustworthy or valid. Bringing my interpretations and
data back to parents, student-researchers, and faculty members has helped in clarifying and
confirming our analyses.

**Inquiry Frameworks**

This research study was a mixed-methods study that utilized survey data and interview-
based qualitative data. While this study does not fit neatly within the category of Participatory
Research, I utilized several of its elements, including working collaboratively with a small group
of student-researchers throughout the research process. Corbett and Wilson (1995), in their
article entitled “Make a Difference With, Not For, Students: A Plea to Researchers and
Reformers” wrote that,

Because adult-student relationships are so central to both reform and students’ views of
schooling, methods that can sensitively and credibly capture relational qualities would
seem to be particularly valuable. Certainly in the beginning stages of an intensive
examination of students and reform, there would be no substitute for talking to students
directly, in settings where students can express their experiences freely, and without the
constraints of an adult-imposed model of the most significant issues. (16)

While research may never be able to entirely free itself from the uneven power relations between
adults and children or the researchers and participants, my study aimed to both minimize and
analyze these relations throughout the research process through my collaboration with young people in both the data collection and analysis. Valentine (1999) wrote of the more recent educational research has explored, “new ways of working with, not on or for, children” (141). In addition, working with student-researchers in conducting interviews and in interpreting data reflects a more participatory stance toward research that aims to transform the relationship between the researchers and the participants, in line with Freire’s (1982) argument that, “The silenced are not just incidental to the curiosity of the researcher but are the masters of inquiry into the underlying causes of the events in their world. In this context research becomes a means of moving them beyond silence into a quest to proclaim the world” (30-31).

I came to understand that the most critical component of my research and methodology has been my desire to work with students throughout the data gathering and data analysis processes. Since I had been a member of the school community for over five years, my prolonged engagement helped me to establish a certain degree of trust with both parents and students. It also helped me to identify students who were interested in developing research skills as well as students who were interested in education or education-related fields of study. These students, including graduates who are attending colleges and universities were strong assets to my research and, to the greatest extent possible, have been part of data-analysis focus groups, while simultaneously developing important research skills. Students have ways of knowing and
interpreting the words and messages of other students that I, as a researcher with particular identities, did not.

Who I am Here

In addition to describing the methodology and my thinking related to the project and the knowledge frameworks employed, this chapter presents both a data snapshot of the school and a tour of the school, the latter of which attempts to document the complex, layered, multi-faceted character of the school site. Doing any of this without addressing who I was and am in relation to the site would conceal important elements of this work and the methodology employed. As a teacher in the school for seven years, I had both deep knowledge of the school, its mission and history, and limited experience as anything other than a teacher. I aim, as Fine and Weis (2009) wrote, to “come clean at the hyphen” examining my own positionality as it relates to my questions, methods, goals, and representations. As Charmaz (2009) noted, the story that researchers compose reflects both the researcher and her participants. I am here presenting the lenses, including those that have grown out of my own experiences in schools and with teachers that, in some ways, at some moments, color the ways in which I see, understand, or interpret the words and worlds of the participants.

The school in which I conducted my research was selected because of my work there and the relationships I was able to build with students, faculty, parents, and administrators. For seven

---

5 I further elaborate on the participatory elements of this study throughout and following my description of the data collection methods.
years, I worked as a teacher in the school where I conducted this research. The relationships that I built and established with parents, students, administrators, and fellow faculty members was a result of the kind of work I was able to do in my classroom through community-based projects and programs, with various groups around the school (e.g. the School Leadership Team and the Parent Teacher Association), and with students and other community members as part of field trips (which ranged from visits to local sites like the research library and the historical society to larger trips to places like Washington, D.C., Italy, South Africa, and China). Being a part of the school community for seven years and having taught a range of grade levels meant that I taught some students two or three times (for example, as seventh graders, eleventh graders, and seniors) and have taught siblings, allowing for some deeper, more established relationships with students and their families. Undoubtedly, the relationships that I was able to forge with students were the strongest. Both through our work in the classroom and in more informal settings like after-school tutorials, writing groups, theater programs, a “Respect for All” group, and a documentary filmmaking class that I taught, I was able to forge authentic relationships with groups of students. We engaged in ways where we were able to work towards common goals (a play, the Regents exam, a completed documentary short film, college readiness and applications, etc.) and get to know each other in ways that fostered trust and mutual respect.

In *A White Teacher Talks About Race*, Landsman (2009, p.12) wrote:

---

6 These elements, I argue, have proven essential to the research process and while my work in the school has shaped my interpretations, it has additionally allowed for richness, depth, and comfort—all of which overwhelmingly enhanced the research experience for both participants and our team of researchers.
There are things that I, a white person, cannot know. According to my American Heritage Dictionary, to know is to ‘understand as fact or truth, to apprehend clearly and with certainty; to have established or fixed in mind or memory.’ My memories are white. I cannot know what it is like to be any other color than my own white color…To understand is defined as: ‘to perceive the meaning of, grasp the idea of, comprehend, to be thoroughly familiar with, apprehend clearly the character, nature, or subtleties of, to be conversant.’ I am convinced that if I can imagine, I might be able to understand.

Throughout the research, and due to the nature of my relationship to the school, I have grappled with several questions that seem relevant to exploring the lenses through which I have experienced and represented the school. How best can I, an adult, a teacher, and a researcher, hear a range of student voices and really listen, remaining attuned to what they are revealing? How will I, a white, female teacher, in a position of authority and power as a teacher, but a position that is not as powerful given my gender or race in a school whose students and high school teachers are predominantly of color, be able to negotiate my role as both teacher and researcher with students that may not know me? How do my identities in this place shape what and how I see and experience the character of the school? The complexity of my identity in that place became a critical piece of the relationships that I developed, both with students and their families. The participatory elements of the research, which are described in detail in a subsequent section, enhanced my ability to collect and interpret data, and to a limited degree, present the character of the school, but forever the interpretation of the site is mine, with all the nuances of my identity in relation to the place, at work in my description. Being so entrenched,
while simultaneously so critical (particularly as a result of my researcher training and graduate school studies), I have run the risk of seeing some things while missing others. Further, the personal relationships that I have developed over time both enabled me to learn and understand some aspects of students’ and parents’ perceptions, but undoubtedly, as a result of my experiences, knowledge, and relationships, some things were illuminated while others were obscured. My own reflections, though, on these experiences, knowledges, and relationships--my own reflexivity--has helped me to understand the inevitable results of my own positionality. Further, as Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) reminds us: “The more conscious [the researcher or portraitist] can make this ‘voice of preoccupation’, the more open she will be to what she encounters in the field. We see here a central paradox of this phase of the portraitist’s work: the articulation of early presumptions does not inhibit or distort her clear vision; rather it is likely to make her lens more lucid, less encumbered by the shadows of bias” (p.186). With being clear about my position in this site as well as being open and responsive to the scrutiny of others who have positions other than mine in this site, my hope is that I can illuminate, in a rigorous way, the complexity of this living school.

**Knowing the Place: Views of the School**

This research took place during the 2010-2011 school year at a public secondary school in a large, urban Northeastern school district. The following presents both the official data (as reported by the school district and the state) as well as a tour of the school that attempts to add depth and nuance to the statistical account of the school.
Data Snapshot

The Carver School, the site of this study, is a public secondary school, serving students in grades 6-12 in a large Northeastern city. In the 2010-2011 school year, the student population of the school was just over 1500, with approximately 400 students in the middle school division and 1100 students in the high school. The student body was comprised primarily of students of color: 74% Black, 23% Latino, 1% Asian, and 1% White. Approximately 7% of the population was identified as students with special needs and 3% of students were English Language Learners, both of which were below the district averages. A Federal Title I school, 66% of students were eligible for free or reduced lunch.

According to state accountability reports, the school was In Good Standing and district-generated reports and reviews defined the school as Proficient. The high school division of Carver employs a screened admissions process, with priority given to students who were enrolled in the middle school division or who live in the surrounding geographic districts. Student transcripts and attendance records were also subject to review. For the 2010-2011 school year, over 1300 students applied for just over 300 seats. Once accepted, new students are expected to attend a summer orientation program where they engage in English and Math review courses and study the school’s guiding documents, which include an honor code, non-negotiable rules, and a student creed. Once the school year begins, all students are required to adhere to a dress code which requires young men to wear collared shirts and ties and solid black shoes. Young women wear collared shirts, skirts, or pants.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

The four-year graduation rate at Carver is just over 90%, according to district data and is reported at 85% by the state, with a college enrollment rate of 80% (based on the graduating class of June 2010 and their enrollment in college by December 2010). The graduation and college enrollment rates were well above district averages and had previously earned the school recognition (specifically for its Black male graduation rate) through a national foundation.

There are several notable features of the school, including its graduation rate and Advanced Placement course offerings. Carver, in the 2010-2011 school year, offered 13 Advanced Placement courses, with 162 students sitting for exams (for a total of 212 tests taken and 68.4% of those earning passing scores of 3 or higher). The school’s pass rate placed it in the top 20 high schools in the district, with special recognition for its pass rates on certain exams, European History, Microeconomics, and Statistics among them. (The school had the highest pass rates in the state for African American students in these areas.)

There were approximately 80 teachers on the faculty, with only 6% having fewer than three years of teaching experience. Thirty eight percent of the faculty had earned either thirty credits beyond their Masters degrees or a Doctorate. The faculty was more experienced than other schools in the surrounding geographic districts, and students, in interviews, reported feeling as if the faculty was more diverse than schools they had previously attended.7

---

7 I shared a similar perception, particularly in the high school division of the school, being one of two White women in an English department of ten teachers.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

The demographic and achievement data reflected in the state and district accountability reports presents the official snapshot of the school. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) describe qualitative researchers, many of whom argue that “positivist methods are but one way of telling stories about society or the social world” and that “these methods may be no better or no worse than any other methods; they just tell different kinds of stories” (p.15). The data presented in the state and district accountability reports, I argue, both reveals and conceals the life of the school and research site. It is forever partial and incomplete, and can only tell part of the story. Clifford Geertz (1973), in *The Interpretation of Cultures* wrote that, “It is not against a body of uninterpreted data, radically thinned descriptions that we must measure the cogency of our explications, but against the power of a scientific imagination to bring us in touch with the lives of strangers” (p.16). What follows fills some of the gap, and reveals more of the life of this place, bringing us in closer proximity to the lives and contexts of the students who have shared their perceptions.

**Getting to Essential Matters**

If I have told you these details about the asteroid, and made a note of its number for you, it is on account of the grown-ups and their ways. Grown-ups love figures. When you tell them that you have made a new friend, they never ask you any questions about essential matters. They never say to you, “What does his voice sound like? What games does he love best? Does he collect butterflies?” Instead, they demand: “How old is he? How many brothers has he? How much does he weigh? How much money does his father
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

make?” Only from these figures do they think they have learned anything about him...Just so, you might say to them: “The proof that the little prince existed is that he was charming, that he laughed, and that he was looking for a sheep. If anybody wants a sheep, that is proof that he exists.” And what good would it do to tell them that? They would shrug their shoulders, and treat you like a child. But if you said to them: “The planet he came from is Asteroid B-612,” then they would be convinced, and leave you in peace from their questions. (Saint-Exupery, 1971, p.17)

Capturing the “essential” qualities and personality of a place require more than simply numbers and demographic data. While it is never possible to convey the “true” character of a research site, I am hopeful that with some description, a tour of sorts, I will be able to illuminate the complex being of the research site, a school alive, and one which is critical in contextualizing the words and perceptions of the students who participated in the study.

In my attempts to convey something of the essence of the school, I have borrowed, albeit loosely, from the work of Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot and the methods she has developed as portraiture. Reminiscent of Saint-Exupery’s narrator in The Little Prince, Lawrence-Lightfoot’s methodology reminds us that there are limits to any medium, as each is limited and none can ever “capture and present the total reality” (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997, p.5). Instead, the work of any scientist or artist can aim only to (re)present an angle or a perspective of an object, event, or place. In her introduction to The Good High School, Lawrence-Lightfoot wrote that she came to think of her work as a series of portraits because of the freedom that such a term conferred, and because she aimed to achieve something beyond or other than what traditional
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

research methods achieved. She wrote, “I hoped that our work would be defined by aesthetic, as well as empirical and analytic, dimensions…Portraits—and research—should be critical and
generous, allowing subjects to reveal their many dimensions and strengths, but also attempting to pierce through the smooth and correct veneers” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, p.14) Further, the methodology encourages a focus on a single place or single site and aims to “document and illuminate the complexity and detail of a unique experience or place, hoping that the audience will see themselves reflected in it, trusting that the readers will feel identified. The portraitist is very interested in the single case because she believes that embedded in it the reader will discover resonant universal themes” (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997, p.14). What I aim to present is the complex, complicated, nuanced site of the research—one school where I hope the reader can recognize the themes that pervade so many schools. With as much skepticism as possible, I have crafted this narrative tour, shared it with others (including the student-researchers and several colleagues), and revised it to take into account the questions and comments of others who have known the school through different lenses. Ultimately, though, this account remains mine--limited, yet deeply entrenched, and surely written through the eyes of a teacher who lived just one version of the school’s life, but who tried, in ways that felt (to borrow Luttrell’s (2010) term), “good enough”, remaining reflexive, and “accounting for the decisions” (Luttrell, 2010, p.258) I have made throughout the course of my research.

A Tour of the School

My first experience visiting the Carver School took place in the Spring of 2004. It was a sunny, weekday afternoon and as I climbed out from the subway station, I was immediately
struck by how far away from the rest of the city this place seemed. There was a dearth of storefronts and yellow cabs, and not a pizza place in sight. What I’d come to expect from the streets and neighborhoods of the city were notably absent. The sidewalks were busy as people bustled through the doors to the train station, and I made my way up the steps that led to Carver, which was perched well above the street level.

Not much really changed about the area immediately surrounding the school between the Spring of 2004 and the year of this study—2010-2011. While other parts of the neighborhood underwent gentrification, with the Starbucks and newly constructed condos popping up just a few avenues away, the area immediately surrounding the school remained largely unchanged. The bodega across the street closed and a new one took its place.

Climbing the stairs up to the school provides a clear view of the neighborhood and an adjacent highway with its steady stream of cars emitting their fumes to a section of the city that is plagued by some of the highest asthma rates in the country. Entering the school, any student, faculty member, or guest, pulls the heavy burgundy door, moves past a series of full-length mirrors that have been screwed to the wall so that students may check their uniforms, and walks under the green banner announcing the school as one of three award winners for its Black male graduation rate. There are no metal detectors, but the standard school safety agent, dressed in her blue school safety uniform, sits at a tall table at the entrance. Several safety agents can be found patrolling the hallways of the school, and newly installed security cameras are encased in shadowy plastic bulbs located in stairwells and at the ends of hallways. The school safety agent who is posted at the entrance is framed by a bulletin board displaying the artwork of high school
art students—this time it’s flowers, but there’s a monthly rotation. Other works of student
art line the main hallway, off of which are the offices of the school building—the teacher time clock
and mailroom, the parent office, guidance, the main office, the principal’s conference room,
attendance, the medical clinic, dental office, and the entrances to both the teachers’ and students’
cafeterias. Interspersing the student artwork are photographs from the school trips—Ghana,
China, Peru, South Africa, Japan, Turkey, Italy. The faces of students, their parents, teachers,
administrators, and other community friends exploring the world together have been enlarged to
8x10s and hung throughout the main hallway and an adjacent hallway that leads to the
gymnasium. Across from the gym are the school store (which, with its hardwood floors and
neat, polished displays of uniforms, school apparel, gym bags, Dover thrift editions, and snacks,
is hardly a typical school store), and college office (which is bright, seemingly plastered with
college pennants, and staffed by one full-time and one part-time college advisor, a secretary, and
a steady stream of volunteers). Further down the hallway is the auditorium, with images of
Frederick Douglass, Rosa Parks, Gandhi, Barack Obama, Abraham Lincoln, Dr. Martin Luther
King, Jr., Albert Einstein, Harriet Tubman, and Chief Joseph painted on the walls by one of the
school’s physical education teachers.

One bulletin board, in particular, is a sure stopping point on any visitor’s tour of the
school. It contains the names of the previous year’s graduating seniors, and the colleges and
universities to which they have been accepted are posted below their names. A piece of clear
plastic preserves and protects the contents of the board. Students’ acceptances range from 1
community college to up to 15 schools, with quite a few containing top-rated universities.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Generally, three or four Ivy League schools appear on the board. The Juniors and Seniors can frequently be seen stopping at the board, admiring the names of students who have been accepted to a number of schools or an Ivy. Sixth graders, whose classrooms are housed primarily on this main floor, move past the board, which is posted above their lines of vision, with their teachers as they are escorted from class to class. They don’t seem to notice.

At the end of this particular hallway, near stairwell F, a garbage can stands between two sets of doors and perched atop this can is a student who seems to be holding court with a group of other students who are notorious for cutting classes. There are about 8 to 10 high school students, mainly 9th and 10th graders, hanging out, laughing, seemingly with no place to be. As I approach, most scatter. Two linger and wait for my, “Where are you supposed to be?” The answer to this question is, as is typically the case, “lunch” whether it happens to be a lunch period or not. The two students walk slowly toward the lunchroom, making their way through a particularly crowded hallway—THE hallway where most class-cutters linger. There are only three classrooms that are attached to this hallway, and the teachers of these classes vigilantly attempt to “move kids along” to their classes or lunch. This mainly takes the form of verbal reminders, while occasionally documenting students who refuse or use profanity. The documentation is not always easy in a school of more than 1500 students. The teachers do not know all of the students by name, and with all 1500 wearing the standard uniform, teachers often write referrals to the deans or guidance counselors that include only features—the color of a backpack, the type of shoes, an earring.
Cutting and hallwalking are teachers’ biggest complaints in union meetings, lunchtime conversations, and shared train rides at the end of the day. The problem arose as the student population grew while the number of faculty members shrunk, or so it felt to many teachers, including me. In my first years, I could stop students, request their programs, or follow them to their classes to find out their names if there had been a serious situation. As the number of students in the school grew, the number of students in the hallways grew, and it became more difficult to identify the students in need of support, or intervention. Some teachers who had previously been vigilant in finding out why a particular student was not attending class, within a few years and with an increase in the number of students they taught, became overwhelmed by the sheer number of students who were not attending. This was true for me—there was a semester when I had 167 students on my roster. On any given day, 20 or so might be absent. Some were likely in the halls, some were sick, and others were completely unaccounted for. The school’s system tracked official attendance, taken during one class period in the morning, and attendance teachers were dispatched for students with chronic absences from school. But those who cut classes after reporting for official attendance, flew under the official school attendance radar. It was up to individual teachers to discover those who were cutting classes. Beyond that garbage can, and up on the second and third floors of the school building, a visitor would likely see a number of students roaming the halls, “Hall Americans” or “Hallstars” as one teacher who vigilantly documented and attempted to solve the problems the school had with cutting, came to sarcastically refer to the students.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

The second floor of the building houses the classrooms of the 7th and 8th graders, the science labs, the lone computer lab with its 34 computers, the culinary arts room—which hadn’t been used in several years, and the school’s library, which was staffed by a rotating cast of school aides and volunteers since the school’s certified librarian had retired the year before. The library was equipped with 4 computers and had not had an official system for checking out books since the librarian retired. This space became a “hang out spot” for students, some of whom were avoiding the lunchroom, others who were in search of a place to work on homework or conduct research, and others who were avoiding their classes and sought not to be subject to the questions that might be asked of them if they roamed the hallways.

The third floor is mainly “off limits” to middle school students, though several find their way up and into the halls on their way to detention, the name given to the school’s SAVE room, where students who are serving in-school suspension or those who have been removed from a period of instruction due to uniform infractions or repeated disruptions are sitting in individual study carrels, either sleeping or working on assignments that have been sent by their teachers. The room is generally staffed by Ms. T, the absolute queen of the room, a paraprofessional who is simultaneously loved, feared, and respected by the students who find their way into detention, and a rotating cast of teachers throughout the day.

The classrooms on the third floor were staffed by teachers who were more likely to be seasoned, veteran teachers than those who worked with middle schoolers. (In several interviews with students, they also reported feeling as if the teachers of the high school were older and more racially diverse than those they had had or seen in the middle school.) The classroom themselves
ranged in size and capacity. Some classes, including several of mine, had the maximum number of students—34, while other courses, electives and some APs had fewer. From third-floor inner-side classroom windows, students could peer out into the courtyard, since the school building itself formed a square.

Any visitor’s tours would surely include a stop inside of this courtyard, where there stood a fairly large greenhouse, which could be seen from any of the windows of the adjacent classrooms. Inside of the greenhouse, during one or two class periods during the day, or on any given afternoon (after school) you’d encounter anywhere from 5-10 students tending to an aquaponic system that, thanks to generous contributions from a private donor, students were using to study and growing plants and vegetables, basil and tomatoes mostly.

The school is alive early in the morning—there were mornings that I arrived at 6:30 a.m. and students were already sitting in the students’ cafeteria, waiting for the freely available breakfast, reading a local newspaper that was available at the front door, or working on homework. Some students arrived early and played chess with the sets that were available to students in the morning, during lunch, or after school. Students could also be found in the greenhouse, teachers’ classrooms, attending a morning tutorial or seeking help from any number of teachers who arrived to school well before the 8:00 a.m. start time. There were a small number, perhaps 10 of the 100 faculty and staff members, who arrived just before or as the first bell rang at 7:57 a.m., but most teachers could be found in their classrooms, talking with other teachers, or struggling to find a place to print or copy materials for the day’s lesson.
During the school day itself, students were programmed for what were fairly standard courses. Middle school students’ programs, with only minor variations, generally included double periods of math and English, science, history, Latin, a period or two/week of chess, art, or music, and gym. At the end of the school year, 20-30% of the middle school students sat for the Earth Science, Living Environment, or U.S. History Regents exams. These students, having passed Regents exams before entering high school, would often take the accelerated Global History course in one year, a pre-requisite that allowed them to take the Advanced Placement history coursework in their sophomore years.

For those students who were not early on the AP track, though, there were very few, if any, elective options. Courses like debate, journalism, and U.S. Foreign Policy were available, but were sometimes used for students in need of additional credits after failing another course. There was a dearth of courses, aside from Advanced Placement courses, that students actually elected to take. There was, however, a rich array of extracurricular, after-school programs that, for those willing to stay beyond the school day, engaged students’ varied interests. The question in my mind, as well is in some of my colleagues, was always about the kids who wouldn’t stay after, the ones who left before the end of the day due to a shortened program. When did they get a chance to choose—to pursue some interest, culinary arts for instance (a course that was offered in the first few years I worked at the school)—that was not the standard English, Math, History, or Science? Of course, they met the requirements for art, health, and gym, but these were standard offerings, some of which were only ½ or 1 credit requirements.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

On Saturdays, the school lived, with teachers running classes, programs, tutorials, trips, rehearsals, the principal answering phone calls and holding meetings (with teachers, students, parents, or the random journalist who was seeking his opinion on a relevant story) in the main office, and deans running Saturday detentions. Teachers who wanted to run ideas past the principal did so on Saturdays, in order to capture as much of his attention as possible. Dressed in the school uniform, even on the weekend (or on school trips), he’d listen, sometimes only briefly, to the concerns of teachers, students, parents, or would try to cajole you into leading a trip or taking on an additional after-school program or responsibility. Deals of all kinds were struck on Saturdays, and there was often food involved, home-made goodies brought by parents and teachers.

Carver School, which began as a college preparatory academy for a small number of neighborhood students, grew into a place that served a greater number of students in different ways, but, by virtue of its ever-increasing size, the decreasing budgets, what some teachers viewed as administrative ineffectiveness, and any number of other, less visible or talked-about factors, the core mission of the school was not achieved for every student. There were successes—the AP results, graduation rates that far exceeded city averages, stellar scholarships, graduates returning to share their success with the school community, international trips, chess trophies, kids who found that one teacher who changed their perspective. And there were failures—not having enough textbooks or computers or printers, kids sitting on garbage cans or running through hallways, not reporting to school at all, being bullied by homophobic adults and peers, or being escorted out of the building in handcuffs. But the school lived, persisted,
transformed, and while so many of the teachers that I spoke with and students we interviewed talked about how the school had changed, and looked nostalgically at what the school “used to be,” it became difficult for any of us to know how things actually compared. Ultimately, what we knew was what we felt—what the numbers or progress report letter grades couldn’t express, the “essential matters” that the wise Little Prince knew all about.

**Data Collection**

This study took place during the 2010-2011 school year at Carver School. A team of student-researchers organized after I announced the opportunity and spoke individually with students who I thought might be interested in developing research skills and/or who would often stop by after school “looking for something to do.” Ultimately, despite my efforts to invite several male students to participate, a group of five girls in their Junior year became our student-researcher group. All of the girls identified as African American or Black and all five had intentions of attending college. Academically, the girls ranged from students who were credit deficient to those who were in the top quarter of their class. Two of the girls struggled with attendance, and had limited involvement in other extracurricular activities.

---

8 That our research team was entirely female was both an asset and a limitation. How male participants spoke about their aspirations may have been impacted by this, and our data analysis may have been strengthened by a male researcher. However, in speaking with the girls, we ultimately decided that an all-female team was an asset. We considered the ways that male participants might have been less open or willing to share personal opinions, aspirations, and other information if another male student (who was not a participant) was present in the room. The need to “act tough” in front of other males might have changed the dynamic of the interview.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

A survey (see Appendix A) was distributed to approximately 300 juniors and seniors. (While the school’s enrollment for juniors and seniors was just over 440 students, any student that was enrolled in one of my courses was ineligible to participate.) Juniors and seniors were selected for participation since they were approaching the end of their secondary school careers and were beginning to think seriously about their post-secondary plans, including college majors and subsequent careers. These students, in addition to being more focused on their post-secondary lives than younger students, also seem to have more realistic and less idealized understandings of teachers work. The principal of the school approved the surveys being distributed through the English teachers who taught junior and senior-level courses. I met individually with each teacher and provided a brief introduction to the project for them to share with their classes. Teachers were also given instructions for collection. Additionally, to raise awareness about the project, survey, and blog, signs were posted throughout the school and student-researchers talked up the study to their friends. Ultimately, 138 student surveys were completed, reflecting a response rate of 46%. Through the consent and assent forms, students and parents were also asked if they would be interested in participating in subsequent focus groups and, in the case of students, individual interviews.

9 Several studies on children and young people’s perceptions of issues such as discrimination and the U.S. presidency (Bigler et al., 2008), the role of the police (Powell, Skouteris, and Murfett, 2008), and African American children’s perceptions of race, class, and government involvement in Hurricane Katrina (Spears Brown, Mistry, and Bigler, 2007) have illustrated that elementary school-aged children are forming refined, nuanced beliefs about government and its role. However, older students were found by Spears Brown, Mistry, and Bigler, to have a greater understanding of institutional discrimination, and one that is more consistent with ‘adult’ understandings.

10 I describe the student-researchers’ roles in both soliciting participation and data collection in the section on participatory approaches.

11 Participants’ racial and/or ethnic backgrounds are outlined in Table 6.
Additionally, we planned and implemented a TEACHER! blog that was advertised around the school and through small flyers distributed by the student-researchers. This was intended to be a site where students could post words, thoughts, images or other comments related to their perceptions of teachers and their work. A short introduction to the research project was posted on the blog. Thinking that there were certain limitations to interviews due to power differentials that exist between teachers and students in schools, the blog was meant as an open forum that could provide a space for students to be as open as possible about their perceptions of teachers. Unfortunately, despite our early attempts to publicize the site, and our reminders about the site to small-group interview participants, there were only 3 posts to the site, one of which was from a student-researcher who identified herself as such, encouraging students to post. In discussing the absence of responses on the site, the student-researchers hypothesized that blogging was not really something that many of them did. Instead, they said, most students would be more likely to respond had we used Facebook.

The survey results provided some descriptive statistics on their perceptions of the teaching profession and their consideration of teaching as a career choice. Additionally, through the open-ended responses, we began to develop codes that informed both our small-group and individual interviews. It was at this point that we began to study and refine the small-group interview questions. During two sessions with the student-researchers, we reviewed the questions I had drafted and I shared details about what I was hoping to understand. Through this process, the student-researchers provided suggestions for edits and revisions, and we ultimately landed on our final list of small-group interview questions. In further sessions, we discussed the
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

protocol for conducting the interviews, including being comfortable with silence and knowing how and when to ask follow-up or clarifying questions as well as confidentiality issues.

Following the collection of the surveys, we began the process for recruiting students to participate in the semi-structured interviews and focus groups of criterion-based samples of students who fit into one of the three categories (considering, planning to pursue, or rejecting). Students were first invited to take part in category-based focus groups led by one or more student-researchers. Signs recruiting students were posted around the school and students signed up for the small-group interviews outside of my classroom. The student-researchers were instrumental in both recruiting students and in providing suggestions for improving the process, suggesting reminder notes and announcements. In total, we completed twelve small-group interviews that included forty nine participants. Of these, eight of the groups were comprised of students who were not interested in pursuing a career in teaching, three were with participants who were interested in pursuing a career in education, and one group involved three students who had previously considered the career, but were no longer interested.

All of the small-group interviews were held after school (with two held during a lunch period) and led by student-researchers, who helped to facilitate a space where students seemed to feel increasingly comfortable speaking freely about their perceptions (which may not necessarily have been the case if I, a teacher imbued with institutional status, were to have conducted the interview on my own). Beginning with small-group interviews was also meant to provide a less “threatening” and more open and free space where students can speak with each other to convey their perceptions. (See Appendix B for focus group questions.)
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

During each of the small-group interviews, we introduced ourselves and the student-researchers described the project. I informed students that I would be taking notes and that we were audio-recording the interviews, but that their identities would be kept confidential. The student-researchers often (and without my prompting) casually vouched for my being “cool” and encouraged the participants to be honest. At the end of each interview, we asked participants if they had any questions for any of us. It was at this point that students asked more questions about why we were doing the study, what it was like to get a Ph.D. and what was going to happen with their responses.

At the conclusion of each focus group, all of the students were invited to take part in individual interviews. We informed them that once the small-group interviews were completed, we would begin the individual interviews, in the hopes of hearing more of their thoughts on teachers’ work and their experiences in school. After reviewing our notes and developing preliminary codes\(^\text{12}\) based on the small-group interviews, we began the process of developing and refining the individual interview questions for participants who were interested in teaching and those who were not, reviewing questions one-by-one with the entire team of student-researchers. We then began the process of contacting the participants and encouraging them to sign up for after-school interviews. Over the course of a month and a half, we conducted fifteen individual interviews that lasted between thirty minutes and an hour. Of these, six were with students who were planning on pursuing a career in teaching, one was with a student who was considering it, and eight were with students who were not interested in becoming teachers.

\(^{12}\) The data analysis process is described in more depth in a subsequent section.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Individual interviews were led primarily by the student-researcher, but I took a more active role in these sessions, asking follow-up and clarifying questions. Conducting these interviews together with a student-researcher allowed us each to spend interview time both asking questions and listening to responses and helped to ensure that questions were clear and that students felt as comfortable as possible in the interview. (See Appendix C for individual interview questions.)

All of the interviews were conducted in my classroom due primarily to space constraints within the school and various groups using other spaces throughout the week. The interview day routine began quite easily, with the student-researchers coming by right after the last bell rang, and helping me to organize the circle that they would be sitting in during the interviews. We snacked and “hung out” as the participants came in and began the interview 15 minutes after the end of the school day.

While the study was focused on students’ perceptions of teachers’ work and the profession, one important factor in how their perceptions are formed is family. Using the parental/guardian permission forms, I was able to gather contact information for the parents who indicated that they would be interested in participating in a focus group. I contacted interested parents by phone and provided details about the study and where we would be gathering. I initially aimed to gather a group of 5-10 parents/guardians, fifteen of the twenty-three that I contacted agreed to participate on a Wednesday night in March. Over some snacks and home-made treats in the faculty cafeteria, the ten parents who were ultimately able to participate shared their thoughts on the teaching profession and their experiences with schools. This group, while
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

scheduled for an hour to an hour and a half, went on for just over two, with all but one of the parents staying for the entire time. The student-researchers were not present for the parent group interview, but we did debrief my notes together. (See Appendix D for parent focus-group questions.)

Data Analysis

Survey data was analyzed using SPSS to generate descriptive statistics. All interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed. These transcripts, as well as the open-ended responses from the surveys, were analyzed using a grounded approach (Charmaz, 2009), creating codes as the data was gathered and studied. Initial line-by-line coding of open-ended survey data and small-group interviews helped in, “remaining attuned to [the] subjects’ views of their realities, rather than assum[ing] that we share the same views and worlds” (Charmaz, 2009, p.197). Out of the line-by-line coding of the focus groups (both parent and student), themes emerged, allowing for testing of the themes and codes in the individual interviews. These individual-interview transcripts were coded using the existing themes, while remaining open to any new themes that emerged as a result of more in-depth interviews with participants.

As much as possible, the student-researchers participated in the data analysis process, thereby working against the warning issued by Qvortrup that, “the group doing the interpreting—adults—may have different interests to uphold or protect than the children they are interpreting”
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

(in Valentine, 1999, p. 150). The first set of data that we coded was the open-ended responses from the student surveys. After compiling the results, our group reviewed the results of three open-ended questions. We read them twice without attempting to identify themes or codes. We then sorted the responses into those from students who indicated that they were interested in pursuing a career in teaching, those who were unsure, and those who were not. We reviewed the data twice more, and then began by identifying our general impressions. *What do you feel like a lot of people are saying?* became the question. We each wrote down our impressions and then shared, charting our responses and combining our initial themes. We then began the task of coding each response according to the themes we had established and then noting responses that did not fit neatly into the themes. Each of the student researchers participated in this process and upon completion of independent coding, we reviewed responses one-by-one, discussing any divergent codes or discrepancies and refining the codes that we had previously established. The codes that we established during this initial process informed our thinking about the small-group and subsequent individual interviews and the questions we were exploring through those sessions. A similar process was undertaken as we reviewed and de-briefed the small-group and individual interviews, though I conducted the line-by-line coding of small-group interview data independently\(^\text{13}\), discussing any questions that came up with the student-researchers. I shared my developing codes with the girls throughout the process, bringing things back to them in an attempt to ensure that I had understood and interpreted participants’ responses as accurately as possible. We similarly de-briefed the individual interviews, but I independently coded and

\(^{13}\) While it was not my initial intention to analyze interview data independently, the time required for such a process was significant, and I therefore decided instead to share back with the girls once I had completed my initial analysis.
analyzed the individual interview transcripts, and shared back and confirmed my interpretations and analyses with the girls.

**Final thoughts on Methodology**

When I traveled with a group of students to South Africa several years ago, we came upon a sign that read, “Nothing about us without us is for us.” The quote was not attributed to any particular person, but I have since learned that the phase has been used by various activist groups. I recall the students briefly looking at the sign and saying, “Yeah!” I had not previously heard the phrase but jotted it down in the notebook that I carried throughout the trip. The phrase has since been engrained in my mind and has informed the decisions that I have made as an educational researcher who aims to bring the voices of those who live schooling experiences to academic and policy-based conversations about who teaches and how it matters. I have aimed to work *with*, rather than *for* students, and have been constantly mindful of who I am and who the students are, both in the room, in the research, and in society.

I have kept in mind Luttrell’s (2010) description throughout the course of my research. I have aimed to be “good enough”—

…A person who is aware that she/he has personal stakes and investments in research relationships; who does not shy away from frustrations, anxieties, and disappointments that are part of any relationship…[who] tries not to get mixed up between fantasies,
projections, and theories of who the ‘others’ are and who they are in their own right.

‘Good enough’ researchers accept rather than defend against healthy tensions in
fieldwork. And they accept the mistakes they make—errors often made because of their
blind spots and the intensity of their social, emotional, and intellectual involvement in
and with the subject(s) of their research. (p.273)

Inevitably, throughout my research, at a school where I had spent nearly ten years, I worried
about my own listening—if I was hearing only what I was interested in hearing, or was
interpreting students’ statements in ways that were skewed by my own work and life in the
school—the ways I’d observed the administration interacting with teachers, the ways students
interacted with each other and their teachers, the ways I’d been treated by students, parents, and
administrators. I wondered and worried about how my experiences as a white, female teacher
made me listen differently, making some participants’ statements about race resonate more
deeply in my mind. I can recall one particular individual interview that ended up lasting far
longer than the others because the student, a Senior, Puerto Rican male, took advantage of the
opportunity when we posed the question, “Do you have any questions for us?” He asked me
questions about my work, how I felt listening, what my assumptions were about the questions
that I was asking. I realized, in my notes that I spent quite a bit of time reflecting upon his
questions, perhaps in part because his questions, perceptions, and assumptions so closely
matched my own. Ultimately, though, the student-researchers, the girls, became my “check”,
when we discussed our notes, when I compared their notes to mine, and in the end, I decided that
this anxiety and tension might never be entirely resolved. And that was okay. The research was “good enough”.

Chapter 5: “Mostly, it’s about respect”—Findings

The data collected in this study included a survey of 138 high school Juniors and Seniors. In total, we conducted twelve small-group interviews that included fifty students and fifteen individual interviews that lasted between thirty and sixty minutes. The parent focus group included ten parents of high school Juniors and Seniors.

Of the students who participated in the surveys, 64.5% were eleventh graders and 35.5% were twelfth graders. 60.9% of the participants were female and 39.1% were male. Students ranged in age from fifteen to eighteen. In an effort to allow students to identify and name their own racial or ethnic backgrounds, students self-identified by filling in a blank rather than selecting from pre-determined categories, allowing for the complexities of racial identities to be captured in ways not possible when simply checking a box. Participants’ backgrounds are listed in Table 6.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Racial or Ethnic Background</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific country listed (e.g. Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Ghana, etc.)</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Mixed” or listed at least two racial and ethnic categories (e.g. Puerto Rican and African American)</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (e.g. human) or none listed</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Because students were not provided with a list of options from which to select the race or ethnicity with which they identified and instead self-described by filling in a response, I was not able to gather data that neatly compared with the official school demographics. The publicly available information indicated that 74% of the students were Black, 23% Latino, 1% Asian, and 1% White. The students’ self-reporting indicates that at least 42% of participants identified as African American or Black. Compared to official school data, the Hispanic student population was over-represented in our participant group. The initial question on the survey gauged students’ consideration of a career in teaching.

Table 7

*Likeliness of Pursuing a Career in Teaching*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Likelihood of Pursuing a Career in Teaching</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is highly unlikely.</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is unlikely.</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have considered it, but I am more interested in other options.</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>34.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am seriously considering it.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pursuing a career as a teacher is my plan right now.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Less than five percent of students reported seriously considering or planning to pursue a career in teaching. Approximately ten percent of the college-educated workforce is engaged in teaching, thus providing context for the number of students who, at this college-preparatory school with a college enrollment rate of 80.5% (New York City Department of Education, 2011), are seriously considering or planning to pursue a career in teaching. While a report by the Aspen Institute (2007) indicated that teacher racial demographics closely match the college-educated population, the small number of students who expressed interest in the teaching profession at a college preparatory institution is worthy of exploration. Students from this school attended college at higher rates than others with similar demographics throughout the city, yet still did not approach the ten percent. Their perceptions of the profession, as well as their descriptions of what they were looking for in a future career can illuminate some factors that contributed to the small number of students who were interested in exploring or pursuing a career in the profession.

In the sections that follow, I have brought together information from the student surveys (both open-ended and scaled questions), small-group interviews, and individual interviews. These sections explore young people’s career aspirations, images of teacher and teaching, familial perceptions, and the perceived respect afforded both teachers and the profession overall.

Young People’s Career Aspirations

In considering potential careers, aside from naming specific careers, participants valued several aspects of the careers they intended to pursue. More than salary, participants valued the ability to feel passionate about and enjoy their work, often combining this with a desire for a
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

career that paid well and that was respectable, seeking both to be respected and to respect the work. One participant said, “I’m looking for a career that will bring me happiness. I would much rather have a career that I enjoy doing, and being economically stable, rather than having an extremely high paying job, yet I am miserable.” Many of the responses were charged with emotional words and discussed the passion that participants hoped they would feel for their future work.

Passion. I can’t do anything that I’m not passionate about because then I’d just be another schmuck, working 9-5, hating their boss and dreadfully wishing they could be someplace else and I feel that that’s not a type of life that I need to live…Passion for whatever I do and I have to have respect for it, if I can’t respect the people I’m surrounded myself around or what I’m doing in general, then there’s no need for me to be doing it, then I’m just in it for the money. I can hustle for the rest of my life if that’s the case. Passion, and respect, and dedication. If I’m not dedicated to it, then there’s no reason. I’m wasting my time and everybody else’s.

Others described the desire to find a career that not only made them happy, but also was an extension of their personal selves. A participant described that he desired, “a place where I can be myself, where people respect each other and help others, and a place where I will never feel like not coming into work. I want to be able to love my career.” Often in addition to feeling emotionally invested in the work, or being able to draw positive emotions from their work, many participants shared their considerations for economic security as well, with one participant
seeking, “to be able to love what you are doing and being able to get a reasonable amount of money from it and be respected for your career.”

Further, they described being eager to find a comfortable and autonomous work environment, looking for “good pay, independence, and management of my own time. I’m also looking for a reliable job that I am less likely to lose in economic hardships.” Another participant, echoing the desire for autonomy and independence shared, “I’m looking for high pay and happiness, working hard, and not being bossed around. I want to be my own boss.” Reflecting his own interests and eagerness to find a work environment that matched those, one participant said:

I hope it’s fun. I don’t want to go into some business that’s completely boring. Working at a desk…doing it every day can be tedious. Aside from doing deskwork, I’d like to go about, talk to people, have group discussion, have personal projects within the corporation so like, doing certain things based on you, so in some way it kind of feels like you are your own manager, but at the same time you’re working for a much larger company. So, it would be balanced, good paperwork but also a lot of going around, talking, learning a lot of things as you work.

Several students, including several who indicated that they had at one time considered or were planning to pursue a career in teaching described their desire to engage in work that benefitted society at large or individual lives. Participants regularly talked about “doing something with their lives” and their desire to make their lives meaningful based on the work or
profession in which they engaged. A participant shared, “I’m looking for something that I can help others around me. Something I love and look forward to going to every day. Something where people benefit because I have helped them.” Others were more specific, considering the specific fields that might interest them, with one high school Junior explaining:

I’m not sure, but I’m a humanitarian. I want to be able to go around the world, to reach out to others, to give back. I also have an interest in animals as well. I want to be able to stop the cruelty, the way they’re treated, something like that. I want to be happy with the things that I do. Not just doing it to do it, doing it because I care. The people have to be able to not do it because it’s paying well, but because it’s life-changing.

While some participants had clearer images of their future careers, most participants identified feelings that were associated with their desired career or that they hoped to find in whatever field they entered. Overwhelmingly participants desired passion, love for their work, autonomy, and purpose—together, these desires constituted the model of success for which participants were striving. While pay was not a dominant theme of participants’ responses, it was often connected to other desired traits, such as the ability to do something meaningful and get paid a salary that would not cause economic hardship. Participants did not aspire to be rich, but rather to be respected and engage in work that they believed would make them happy, reflecting practical and realistic expectations for their future lives. Participants were reflective about their individual strengths and preferences, and considered careers that they believed to both match those and provide the potential for overall happiness.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Participants’ descriptions of what they are looking for in a future career illuminate particular factors that may explain the small number of students who were interested in exploring or pursuing a career in the profession. The desire for passion, autonomy, purpose, respect, and overall happiness, became key words that we listened for throughout the small-group, but more specifically, the individual interviews. If these were the dominant factors in informing young people’s career aspirations, and so few young people considered or were planning to pursue a career in teaching, then there were aspects of the profession that did not match with young people’s overall goals for their future professions.

What Comes to Mind: Images of Teachers and Teaching

Students’ images of teachers. The initial activity in which students engaged in the small-group interviews asked them to either share the first words or images that come to mind for the word teacher\textsuperscript{14}. In Weber and Mitchell’s (1995) study of children and teachers’ images of teachers, they discuss images as reader texts through which we can understand the cultural imagery of teaching. They wrote that, “a child’s artistic intentions can simultaneously be a serious effort to represent actual classroom experience (the teacher’s skin color, the science lesson), and intentional use of a culturally powerful marker to signify teacher (the pointer), and a whimsical interpretation of teaching, or of women (pink high heels, the kind you find on Barbie

\textsuperscript{14} I decided that this activity was most appropriate as an ice-breaker for two reasons. It would provide time for students to independently generate their perceptions on paper, establishing a clear launch point for the subsequent questions. Additionally, using this as the first activity ensured, to the greatest extent possible, that students were sharing their initial impressions, uninformed by the discussions that followed.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)
dolls). Most of the drawings collected had some relationship to real life experiences” (p.18). To understand how participants’ perceptions of teachers work were influenced by social and cultural imagery, as well as lived experiences, we provided the option to the high school participants in this study. Some participants drew pictures; others created lists of words, while some did both.

Consistent with Weber and Mitchell’s (1995) findings, participants did, through words and images, represent actual experiences, cultural markers, and whimsical interpretations. Fourteen of the participants included drawings either alongside or in place of the words that came to mind. The images that participants included seemed to reveal both a combination of personal experiences and social knowledge or perception. Of the drawings, five included clearly female teachers and three were distinctly male. In several of the drawings, students specifically included key features that were lesson elements that were required to be posted prominently in the classroom during a lesson, reflecting that the drawings were based on students’ own actual experiences. Further many of the words that participants used to describe the images that came to mind were rooted in actual classroom experiences. Students listed words such as *chalkboard*, *assignments*, *deadlines*, *grades*, *lesson plans*, *homework*, and *books*, which are already related to very traditional, instructionally-based activities and tasks that teachers perform rather than the more relationship-bound, interactional aspects of the profession.
This drawing, which includes the school’s required lesson elements, also includes a figure of a teacher who appears to have fangs and what could be fisted hands or gloves. While integrating pieces of actual experience, the image is charged with negative imagery that may also be related to this young adult’s interactions with his teachers. Teachers as evil authoritarians, standing in front of the class with the board full of information for the students to consume, including standardized language such as the “Aim” or the “Do Now” demonstrates the sometimes negative perceptions. This image was drawn by a Senior male student, who described the image with the word *authority*. He also explained that teachers often struggle with discipline, especially disciplining “offensive students”. Interestingly, in his explanation of the elements on the chalkboard, he described that it represented the teacher’s organization, and the fact that most of the teachers he had had were well-prepared. Other images included such cultural markers as the pointer or the apple on the desk, stereotypically associated with teachers,
though when asked, the female student who drew this image (Figure 2) said she’d never commonly seen teachers with either apples or pointers. “It’s just what I thought of first,” she explained, illustrating the power of these dominant markers and images. Interestingly, the emphasis of this image is also entirely on the teacher, a much larger figure than either the chalkboard or the students.

Figure 2: Participant drawing of teacher at chalkboard

Figure 3: Participant drawing of teacher in front of the class
While many of the drawings presented simple stick figures of teachers in front of a board, near a desk, or with students several of these teachers had specifically negative characteristics. In addition to Figure I above, the following drawing reflects a similarly negative portrayal:

Figure 4: Participant drawing of teacher speaking with student

The image included in Figure 4, while portraying negative interactions, is also focused on regulation and control instead of simply on instruction. The female Senior who drew this image explained that teachers are often disrespected, and that their hard work goes unrecognized by students who often spend their time, “just screaming at the teacher.” The negative portrayals, far more common than any positive or professional images, stand in contrast to the words used by participants when describing their career aspirations. The teachers in these images did not look happy, passionate, or respected. Instead, they are disrespected, or reflective of dominant cultural markers and stereotypical notions of the profession—fitting into a role that has been predefined.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Just one of the drawings reflected a rather glamorous portrayal of a female teacher. The portrayal includes a quite gendered representation of a female, with an hourglass figure, knee-length skirt, necklace, ankle bracelet, earrings, long hair, and glasses. This image was drawn by a female participant who intended to pursue a career as a teacher and described the woman she drew as smart and professional. She explained that she thought of herself as a person who wanted to be professional and “put together” as a teacher. This was her aspirational image—an image that reflected how she imagined herself in the profession.

Figure 5: Participant drawing of female teacher

Weber and Mitchell (1995) wrote that, “Because a picture can communicate simultaneously on many levels, drawings are useful not only as iconic images, but also as layered paintings that hide or combine other social, cultural, and personal images. An analysis of drawings can thus
reveal aspects of our personal and social knowledge—how we see the world, how we feel, and what we can imagine—that have been largely ignored” (p.19). While these images reflected some of the participants’ combined knowledges or perceptions, the words that they listed and used to explain their images were similarly revealing.

Participants’ words and explanations fit largely into several categories: physical traits or descriptions, positive personal characteristics, negative personal characteristics, neutral personal characteristics, and school or classroom-specific words. It is worthy to note that when sorted by participants who were interested in teaching and those who were not, those who were interested did not list any negative personal characteristics. Further, these words fit similarly into the categories established by Weber and Mitchell (1995), but also included more emotionally charged descriptions of teachers’ traits. *Smart* was the only trait listed more than once by students who were planning on pursuing a career in teaching. The trait most frequently listed by students who were not interested in pursuing a career in teaching was *stressed*, with *patient/patience, professional, disrespected*, and *busy* being included by more than one participant. Participants who were not interested in pursuing a career in teaching, while generally respectful of the profession, more often included negative feelings, phrases, or images.

The words participants included or used in their explanations of the images they drew, seemed to reflect an amalgamated image of teachers and teaching, drawing at once from actual experiences as well as dominant cultural images of the profession. That *smart* was the only pattern for those planning on a career in teaching reveals the perceived respectability of the profession, but also begs the question, “What counts as smart?” or “Smart in what ways?” If
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

smart is a key trait, then the ways in which schools define smart, or the ways in which they value the knowledges and ways of knowing that students bring with them to school matters. Students with skills and knowledges that are not valued, but instead considered as deficits to be overcome would certainly find it much more difficult to identify with the traits required for teaching, the smart teacher identity, as established by institutional definitions of smart. Further, if the institutional definition of smart is what is perceived to be a required trait, then the notion that only young people with that particular definition might be those who enter the profession, thereby reproducing existing social and cultural definitions of what counts as smart.

That so many students perceived a teacher to be stressed and disrespected, but simultaneously patient and professional further develops the idea that to be a teacher means to tolerate, to have patience in the face of difficult circumstances. The root of teachers’ stress and the disrespect afforded to them are developed in subsequent sections, but these negative perceptions surely factor into students’ decisions of just what it takes to teach—patience, tolerance, and endurance—all of which stand in contrast to what students hope for in their future careers. The young people in this study more often than not perceived themselves to be lacking the tools or traits required to be successful in the profession, or the traits required were imbued with such negativity that they were traits that were perhaps not appealing to develop.

Teachers in the media. While students’ drawings proved to be combined images reflecting their experiences with teachers in schools as well as dominant cultural images, with one student writing Ms. Rizzle, from the Magic School Bus series as what immediately came to mind when she thought of the word teacher, participants analyzed the differences between
images in television and movies and their own experiences. Several participants described the
teachers that appeared on television as extremes, with either teachers who were “really fun and
cool”, teachers who were evil and who were “out to get students”, and teachers who “give their
whole lives” to teaching. One high school senior explained his perspective:

I think teachers that are portrayed in movies and television are extremes. So, teachers in
movies and TV are either the really awesome teacher that does everything they can to
help you or that teacher that does everything they can to hold you back. I think we have a
number of teachers of all different ranges in real life, who we interact with, and I don’t
think it’s limited to one type of feeling. Teachers have feelings, and they depend on the
student as well. No teacher can take any student and just make them a better student.
The student has to bring, to offer something to the table, to their own learning. In TV, in
media, you don’t really see that.

The ideas presented in mainstream media portrayals, he pointed out, are not robust enough to
capture the actual lives and work of teachers, who do not save or destroy students, but instead
who work together with students to achieve shared goals. The teacher-student relationship and
the mutual efforts of each are often overlooked in superficial media representations of teachers’
work.

Another student participant discussed the idealized teachers that are often portrayed in
television and movies:
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

I feel that movies and stuff kind of, idealize. I feel that the media idealizes teachers and what they do. You know, there are some movies where they show the difficulty of a teacher’s struggle, like *Freedom Writers* was one of them, where you saw not only how the teacher cared about the students, but also how she dealt with her home life and how her teaching affected her home life. But I don’t know, I think in a way, it’s setting kids up to kind of think that all teachers are dedicated, or that all teachers are fun and can understand, or that all teachers will be willing to listen to your problems if you want to talk about them. And that’s not necessarily true…So yeah, I think when you see a teacher in a movie and you have a teacher in real life, you’re nowhere, you’re not ready, because it all depends on the type of teacher that you have. You could have someone that’s really nice and kinds and warm and not only cares about your education, but also cares for you. Then you can have someone that just doesn’t care. They’re doing their job. They’re getting a paycheck at the end of the day.

Reflecting the wide diversity in the quality of their teachers, participants recognized the differences between media portrayals of teachers and the teachers that they knew. While some expressed disappointment that more of their teachers were not like teachers in movies and on television, most regarded the images with skepticism, or with the understanding that there was much more variety amongst teachers than is portrayed in media. Nevertheless, in the words and images that immediately came to mind, students’ drawings and initial descriptions drew more from these caricatures than their lived experiences in schools.
Encouraged or Not: What My Family Would Say

Several studies have documented the prominent role that families play in shaping the career aspirations of young people, with some demonstrating that parents have more of an influence that guidance counselors, teachers, peer groups, or individuals working within a potential occupational field (Bardick, Bernes, Magnusson, & Witko, 2004; Sebald, 1989). Additional studies have also found that students of color are more likely than White students to talk regularly about and seek parental support for about their career aspirations (Otto, 2000; Whiston, S. & Keller, B., 2004).

Table 8
Participant responses on family encouragement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Valid</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>42.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral/Don't Know</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>138</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to survey results, less than twenty five percent of students reported that someone in their family had encouraged them to become a teacher. In sharing what their
family’s reaction might be if they decided to pursue a career in teaching, most participants said that their families would be supportive of the decision, not specifically because of the career, but because their families are generally supportive of their decisions. For example, one participant who did not plan on entering teaching said, “My family really supports me in whatever I do, just as long as I’m happy, successful, and safe.” Other participants shared that their families would ultimately be supportive, but would perhaps offer specific advice or warnings, related either to the students or the salary. A high school Junior described what he expected his family to say:

My family wouldn’t have a problem, because, well, they do support me with everything I do. But if anything, they’d probably tell me to go to the little, they might say that the smaller children, they’re not much of a problem, but they’d say that I might get a little bored doing it, because although it’s helping the children from the start, which is or may be very enriching for you as a person, you might get bored at some point. They also might be a little selective. If I were to say I wanted to be a teacher they would probably recommend a school to me, they wouldn’t want me to teach at a school where it’s rumored that every single child in there is a delinquent or something like that. But aside from those things they wouldn’t really have a problem with me being a teacher.

A similar sentiment was expressed by a high school Junior who said:

I think the first thing she would say is, ‘Good luck.’ She would say she feels that I’m maturing and everything’s my choice to make. I think she’d be proud of me because it would be an unselfish act. I know she would think it’s a respectable job, and that’s
logical because my mom is a state worker. So she went into her job, I know after having me, for benefits and for money, so at the same time even though she thinks it’s a respectable job, I think she might think it’s not logical because I’m not making as much as probably over the years with what’s being taken out of me when I have to babysit students if I became a teacher. I think she would definitely respect it.

Other participants shared that their families would explicitly warn against the profession. These responses came from both a student who was planning to become a teacher and one who was not. A high school Senior described his family’s attitudes towards his decision to pursue a career in teaching:

My father’s real, it’s interesting to see the way he gets about that. My mother just in general she, she knows I’m smart, knows I’m really smart. She doesn’t know how smart smart. My father gets it. My mom doesn’t really get it…My sister is in college, at John Jay and my other sister’s at Stony Brook who, I mean they call me frequently, they’re coming to me frequently. I help them, like with their homework, not necessarily math, but everything. I’ve written papers for my sister. So like, my dad, he sees all of that and he’s like ‘Why aren’t you becoming an engineer?’ That’s what my dad wants. My dad is huge on me becoming an engineer. He’s all like, ‘Yeah, you know, you’re obviously great at mathematics, but why would you teach math? You would make a lot more money.” I guess that the money issue would be the big thing, coming from a lower class family. I’m not going to sit here and say that we struggle financially, but it’s not like we have an abundance of money. My father is seeing the potential in me, seeing that I could
make a lot more money if I choose to become an engineer, to be whatever it is that isn’t teaching. I could make a lot more money doing something else, and my father sees that and is kinda like, “You shouldn’t really be a teacher.” My mom she knows that I’m smart, but she doesn’t think that I’m like a genius, and a big part of that is because I slack off in some other classes and I got in trouble a lot, so she doesn’t necessarily think that….she’ll be fine with whatever I do. She thinks very highly of teachers, of all teachers. So I don’t think she’d be too upset. My dad, he’d feel a different way about it than my mom does. But it’s my life and he’ll respect whatever I’m doing.

Another student expected that her family would warn her of the potential challenges:

My family, they would be like, “Oh, it’s gonna be, you better be patient.” That’s what they’d say. Because the way that society is today, the students, the way that we’re learning, the way that we’re shaped up. They’d probably be like, “At least go to a good school, where students are behaving.

Several participants shared that their parent or parents would be supportive, but that they had dreams of their children going into another profession, particularly becoming a doctor. A participant who had at one time considered pursuing teaching but wasn’t planning on entering the profession said that her mother would be proud, but did have hopes of her daughter going on to become a doctor. She said:

I think my mother would be proud. Well my mother’s proud of anything I do, so that’s kind of biased. But, well, it’s a Catch 22 because I know my mother wouldn’t mind me
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

enriching young minds but at the same time she really wants me to be a doctor, you know, save someone’s life. In regards to my mother, I think she’d be okay with it. In regards to my family, I don’t think they’d necessarily care, if I’m good at what I do, if I could teach their kid or something, maybe, but it’s just, my mom’s really the only person that would give a damn.

There were several participants who said that their family would react with pride alone if they aspired to become a teacher. These responses came from both participants who said that they were planning to pursue a career in teaching as well as those who were not. One response came from a participant who described himself as a reluctant student, one who didn’t like school, but knew he had to get through it. He said, “I think they wouldn’t react in any type of way. I think they’d be proud of me for teaching, because I’m helping future generations learn, I’m shaping future generations.”

To understand parents’ perceptions of the profession, the parents came together for one focus group session where they shared general thoughts about their satisfaction with the school system writ large as well as their perceptions’ of teachers’ work and their attitudes toward the profession. Consistent with the findings of Diamond and Gomez (2004), parents spoke broadly about their general dissatisfaction with the educational system, and advocated for greater accountability, not necessarily in the form of standardized tests or achievement, but in the system at large:
I think it’s atrocious, with the talented individuals we have teaching, the untalented we have running the system, and the fact that our children are sacrificed daily, and their lives are not put into perspective, their futures really, their futures, I think we should be ashamed of ourselves when we look at all the countries that are doing better than us. I’m tired of hearing about what China’s doing, what Africa’s doing. I want to hear what we’re doing here. We’re educated. We have resources, we have manpower, we have everything, yet our kids are dropping out of school, our kids are failing, this that and the other, I’m getting tired of hearing how bad we are as opposed to what we’re doing with all this talent, with all this knowledge we supposedly have here in NYC.

However, other parents’ expressed frustration, specifically raising themes of inequality, both in terms of resources and the educational programs that are offered in different schools and systems. The “confrontational approach” as articulated by Lareau and Horvat (1999), was based on the legacy of previous discrimination and inequality, though parents frustration here centered not explicitly on previous discrimination, but instead on current inequities. One parent spoke of her own experiences and then those of her own child, who she believed was getting an education that was not afforded to all students:

The education field is not level. We need to stop pretending like it is. Some of my own friends in high school were not learning what I was learning. Like here, how it’s set up. Kids are not learning the same things everywhere. Some kids are behind. Stop pretending like you are allowing kids to learn when we should already be learning. Like it’s a privilege, not a right. Lots of schools are not set up or conducive where we all have
enough books, not enough literature. Whatever the curriculum is there should be enough books, there should be enough literature, and there should be enough time for the teacher to teach. And that’s not happening.

Other parents specifically expressed frustration with funding inequities and the availability of non-public resources in other, wealthier districts:

It’s just like this district, and you go downtown… and it’s completely different. There’s a lot of parent participation and auctions, fundraisers. Maybe we don’t have the same resources or finances that they have, yet it’s still public school and they’re getting a better education than we are. It’s a difference of what, not even the difference of a city or a borough. It’s a train ride.

Further, parents’ critical and confrontational stance was directed more specifically at the larger system than the teachers and the school in which this study was conducted. Parents spoke specifically of being shut out from the larger school system. One parent said, “Here in NYC parents are ostracized. In suburban schools, if the teachers don’t work with the parents they don’t have a job.” Other parents spoke of the transformational power that could be leveraged if teachers and families were to truly come together, saying, “The teachers need to work with the parents at the PTA meetings, they work together to fight against the system. Look downtown, that’s what happens. But up here, we’re not together.”

In specifically sharing perceptions of the profession, parents’ responses were organized around several themes: the negative public and media-based images of teaching, the relative
status of the profession, and salaries. These themes relate to the cultural and social worlds of schools, as perceived by the families intended to be served by these institutions. The collective disappointment and frustration parents expressed through these specific themes reflected the tension between the tools, dispositions, and capital of those who run school systems, those who work within them, and the students and families who participate in the local school community. If “actions and values are organized to take advantage of cultural competencies” (p.275) as Swidler notes, then the strategies of action that the parents in this study imagine for their children likely do not include entering a profession that includes such tensions.

As parents imagined their children taking up a career in teaching, they considered the social context that would surround their children’s work, including popular images of teachers. Parents spoke of the ways that teachers were portrayed in the media, with one parent speaking of how this has shaped her thinking about her daughter’s school and her experiences with it:

Teachers are not portrayed well. Teachers in the rubber room, teachers of all these serious incidents. The more that you show that, and the more that you have parents who do not have answers, their image is not escalated. In my mind, I have to fight with this teacher to have my child educated. By the time I come up to school, I have in my mind this is going to be a battle. I don’t think you guys are being shown in a good light. It’s not a team effort. It’s the parent against the teacher.

This image was often connected to the lower status that the profession had and the themes that developed were largely consistent with Su’s (1997) findings on barriers to improving the status
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

of the profession. These included low salary, alternative/emergency licensing programs, uncertainty about the complexity of the classroom, and the ability to more easily identify ‘bad’ teaching. While parents repeatedly expressed their respect for teachers and the profession, they described the public perception as less than favorable. One parent said, “Teaching is not being presented as a valuable position. When we were younger the teacher was looked at as a valuable part of the professions. You’re not looking at the profession as something that’s valued anymore.” Several parents described the “good” teachers as not being as valued by the system as those that “teach to the test”. Further, one parent who identified as African American, described the evolution of her son’s thinking about the teaching profession over time, as he experienced different teachers, including those who had adopted a more authoritarian stance. She explained:

Especially in the middle and high school level, when you teach students, you need to allow them to have an idea, to ask, their questioning, because sometimes teachers take that as disrespect. They don’t want to take or acknowledge the students’ ideas. We have to get away from this ‘I tolerate you.’ And they not only tolerate students, they have this demeanor where they tolerate parents. So you don’t really see the student before you and I think that’s a powerful issue. You have to like students! You have to like younger people. You have to love what you do and like students, you don’t have to love our students, but for that period of time, it becomes your child. You also have to be honest with them too, for them to be better. My son when he was younger, I want to teach, I want to teach, elementary to middle school. By the time he got to high school he said, ‘I’m not sure.’ But now he had an English teacher and he said, ‘Maybe I want to teach
Something sparked his curiosity or changed his idea on how he’s seeing things. Because he relates to some teachers and he sees them as a person as opposed to this arbitrary person, authoritative figure telling me what I should learn and not listening to my ideas. Because I think some teachers do that.

This reinforces the value of what Payne (2011) abstracted from Siddle-Walker’s (1996) description of Caswell County Training School in *Their Highest Potential* and described as “authoritative-supportive” teaching. This approach to teaching, which Siddle Walker characterized as the institutionalized caring of African American schools in the segregated South, exerts strong demand for students’ intellectual, academic, and social achievement as well as a concern for the overall well-being of children and their futures, with a strong sense of a larger mission and teacher efficacy and legitimacy. Payne (2011) asks the question, “If this is the kind of teaching that many Black people remember as having worked for them, is there any reason at all to think it would transfer to contemporary inner-city communities?” Indeed, this approach as outlined by both Payne (2011) and Noguera (2005) improves both the school experiences and outcomes for African American students. Furthermore, if such an approach were more widely adopted in schools that served students of color, would not the profession be further humanized and thereby potentially more appealing to a greater number of students of color?

Parents also discussed the status of the profession as it was either a fall-back profession or one that was used as a stepping stone to another. One parent said:
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Overall, most of the teachers that my kids had are experienced teachers, but there are a few that weren’t ready, teaching was just a way into something else. If you’re using teaching to, like you’re waiting to get into law school, or waiting trying to get to your MCAT, you’re waiting for something, then you shouldn’t do it. Don’t go into it because you’re using it as a stepping stone to get somewhere, because it’s in the long run it’s the kids that are hurting.

This theme was later developed by other parents, one of whom explained:

Teaching is a stop-over for some young people. They want to go to law school, med school. You teach here and then go to the private sector. They subsidize the degree. That’s what some of the younger white teachers are doing. Or, some people, they fail at their first job and then go teach. I’m an accountant and fail at it, so I go teach. Teaching is a fall back. They don’t even give a damn. They should have teachers’ colleges. Not these programs. It will put people who really want to teach into those colleges.

To many parents, the status of the profession was impacted by such programs as Teach for America and other alternative licensing programs that were often used to fill vacancies within the school and the district.

The status was also closely connected to the low salaries teachers were perceived to earn compared to other professions. Several parents shared why they thought that the profession was not appealing to young people, specifically young men, “The profession should pay more money so that men can do the job and still be the breadwinners.” Another parent explained:
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Our children want to mimic the CEOs, they want to be the power players. They want to make the big bucks; they don’t want to teach. It’s not a lucrative profession. You don’t make much money, and you have to spend a lot of time in school, and you going to be grading all those papers. You ask the children, what they want to do and how they want to feel, they want to enjoy their lives, they want to travel, and they want to live well.

Another parent, who identified as African American and worked as a paraprofessional, offered an explanation specific to African American young people’s aspirations. She said:

I think that whether African American males or females are teaching has a lot to do with salary. It has a lot to do with salary, if they cannot feed a family or live a life or buy a home, you know, it’s the job against the career. Teaching is a career. A job may pay more. When I went into the teaching field, I was told, ‘Don’t go into it for the money.’ You have to love it and you have to be able to live on whatever until you teach for 30 years, and then you make over a hundred thousand dollars a year. I think it has a lot to do with economics. It’s all about the money. If the kids are looking now. When I’m talking to my 21 year old son and he’s looking at career fields, he’s studying business, he’s saying I may want to teach history one day, but him and his cohort, are thinking about the money. We can make $50,000 going in and then rise up. Not $42,000.

There were several parents who spoke about the value of and need for African American teachers. Parents described the value of having people from the community or who were more
familiar with the community and the benefit of that experience, consistent with research on the value of a diverse teaching force (Darder, 1993; Foster, 1993; Irvine, 1990).

I think it’s important for African Americans to teach kids, and to teach in urban schools because they can control the kids even better because they’re coming from those situations, circumstances. Not necessarily that someone from another group can’t, but there’s a certain culture, in which they can come in and demand respect and get it because they speak their language. It all depends where they’re teaching.

Pointing to the value that African American males can have in schools, serving specifically as role models, one African American parent explained:

At some point I want to see my son give back to the community. They need to see African American males that really love, love math and science, that love to articulate and I think it’s important at some point, maybe not for the rest of his life, that’s his choice…I think it’s important to give back. Unfortunately in our community kids are really smart, they’re considered nerds instead of something to look up to, athletes are something to look up to. It’s very important to change that way of thinking, and the way we can change that is by our kids giving back, teaching, it’s really important. It really is.

One parent who identified as Jamaican-American described her reluctance, though, in fully encouraging her daughter’s decision to pursue a career in teaching. While not entirely race-based, this mother was concerned about the challenges her daughter would face in pursuing a career that was predominantly white. This is consistent with recent research on race-related
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

stress and its impact on career aspirations. Harrell (2000) defined racism-related stress as “the race-related transactions between individuals or groups and their environment that emerge from the dynamics of racism, and that are perceived to tax or exceed existing individual and collective resources or threaten well-being” (p.44).

My daughter wanted to go into education and at first I was like, ‘Are you sure?’ and it’s not because of the status of teachers or anything, not respected or anything, just when you look at the way the profession is, it’s like about 90% white, you know it’s very rough for African Americans in the education field. We sat down, we discussed it, it’s what she wants to do. So now I just support her because that’s what she wants. I’m looking at the salary, everything else, too.

While several parents voiced the need for a more diverse teaching force, all who spoke of the profession shared concerns related to the perceived challenges of the profession—the lack of a salary that was competitive with those offered in other fields, particularly business; the struggle to achieve a respectable public status; and the possible challenges to overall well-being, either due to being a minority in an overwhelmingly white profession or the demands of the job.

Parent’s perceptions of the profession were forged in social, culture, historical, and economic contexts, and these informed parents’ overall attitudes about the profession. Their considerations of the social identities that their children would take up if they chose a career in teaching reflected their understandings of the tools required for the profession, their perceptions
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

of their children’s aspirations and traits, the benefits offered, and socially and culturally-formed notions of status, respect, and success.

Respectable, But Not Respected

The theme of respect, while less prevalent in responses related to what young people were looking for in a future career, was one of the most common themes in responses related to why participants would not be interested in pursuing a career in teaching. While parent participants described the economic barriers to consideration as well as the demands the job might place on the lives of their children, the theme of respect predominated in both small-group and individual interviews with student participants. While teaching was regarded by students as a respectable profession, with 81.2% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing that teaching is a respectable profession, the actual respect perceived to be afforded teachers by students, parents, and administrators varied. Thus teaching is viewed as a respectable profession, while teachers are not always respected. Such a paradox contributes to the social reproduction of inequality in several ways. To acknowledge the respectability of the profession and the possible lack of respect to individual teachers, and then to ultimately pursue that profession likely requires specific sets of skills and dispositions, as well as a particular value orientation. Specific factors must converge, one of which being an anticipation that one may face regular disrespect by students and others. For those whom respect and status stand as key features of their career aspirations, the perceived lack of respect might ultimately deter them from considering such a
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

career, especially given that such issues with respect jeopardize the professional nature of teachers’ work. Thus, the profession loses the opportunity to comprise itself of a more diverse teaching force—a professional force comprised of people with a range of values, perspectives, understandings, ways of knowing, and tools—the very differences that might make the difference for more students in schools. Inequality is thereby socially reproduced as the profession continues to draw only a certain type of person with particular sets of skills, values, and perspectives.

Table 9
Perceived respect for the teaching profession

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching is a respectable profession.</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral/Don’t Know</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>44.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The theme of respect was both broadly discussed and specifically described. Participants spoke of several domains: the respect afforded to teachers by students and families, social recognition and respect afforded to the profession, the “system”, specifically of New York City, and the respect it afforded to the teachers working within it, and finally the general sacrifices and burdens that deterred their considerations.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Respect Afforded to Teachers by Students and Families

While teaching was widely regarded as a respectable profession, exactly 50% of students either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement *Teachers are widely respected by students*. While socially, teaching was respected, at the personal level, teachers did not widely earn the respect of students.

Table 10
*Perceived respect afforded to teachers by students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers are widely respected by students.</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>43.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral/Don't Know</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>26.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In sharing what their families would think of their decision to enter the profession, several participants shared that they would be warned of the challenges they would face within the classroom. Overwhelmingly, students who were not interested in the profession spoke of not having the patience to “deal with these kids”. A high school Junior shared three careers which she would not consider, with teaching being one of them. She said:
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

There’s three jobs I would never ever do, and it’s sanitation (because I don’t like garbage), bus driver (because I don’t have the patience to deal with rude people and rude kids), and then teacher because I feel like part of it is because I don’t have the patience.

One participant shared, “I dislike teaching. It’s quite difficult to control children, especially high school children.” Another student said, “Teaching is something I am interested in as a career, but it’s not something I would enjoy doing. Working with kids is hard work. Kids are disrespectful and I don’t know how I would deal with that.” Additionally, participants spoke of what may be required of teachers in order to earn the respect needed to “control” the class, with one participant stating, “I dislike children of all ages. The only respect you can get is by making them fear you.”

Several students perceived the problem of respect for teachers as one that was community-specific, sharing that while in some places teachers might be respected by students, and sometimes by virtue of their position, that was not generally the case at this school or in this particular neighborhood or community. One high school Senior explained:

In this community, a teacher has to earn respect. A teacher doesn’t really come in, she, or he, won’t be able to stand there and use their position as a teacher to, they have to actually have a personality, and drive the student toward working harder, while connecting with the student. The kids here, like, speaking of this school, the kids here are more free to do what they want to do, like the little kids go home back and forth alone
and they’re free to just do a lot of things alone. The authority figure has to prove that they care to get respect.

That students were more free from their parents, getting themselves to and from school, with parents not being home or transporting children to school was just one additional factor to consider in understanding why children did not automatically respect rules or authority figures. With so much “freedom” in their out-of-school lives, school was a place where they had to relinquish some control, and in order to do that, teachers and other authority figures needed to prove their genuine concern for the students; such concern or care was not automatically assumed by students. Teachers who proved that they cared about students’ success, by being strict, “pushing students”, sharing their personalities in the classroom, and “going above and beyond” were the teachers that earned students’ respect. But this wasn’t perceived to be the norm, or the assumed traits of a teacher. Teachers needed to prove themselves in order to earn respect. Another participant, a Senior, offered an explanation that echoed the sentiments of several students as they discussed issues of respect as it related to both students and parents:

From students, it depends on where you work. You might get lucky and have a few students that respect you, but in my community, where I’ve grown up, in the Bronx, with Hispanic children, with African American children, who only know the poor Hispanic and African American community lifestyle, the ghetto, mostly, it’s not ideal for students to want to learn. The situations that they’re raised in or through are different from the situations that teachers try to bring them to, you know. Like trying to teach them things that they don’t want to learn is what I’m trying to say. So the kids I’ve been brought up with
around don’t have a lot of respect for teachers, although I know that that’s not the case elsewhere. There are other places where teachers are regarded highly. A lot of parents don’t know how to treat teachers, in my opinion either. In terms of parents, my parents have always looked to teachers for advice or as someone who knows a lot about children. Other parents that I’ve witnessed speak to teachers, in my community again, not the best community, a lot of parents don’t know how to treat teachers. I feel that they disrespect teachers sometimes, when the teacher attempts to tell the parent how their child’s performance isn’t where it should be, sometimes I’ve seen situations like that, not go well.

The disrespect that some participants attributed to their racial communities reflected their perceptions that teachers in other places that served predominantly White or Asian students did not face the same challenges as teachers in schools that served African American or Latino populations. Further, the deficit perspective that has been internalized here as a result of schooling experiences where fellow students seemed not to “want to learn” reflects the ways in which schools and teachers have failed to connect with historically underserved communities. Further, his perception that students from other communities might be more likely to relate or connect to schools reflects the collective failure of schools that serve students of color (particularly African American and Latino students) to successfully build upon the lives and experiences of students, adopting a culturally relevant approach that makes school relevant.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

While the majority of students reported on surveys that teachers are widely respected by parents, some participants did cite potential challenges between teachers and parents as something that they “don’t have the patience for”.

Table 11
Perceived respect for teachers afforded by parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers are widely respected by parents.</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral/Don't Know</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>47.8</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In both the parent focus group as well as small-group and individual interviews, participants shared stories about the often confrontational relationship that existed between teachers and families. One student said, “The parents are always taking the child’s side and I couldn’t deal with that.” The taking of sides was a common theme in discussions about the interactions between parents and teachers. Another student explained, “If a kid fails a class, a kid tells the parent that the teacher doesn’t like them. The parent takes the kid’s side and goes off on the teachers.” Reflecting the lack of a solid partnership in effort to educate children together, many students cited these negative interactions as a potential source of frustration should they consider pursuing a career in teaching.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Social Recognition, Respect, and Salary

In addition to not being respected by students, young people shared that they felt as if society did not respect, support, or appreciate teachers’ work. This perceived lack of social respect was often connected, in the small-group and individual interviews, to the lack of pay or resources available to the profession. A high school Junior stated:

I think that a lot of teachers do so much and they never get full recognition for how much they do. I’m not going to be the type of person who’s like, ‘Oh, I have money to that homeless guy, did you see?’ But at the same time, I’m not going to put up—I’m trying to help your child better himself and now I’m arguing with somebody’s mother because your child’s coming late and I’m calling the house to wake your child up, trying to get your child to do better. I don’t have time for the drama and I don’t think they get that much recognition…Teachers in the NYC public school system get paid like crap. I’ve been in this school since 6th grade and I’ve seen, it’s just some of the stuff they have to deal with and put up with is just totally unnecessary for the amount they get paid. Some people don’t do it for the money, but to me you’re a liar if you say money doesn’t at least play a part in it. So it’s like the idea that these people are honestly shaping our future and they get paid less than people that do boob jobs. It’s amazing to me.
While many students reported not knowing about teacher salary/pay, just 21% of students reporting thinking that teaching pays well. Over 35% of students disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that “Teaching pays well.” With many students reporting that they did not know whether or not teaching paid well, through small-group and individual interviews, students who spoke about salary primarily reported that their assumption was that teaching did not pay well in comparison to other careers or for the amount of work required. Parents shared consistent perceptions. Overwhelmingly, parents believed that their children had to consider the economic impact of choosing a career in teaching, which required long hours, hard work, and paid little in comparison to fields such as business. After making it to and through college, parents explained that their children probably did not want to struggle in the way that teachers might be required to struggle.

That teachers’ work was under-recognized, under-valued, and often involved conflict made the profession less appealing as a potential option. The idea that the conflicts and challenges did not necessarily lead to any sort of success, social recognition, or substantial
monetary gains would be a source of frustration. Another participant, one who had considered the profession but ultimately felt compelled to pursue a different career described her thinking:

"Basically, there are pros and cons. So, I would want to be a teacher because I think ultimately education is important. It gets your brain going and it kind of, I don’t know, it makes you aware of things that are going on in the world. And I would be an advocate for that, right. I would want to promote that, you know. But at the same time, I think teachers are undervalued sometimes, and personal, as a person, I wouldn’t want to feel like that. So it’s kind of like a Catch-22. Although I want to help the future progress in some form or way, I wouldn’t want to feel like I’m not important, like I’m not worth it. I think teachers sometimes feel like that. Because they have to teach a whole bunch of kids sometimes who are unappreciative, who don’t appreciate this gift of education…So I guess I would have to mentally prepare myself to the possibility that I will come across children that just won’t care. And it will break my heart, but I can’t just not want to be a teacher because there are a few kids who don’t care. I have to think of the other kids who do, and who can make a society that is possibly better than ours.

The perceived emotional demands of the profession, both within the classroom and the school, and in the world outside, surrounding it, were barriers to participants’ considerations of the career. Moreover, as this young woman described, there is a paradox—wanting to positively impact future generations and feel a sense of satisfaction with that work, while experiencing a sense of trepidation at the thought of struggles she would face with students who may be apathetic. Her having experienced “a whole bunch of kids” in her classes that have seemingly
not valued their classroom experiences has informed her thinking about the profession. What if she had not been surrounded by students who instead she perceived to find school meaningful, relevant, and engaging? How would a more culturally relevant approach have changed her perceptions of her classmates’ attitudes, and thus, her own attitudes toward the profession, thereby improving the overall diversity of the teaching force? With young people placing such value on feeling passionate and drawing positive emotions from their future careers, the challenges they perceived teachers to face daily discouraged their full consideration of entering the profession.

In addition to the lack of attention paid to the important work that teachers’ do, participants shared their perceptions of the status and financial incentives given to teachers. One participant explained:

Teachers play a fundamental part in society. People are always saying that ‘the children are the future’ and teachers are a big part of that. However, the depth of responsibility is reflected in neither status nor pay. Unless it is on the professional level, teachers tend not to have a lot of resources. Not many young adults want to get an education in a career that would most likely leave them struggling.

Participants analyzed the cost and benefit of choosing a career in education. To invest in an education, studying to enter a profession, and then be left struggling in many ways, with students, with families, with the system in which they worked, the perception of many young people was that the career would not only earn them the respect or salary, but would also leave
them in daily conflicts with the system itself, one which did not provide the resources necessary to do the job well. With rising tuition rates and the perception of a low starting salary and a life of struggle, the emotional and economic cost of entering the profession did not come with the benefits that many young people were seeking in their future lives and careers.

Administrators, the Big Apple and Respect

In addition to discussing the respect afforded by students and their families, some participants spoke of the respect afforded by administrators and other school system officials. Survey results revealed that less than half of students felt as if teachers were respected by school administrators.

Table 13
Perceived respect afforded to teachers by administrators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers are widely respected by administrators.</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral/Don't Know</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>31.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>38.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

In small-group and individual interviews, students elaborated on the theme of respect as it related to school-based administrators as well as New York City school officials. In some instances, participants said that they would not have the patience to deal with administrators, with one student saying, “Mr. D mistreats the teachers here and I would get sick of that.” Thus, not only does the disrespect by students jeopardize the status of teaching as a profession, the disrespect that some students perceive teachers to face from administrators contributes as well. While teachers ultimately experience some degree of professional autonomy within their own classrooms, they are ultimately challenged by a range of external forces, including administrators and other education officials.

In addition to discussing administrators’ habits of scolding teachers over the school’s public address system, students made assumptions about how teachers were treated by the administration that was based on the treatment given to students. When probed to explain, participants shared additional thoughts related to how the administration more symbolically disrespected teachers. Nested within the larger issue of respect were themes related to freedom and autonomy, characteristics that students sought in future careers. While more than forty percent of students reported that they were neutral/not sure, a greater percentage of students felt as if teachers did not have enough freedom in their work when compared to those who thought teachers had enough freedom.
This theme was developed in small-group and open-ended interviews as participants described teachers who “had to teach a certain curriculum” or teachers who had to “teach to the test”. One student described why this would be frustrating to her, considering its relevance to the profession. She explained, “Teachers have restrictions when molding young minds and I’m too free-spirited and impulsive to adhere to guidelines. I’m imaginative and to adhere to a certain curriculum, I mean, teaching is different from instilling your own thoughts, you’re trying to promote students’ personal thinking and you have to be creative.” The ways in which students felt teachers were limited and restricted further contributed to their thinking about the professional status of the career and the lack of autonomy was a perceived frustration should the teaching profession become a career consideration.

Other students spoke of the lack of resources provided to teachers. In surveys, 34.8% of students reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that teachers have the resources they need to do their jobs.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Table 15

Perceived resources available to teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers have the resources they need to do their jobs.</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral/Don't Know</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to speaking about teachers having to pay for things “out of their own pockets”, participants described teachers not having enough books. One student explained that she felt as if administrators did not seek teacher input regarding resources. She said, “Administrators will not ask the teachers what they want, they’ll just give them something. Teachers are not listened to as much as they need to be.”

While some students spoke about specific issues of respect between administrators and teachers in the school, other students described how the issues of respect were systemic. One participant spoke specifically of New York City, saying, “I don’t believe teachers are treated well overall. They are not always given the necessary resources for their job, especially in NYC.” Several participants, in response to various questions, spoke of their perception of their school, or the entire public school system and other private, religiously-affiliated, suburban, or post-secondary schools. Both young people and their families noted the inequalities that existed
At the time that this study was conducted, Mayor Michael Bloomberg appointed Cathie Black, a non-educator with no public school or administrative experience, to the position of New York City schools chancellor. Serving just three months and sustaining intense public scrutiny (Barbaro et al., 2011), Black’s name, or reference to the appointment, came up in several interviews with students as well as the parent focus group. References to the controversial appointment were given as examples of how the school system was not considerate of either parents or the students within the schools. One participant shared her perceptions of the appointment saying:

I heard that there was a new I think, what’s the word, chancellor? She’s taking over the teaching board or something and she’s never taught anything in her life. She’s never been a principal. She’s never worked in a public city school system. That’s interesting in itself. To me, that’s slight racism. I mean, you put the person who doesn’t know anything in a public school system where most Blacks and Latinos are taught and she can’t really help anybody inferior to her when the people inferior to her know more than she does. I feel that’s interesting. I don’t see that happening over in private school or Catholic school. That’s something in itself.

Interpreting the appointment of an under-qualified official as something that would not happen, or be acceptable in other schools, this young woman perceived the action as racially unjust, and
in some way reflective of a system that did not respect the students, families, teachers, or administrators over which the new chancellor held power. While students and families were subject to such institutional treatment, the decision to enter a system that engaged in such activity, or that so disrespected those working under that position would be even more frustrating.

Burdens and Sacrifice

Other student and parent participants spoke broadly about the perceived burdens or sacrifices that teachers made and the general pressure that teachers were under daily. Some participants spoke of the time required beyond the school day, the obligation to bring the work home with them, with one student saying, “I think teachers do a great job, but teaching just is not my interest. Teachers do a lot of at home planning and working and I really need that time for myself and my family.” Other students spoke of teaching as “more than just a job” but as something more along the lines of a vocation, requiring great passion, commitment, and sacrifice, often in the face of challenging circumstances. A high school Junior explained:

I think it’s a little more stressful, a lot more pressure than most other jobs I would say, cause they have to worry about the principal or their boss, whoever’s above them. It’s not just a job for teachers, you know. There’s no set way to get this job done. So I think a lot of thought goes into their day. Just like anybody else, they use the bathroom, they eat, they do things they need to do, but they think more.
Another student described a teacher’s day as especially taxing with time that was not their own, eating and grading, spending time after school with students, going home and planning. She shared her perceptions of teachers’ lives:

They’re not only thinking about how is the best way to do their job, but thinking about how is the best way to teach someone. Because if you think about it, teachers spend more time with us than our parents do. So basically our teachers have more influences, well, it depends on the kids, but they have a lot of influence on how we are and how we retain information, and how we see the world. They’re basically the number one person we see every single day. So not only do they have to worry about their lives and their drama, they have to sort of worry about, not necessarily an individual child, but everyone as a whole and how they do their job.

Table 16
Perceived value of the teaching profession in society

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching is a career that is important to society.</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral/Don't Know</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>71.0</td>
<td>71.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Overwhelmingly, and as demonstrated above, participants perceived teachers’ work to be important and respectable, but that to be a good teacher meant countless hours outside of the school day, thinking, planning, grading, building relationships, going “above and beyond”, while simultaneously being patient, caring, and real, in the face of a challenging system that did not necessarily provide the resources, support, or ideal conditions. Teaching required patience, with students who sometimes did not want to learn, parents who aggressively defended their children, administrators that imposed restrictions on how teachers did their work, and an often challenging school system. Teaching as a profession is respectable, but teachers are disrespected and participants largely described that they just “don’t have the patience” to become a teacher.
Understanding Students’ Perceptions of Teachers’ Work: Sources and Meanings

Images of teachers and teaching have largely remained unchanged since Weber and Mitchell’s study of elementary and pre-service teachers in 1995: cultural markers such as pointer, apples, and chalkboards, with students seated in rows. While high school students were more likely to imbue their drawings with negative imagery than elementary students, most images were instructional in nature, representing teachers as those who are responsible for conveying content. Students’ perceptions of teachers’ work have thus been shaped by their socio-cultural knowledge, cultural models of school and teachers, and their specific experiences within the schools that they have attended, with the negative encounters and situations seemingly having greater weight in the forming of such perceptions. While students’ were not discouraged in their consideration by their families or communities, they largely felt as if their families, acting in their interest, would warn them of the potential challenges or attempt to provide advice on how best to avoid challenging situations. Both students and their families recognized the value of the profession, with some students and parents speaking specifically

\[15\] I have arrived at such a conclusion given an array of factors. Research has demonstrated the greater power of negative/bad events and emotions over good ones (Baumeister et al., 2001). Further, the survey results of this study provided additional evidence that negative experiences carried greater weight in perceptions. More than 80% of survey participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that “Schools have helped me to learn the things that I want to know” and more than 65% agreed or strongly agreed that “Teachers understand me and help me to realize my strengths.” More than 50% agreed or strongly agreed that school was a comfortable place to be. Considering these positive perceptions of their overall experiences, it seems that the negative encounters and situations have resonated more deeply as these were most generally called upon in explanations when asked about their perceptions of the profession.
about the need for teachers of color and teachers who were more familiar with the communities in which they worked, yet the decision to pursue a career in teaching meant making a significant investment, both of resources and time, for a life that would not necessarily be as good as, at least initially, the life offered by engagement in a different, possibly more lucrative profession that was perceived to offer better conditions for finding happiness and balance in both professional and personal lives.

The work of being a teacher required tremendous patience, and this patience was required daily in classroom interactions with students, parents, administrators, and with a system that often did not provide the resources necessary to do the job well. To teach meant to face challenges on a daily basis, and to be a good teacher meant to work tirelessly to overcome these challenges, often making personal sacrifices in order to be successful.

That students in many cases reacted strongly against the idea of pursuing a career in teaching could be a reflection of their perceived understanding of the profession that is a result of their familiarity with the work of teachers. Just as so many non-educators feel or declare expertise about teachers and schooling because they have experienced schooling, so too can students. Teaching, unlike so many other professions (legal, engineering, or accounting for instance) is something that students have deep familiarity with and because of this, young people are more intimately acquainted with the demands of the work. The familiarity with the teaching profession, through the lenses of their own experiences in elementary, middle, and high school, is perhaps a familiarity that they will likely experience with no other profession. While cultural models, represented through the media and other social narratives, and some knowledge about
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

how schools work or have worked for friends or family members in other schools or areas may partially inform students’ perceptions, ultimately, the greater factor in shaping students’ perceptions are their own experiences.

The stresses on our public urban educational system are apparent to students. Their experiences in schools that are often under-resourced mean that their understanding is that good teachers often supplement what they are provided, that teachers must struggle to gather the resources that they need or simply remain frustrated with the lack of resources. That they perceive students to be disrespectful of teachers and teachers to require tremendous patience is likely a result of several factors: the failure of teachers to be fully prepared for their positions, the lack of training in and adoption of culturally responsive curricula and pedagogy, the often ruptured connections between school systems, school faculties, and the communities they are intended to serve, and the under-resourcing and mis-management of public education. All of these factors exist within the socio-political context, rife with inequality, in which urban public education functions. Further, that the dominant cultural model for “educational reform” involves not substantive efforts to change any of the factors listed above, including such social issues as widespread urban poverty or racial segregation, but instead on the re-structuring and privatization of schools and systems reflects a lack of real and substantive effort to change what actually matters to achieving greater equality in American education.
The Value of Diversity and Policy Suggestions

The factors listed above that have contributed to the perceptions of the school experiences of the students of color in this study, as well as that contribute to students’ subsequent perceptions of teachers’ work cannot be transformed with any single remedy. I suggest instead, that we must pay greater attention to who is teaching and the school cultures in which they work to educate young people. As expert on school reform, Seymour Sarason, argued, “Salvation for our schools will not come from without but from within” (in Lieberman, 1995, p. viii). To achieve the reforms that can ultimately re-shape students’ perceptions of teachers’ work, I suggest the following:

1. Preparation, support, and professional development that foster a social justice orientation and that is centered on culturally relevant, responsive curricula and pedagogy. To enhance the respectability of the teaching profession in historically marginalized communities, preparing, supporting, and developing teachers currently in classrooms is the first step. Furthermore, adoption of such curricula and pedagogy can not only engage students who may previously have become disenfranchised by a system that has emphasized a narrowly defined view of student achievement, but also engages families, communities, and the teachers who enact such pedagogy and adopt such curricula. The respectability of/for the profession can thus be enhanced, shifting perceptions, and possibly expanding both the size and diversity of the pool of prospective teachers.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

2. Recruitment, preparation, and support structures that are specifically intended to increase the number of teachers of color in all public schools should be adopted to engage those who have expressed interest in the profession and who have committed themselves to developing as lifelong educators.

3. Reform to accountability structures that over-emphasize student performance on standardized tests. Increasingly narrow measures of achievement paired with misguided attempts to improve performance on standardized tests with limited, tightly focused test preparation strategies not only shapes students’ perceptions of school, but oversimplifies and diminishes the respect for the profession by limiting teachers’ autonomy and de-skilling a workforce that has been prepared to plan for, engage in, and assess meaningful learning activities.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Educating educators for social justice paired with efforts to recruit, prepare, and support increased numbers of teachers of color can collectively strengthen the experiences that students are provided in schools, but also nurture the expansion of activist-orientations amongst teachers, students, and families, that can then, from within, challenge currently imposed accountability systems as well as unjust socio-political and economic policies and structures.

Cultivating a more diverse teaching force is a critical component. Given the power and potential of teachers of color to serve as role models, and to improve academic outcomes and experiences for students of color (Dee, 2004; Villegas and Irvine 2010), it is imperative that we collectively work toward, Richard Riley’s aim. Our teachers should indeed be “excellent, and they should look like America” (1998).

How this can be achieved in a climate where students of color are, in many areas, underserved by their educational experiences and which present the factors that contribute to students’ negative perceptions, requires both attention to current policies and practices that will improve the school experiences, and thereby, perceptions of the career for students of color and to new efforts to recruit, prepare, and support teachers of color? Fullan (1993) explained, “The way that teachers are trained, the way that schools are organized, the way that the educational hierarchy operates, and the way that education is treated by political decision-makers results in a system that is more like to retain the status quo than to change it” (p.3). Thus, beginning this process requires that teachers and teacher candidates adopt a transformational orientation toward the profession. If we understand schools to be essential in preparing students to be as Michelli (2005) writes, “participating citizens in our social and political democracy” (p.3), then we must
consider both who is teaching and how. Expanding on how we achieve an education for
democracy, Michelli (2005) explains:

To achieve education for democracy as a central part of public education in the United
States, two things must happen. First, public education must embrace this as a purpose in
practice, and not only in rhetoric. Second, and simultaneously, we must examine our
teacher education programs to be certain that teachers are indeed prepared to teach for
these purposes. (p.8)

Requiring the acknowledgement of inequalities (Villegas and Lucas, 2002), and the
democratic imperative to work for change, teachers who are adequately prepared to teach for
democracy and social justice, adopting and enacting such a stance offer the greatest potential for
improving the school experiences and academic outcomes for all students, but particularly for
students of color. Achieving this requires both attention to the means and methods by which we
educate teachers for social justice and subsequently provide opportunities for all teachers to
sustain such a stance through professional development and networks of support.

We must continue to engage in the process of transforming schools from sites of
challenge to places of possibility through several means, including an emphasis both in teacher
education programs and in professional development for teachers on culturally additive and
responsive models of schooling. Achinstein and Ogawa (2011) wrote that, “Culturally
subtractive conditions are endemic to schools in the United States; they are reinforced by the
historic purposes and structures of public education and by contemporary educational
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

policies…Schools tend to emphasize reproduction, reinforcing dominant forms of cultural capital and thus working against the interests of non-dominant cultural and linguistic communities” (p.114). When the curriculum itself respects students, their racial and cultural backgrounds, and builds on their knowledges, students can not only feel a greater connection with schools, but also achieve at higher levels (Dee, 2004; Foster, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Villegas and Lucas, 2002).

If students engage with a curriculum and instructional approach that respects, builds on, and makes connections to their lived experience, with teachers who are knowledgeable, well-trained, and supported in using a culturally relevant pedagogy, the patience that students’ currently perceive to be required of teachers who work with students who are sometimes reluctant to engage in instructional activities may diminish over time, with schools feeling less like sites of conflict and challenge and more like places of hope, partnership, and possibility. Further, such a responsive approach requires that teachers become familiar and work with families and communities that support the students in their classrooms. The ruptures that may presently exist between schools, teachers, communities, and individual families can be repaired with a school or teachers’ adoption of a culturally relevant approach. While teachers of color are, in many important ways, best positioned and more likely to engage in such work, all teachers with such dispositions would need space and continuous support to further develop and enact culturally responsive practices.

Such culturally relevant models for schools and classrooms, which can potentially transform the perceptions of students of color, thereby growing the pool of teachers of color, can
and should be paired with efforts to better recruit, prepare, and support teachers of color.

Numerous programs exist across the country, with the aim of increasing teacher diversity. Strategies for creating and supporting such programs include those listed in Table 16.
### Table 16

*Strategies and Substrategies for Increasing Teaching Diversity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Substrategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Design teacher preparation programs with supports for prospective teachers of color and curricula for working with multi-racial students. | • Create and sustain partnerships among minority serving institutions and their local school districts.  
  • Create paths to connect community colleges and four-year colleges.  
  • Focus on recruiting paraeducators of color or of language minorities. |
| Integrate multifaceted supports into recruitment, preparation, and hiring programs, such as follow-up recruitment events, personal support services, career guidance, and professional networks. | • Recruit high school students and support their interests in teaching.  
  • Financially sustain programs.  
  • Prepare teachers of color/teacher candidates for state certification exams.  
  • Improve schools that serve a majority of racial/ethnic-minority youth, as an investment in the future supply of minority teachers and leaders.  
  • Fund programs that empower and cater to high-need schools and their communities. |
| Recruit, train, and hire school leaders of color.                       |                                                                               |
| Improve teaching as a profession.                                      |                                                                               |
| Include males in the definition of “minority” teachers.                |                                                                               |
| Create a central place to coordinate initiatives of district offices, teacher preparation programs, and |                                                                               |
Combined, efforts to increase the diversity of the teaching force and culturally responsive pedagogies can build partnerships amongst schools and the communities they serve. These efforts can foster social-justice orientations that can be leveraged to work in solidarity to challenge currently imposed accountability systems as well as unjust socio-political and economic policies and structures that allow for the under-resourcing and mis-management of public education.

Of course, all of these recommendations must be surrounded by broad efforts to improve the status of the profession overall. As in the countries that are consistently named as our competitors in international rankings, the United States must adopt a professional model similar to those of law, medicine, or any number of other fields. Establishing a consistent knowledge-base, providing rigorous training, and focusing recruitment efforts through government financing.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

of teacher education can more effectively prepare a more skilled teaching force. Once in place, a teacher must be supported, with time and opportunities for collaboration, rigorous professional development, and additional school-based supports tailored to meet students’ social and emotional needs. Combined, these factors can effectively attract, prepare, support, and retain the quality teaching force that will be best equipped to serve our nation’s students.

Suggestions for Future Research

In a new age of education reform, it is imperative to remain attuned to the most fundamental factor in education—the relationship between the teacher and her/his students. Who students learn from matters. How they learn what they learn matters to how they feel about themselves and their school experiences. At the fore of what informs the educational policy agenda should be the voices of students and their families as well as the teachers who interact with students on a daily basis. Michael Apple (in Dance, 2002) wrote:

The emphasis on high stakes testing, on reductive accountability schemes, on raising “standards,” and so on may have rhetorical force in the public arena, but these emphases may also be based on quite flawed assumptions. As many researchers have shown, such “reforms” may not help but may actually do quite a bit of damage if they are not based on a more detailed understanding of these realities…The kinds of reforms youths call for, and they do so in quite an articulate manner, speak not to efficiency and testing, but to the creation of caring communities. Teachers who understand the lives and cultures in which
these youth are immersed, teachers who constantly show a combination of respect, high expectations, and a willingness to listen and learn from their students’ lives…” (p. xii).

Young people are the experts on their lives and experiences and in order to truly reform education, we must listen more to their voices rather than making assumptions or speaking on their behalves. Future research that aims to inform reform efforts should focus on their experiences, how they feel about their educations, what has worked, the teachers that have made an impact, and their perceptions of school conditions. Young people can yield tremendous insights into how best to make substantive changes that will make their lives and the lives of other better. And regardless of the “reality” many policymakers discuss, students’ perceptions must matter more.

This study was limited by its inclusion of students of color from just one public school in New York City, yet this limitation simultaneously provided a richer picture of the school context and the factors shaping students’ perceptions. To better understand the teaching force, additional research should be conducted to further understand students’ perceptions of teachers’ work and their own schooling experiences. How do students’ perceptions in more affluent, suburban areas or private schools differ from those of the students in this study? In what ways might perceptions be different in schools with a social justice theme, or those high schools that are specifically intended to prepare future teachers, high school for teaching? What are the differences in the perceptions of male and female students from a range of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds and how do these shape their consideration of teaching as a potential profession? How do models of masculinity and femininity shape students’ perceptions
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

of the career, and their consideration of the profession? In what ways do varying levels of academic achievement shape perceptions of schooling experiences and perceptions of teachers’ work? Research that compares the experiences of students of color in different school contexts and their perceptions could yield additional insight into the shortage of teachers of color.

Further, exploring just how accurate students’ perceptions of teacher salary are and the impact of a shifting economic context on students’ considerations of a career in teaching would provide valuable information about how the profession can be better understood and what changes or incentives might entice a more diverse pool of potential teachers. Lastly, additional research and initiatives that focus on overall high school and college completion rates of students of color, specifically the factors that contribute to completion, would additionally yield important insights into how best to improve graduation rates. Since the diversity of the teaching force depends, in large part, on the diversity of the overall pool of college graduates, supporting the efforts of schools and teachers now can lead to a more diverse force in the future.

Final Thoughts

Bill Ayers (2004) wrote:

The fundamental message of the teacher, after all, is this: you can change your life.

Whoever you are, wherever you’ve been, whatever you’ve done, the teacher invites you to a second chance, another round, perhaps a different conclusion. The teacher posits possibility, openness, and alternative; the teacher points to what could be, but is not yet.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

The teacher beckons you to change your path, and so the teacher’s basic rule is to reach…Teaching as an ethical enterprise is teaching that arouses students, engages them in a quest to identify obstacles to their full humanity and the life chances of others, to their freedom, and then to drive, to move against those obstacles. And so the fundamental message of the teacher for ethical action is this: You must change the world. Teaching is the extraordinary work of ordinary people, worthy of our attention, our support, our dedication. (p.13)

The transformative potential that lives within teachers is profound and must necessarily be cultivated and given the room to take root and grow. And while education should never be removed from the larger political economy that surrounds it, with those who care about true reform working for social, political, economic, and educational justice, the struggle will be more fiercely engaged by simultaneously making efforts to democratize education and engaging a culturally relevant, justice-oriented stance. Collectively, we have failed to serve all of our nation’s children. The reforms that are necessary should not pit public educators against families, administrators, or themselves. Schools should not vie for resources, or be positioned as competitors in a “Race to the Top”. Instead, we need to consider what matters, and the time and resources we are wasting on misdirected efforts to “reform” public education in America.

Who teaches, what they teach, how, and in what kind of school culture, are the questions that matter most. Specifically here, I have attempted to consider the ways in which public education is missing out on not only the critical resources that teachers of color offer, but also the ways in which our failure to simultaneously transform educational spaces into culturally
respectful and responsive spaces and recruit, prepare, and support teachers of color has contributed to the reproduction of gross educational inequalities.

Feminist poet Adrienne Rich, in her poem “Transcendental Etude” wrote:

But there come times—perhaps this is one of them—
when we have to take ourselves more seriously or die;
when we have to pull back from the incantations,
rhythms we’ve moved to thoughtlessly,
and disenthral ourselves, bestow
ourselves to silence, or a severer listening, cleansed
of oratory, formulas, choruses, laments, static
crowding the wires.

The time for “severer listening” is now. The future of our democracy depends on it.
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

Appendices
## Appendix A: Research Questions and Methods Matrix

### Research Questions and Methods Matrix

(Adapted from Maxwell, 2004, pp. 102-103)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>How are these questions related?</th>
<th>What kinds of data will answer these questions?</th>
<th>How will I collect this data?</th>
<th>Rationale for my choices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What are students’ perceptions of teachers’ work, authority, status, and power?</strong></td>
<td>This question is meant to gather descriptions from students about their understandings and perceptions of teachers’ work, authority, status, and power.</td>
<td>Descriptions of teachers’ work, Emphasis on students’ descriptions and the language used to describe teachers’ work.</td>
<td>Category-based (not considering, planning to pursue, or possibly considering a career in teaching) focus groups. Semi-structured individual interviews with open-ended questions related to perceptions of teachers’ work. TEACHER blog site.</td>
<td>Ability to analyze overall perceptions of the profession and how these perceptions might connect to lived experiences in schools or popular conceptions regarding the profession.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What specific experiences, cultural models, and knowledge shape students’ perceptions of teachers’ work and the</strong></td>
<td>This question is meant to zero in on the experiences that form the descriptions/conceptions gathered in the first question. It will help to identify ‘stereotypical distillates’ (Holland et al., 1998, p.55) on</td>
<td>Descriptions of thoughts, attitudes, emotions, feelings, experiences, and values that have been part of their experiences</td>
<td>Semi-structured interview with open-ended questions that are centered on school experiences (successes and failures), their perception of</td>
<td>Ability to analyze the value of students’ school, family, and community experiences in their decisions to pursue or reject the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Teaching Profession

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What weight do students place on their school, family, and community experiences in their decision to pursue, consider, or reject a career in teaching?</td>
<td>This question is meant to build on the previous one and provide insight into how much certain experience are mattering in students’ decisions to reject, consider, or pursue a career in teaching.</td>
<td>Quantitative, survey data on the relative weight of their experiences and the likelihood that they will pursue a career in teaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How, if at all, do these perceptions bear on possibilities of a career in education?</td>
<td>Focus group and individual semi-structured interviews with parents’ and community relationships with schools, and their understandings of mainstream portrayals of teachers. Focus group and individual interview questions on images that come to mind around the word “teacher” and comparisons between media representations and their lived experiences with teachers.</td>
<td>Quantitative survey data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students’ consideration of teaching as a career choice?</td>
<td>any) experiences are more or less important in deciding to pursue or reject teaching as a career option. The question will also provide insights into whether students see themselves as unfit for teaching, teaching as unfit for them, or a combination.</td>
<td>work, language around whether or not students “have” the skills for teaching or whether teaching is a field that “offers” certain possibilities or limitations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Student Assent Form

PARTICIPANT (STUDENT) ASSENT FORM

Date: ___________________________ Student Name: ___________________________

Dear Student,

My name is Amanda Winkelsas and I am a doctoral student studying Urban Education at The Graduate Center, The City University of New York. The study will require input from students and parents, which will be gathered through surveys, small-group interviews/focus groups, and individual interviews. This study is not sponsored by the NYC Department of Education or this individual school.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Choosing to participate in the study or not will not in any way affect your grades or affiliation with the school. You are free to decide to participate in this study or may withdraw at any time.

The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. It will consist of biographical questions (e.g., your age, grade, gender) and questions about your educational experiences. Students who participate in small group interviews will be asked questions about their perceptions of teachers’ work and about how they feel about their own educational experiences. These small-group interviews will be conducted at school after the end of your academic day or during your lunch and will last no more than one hour. Finally, students who are selected and choose to participate in individual interviews will be asked follow-up questions to the information that they shared in the small-group interviews. These interviews will be audio-recorded, but all responses will be kept confidential and will be used only for this research study. (Approximately 40 students will be participants in this study.

By participating in this research study, it is not anticipated that you will experience any personal risks. As a result of participation, you may bring your voice to the ongoing discussion around teacher quality and what it takes to be a teacher. The findings of this research study may be subject to possible publication in the future. Your identity and the school’s name will be protected by the use of pseudonyms throughout the reporting of the study results.

Please accept my sincere appreciation for your cooperation in this research study. If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at (946) 254-6023 or amandawinkelsas@hotmail.com or contact my advisor, Dr. Nicholas Mitchell at (212) 617-0202 or NMitchell@gc.cuny.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you can contact Key Powell, IRB Administrator, The Graduate Center/City University of New York, (212) 617-7323, kpowell@gc.cuny.edu.

Thank you for your consideration. If you are interested in receiving a summary of the results of this research study, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Amanda L. Winkelsas

I have read the preceding information and understand that any further questions can be addressed to AmandaWinkelsas@hotmail.com. I acknowledge that I am participating in this study of my own free will. I understand that I may refuse to participate or stop participation at any time without penalty.

Yes No I agree to participate in the survey.
Yes No I agree to participate in the audio-recorded small-group interviews.
Yes No I agree to participate in the audio-recorded individual interviews.

Student Name ___________________________ Student Signature ___________________________ Date ___________________________
Appendix C: Parental/Guardian Permission Form

Date: ___________________________  Student Name: ___________________________

Dear Parent/Guardian:

My name is Amanda Winklelas and I am a doctoral student studying Urban Education at The Graduate Center, The City University of New York. The study will require input from students and parents, which will be gathered through surveys, small-group interviews, and individual interviews, all focused on students’ perceptions of teachers’ work. This study is not sponsored by the NYC Department of Education or this individual school. For students or parents to participate in the study or not will not in any way affect your child’s grades or affiliation with the school.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Students are free to decide to participate in this study or may withdraw at any time. In addition, should you choose to participate in the parent focus groups, you may withdraw at any time. There will be approximately 400 students and fifteen parents in this study.

The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. It will consist of demographic and educational experience-related questions. Students who participate in small group interviews will be asked questions about their perceptions of teachers’ work and about how they feel about their own educational experiences. These small group interviews will take place at school after the end of your child’s academic day or during their lunch and will last no more than one hour. Finally, students who are selected and choose to participate in individual interviews will be asked follow-up questions to the information that they shared in the small group interviews. With your permission, these interviews will be audio-recorded, but all responses will be kept confidential and will be used only for this research study. A parent focus group will also be organized and the session will last approximately one hour. During the parent focus group, we will focus on parents’ perceptions of the teaching profession.

By participating in this research study, it is not anticipated that you or your child will experience any personal risks. As a result of participation, you and your child may bring your voice(s) to the ongoing dialogue around teacher quality and what it takes to be a teacher. The findings of this research study may be subject to possible publication in the future. Participant identity and the school’s name will be protected by the use of pseudonyms throughout the reporting of the study results.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at (646) 234-6623 or amandawinklelas@gmail.com or my advisor, Dr. Nicholas Mitchell at (212) 617-6252 or nmitchell@gc.cuny.edu. If you have questions about your or your child’s rights as a participant in this study, you can contact Kaya Powell, IRB Administrator, The Graduate Center/City University of New York, (212) 617-7625, kpowell@gc.cuny.edu.

Thank you for your participation. If you are interested in receiving a summary of the results of this study, please contact me.

Sincerely,
Amanda L. Winklelas

I have read the preceding information and understand that any further questions can be addressed to AmandaWinklelas@gmail.com. I acknowledge that I am participating in this study of my own free will. I understand that I may refuse to participate, refuse my child’s participation, or stop participation at any time without penalty.

Yes  No  I agree to my child’s participation in all aspects of this research project.

Yes  No  I agree to my child’s participation in the survey.

Yes  No  I agree to my child’s participation in the small-group interview.

Yes  No  I agree to my child’s participation in the audio-recorded small-group interviews.

Yes  No  I agree to my child’s participation in the audio-recorded individual interviews.

Yes  No  I am interested in participating in parent focus group interview and consent to participation.

Parent/Guardian Name: ___________________________________  Parent/Guardian Signature: ___________________________  Date: ___________________________

Telephones contact number: ___________________________________  Best time to reach you at the number you listed: ___________________________
Appendix D: Student Survey

Student Perceptions Survey: We know you probably have something to say about teachers since you spend hours of your days with them! We are wondering what students think about the teaching profession, whether or not they'd ever be interested in becoming a teacher, and some other things about what kids think of teachers. We think that students' perceptions of the teaching field are important to understand. Thank you for sharing your thoughts!

What grade level are you in? ______
What is your age? ______
What is your gender? ______
How would you identify yourself racially/ethnically? _____________________

How likely are you to pursue a career in teaching? (Check one)
1. It is highly unlikely
2. It is unlikely
3. I have considered it, but I am more interested in other options.
4. I am seriously considering it.
5. Pursuing a career as a teacher is my plan right now.

Next to each statement, please circle the number that corresponds to your response. Please base your responses on your OVERALL educational experiences, not just the experiences you have had in one school.

Section I: Teacher Pay
1. Teaching pays well: ______
2. Teachers' pay is good enough to justify the cost of the education it requires to become a teacher. ______
3. Teachers' pay is good enough when you consider the responsibilities of the work. ______

Section II: Perceptions of the Profession
4. Teaching is a serious profession. ______
5. Teaching is a respectable profession. ______
6. Teachers are widely respected by students. ______
7. Teachers are widely respected by administrators (assistant principals, principals, etc.). ______
8. Teachers are widely respected by parents. ______

Section III: Perceptions of Teachers' Work
9. Teachers have a reasonable amount of work to do. ______
10. Teachers have enough freedom in their work. ______
11. Teachers have the resources they need to do their jobs. ______
12. Teachers work in a professional environment. ______

Section IV: Considering the Teaching Profession
13. At some point in my life there was at least one person that encouraged me to become a teacher. ______
14. Someone in my family has encouraged me to become a teacher. ______
15. Someone in my community (not including family or school) has encouraged me to become a teacher. ______
16. At least one of my teachers has encouraged me to become a teacher. ______
### Section V: Perceptions of Schooling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>5</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17. Schools have helped me learn the things that I want to know.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. School has benefitted me.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. I usually have felt like an important part of my school community.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. School has made me feel like the things I know are important.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. School is relevant to my life.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Teachers understand me and help me to realize my strengths.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. School is a comfortable place to be.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. School is interesting.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. I feel like I've done well in school.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Section VI: Professional Status

<p>| | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26. Teaching is a career that is important to society.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Teachers are intelligent and knowledgeable about their subjects.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Teaching is equivalent to other professions (like legal, medical, or business) in terms of status and respect.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Section VII: Career Consideration

29. What are you looking for in a career?

30. Why is/isn't teaching something that you're interested in for a career?

31. Do you have anything else you'd like to say here about the teaching profession, teachers, or what it's like to work in schools?

If you are interested in sharing more of your thoughts about teachers' work, please signup with _____ in room _____ Small-group interviews will take place ____. You can also share more of your anonymous thoughts at: www. Thank you!
Appendix E: Student Focus Group Protocol

Student Focus-Group Protocol

- To get started, take a few minutes to describe what first comes to mind when you think of TEACHERS.

- What images come to mind when you first hear the word teacher?

- Where do you think these images come from? Why do you think you drew what you drew or wrote what you wrote? Are the teachers you have like this?

- Describe what you think a typical teacher’s day is like?

- What kinds of lives do you think teachers have outside of school?

- Where do you think these ideas come from? What do you think influences the ways that kids see teachers and what they do? (If nothing—wait and wonder about family, TV, movies, real experiences, something else.)

- How do the teachers you’ve had in school compare to those you see on TV or in movies?

- Would you ever want to become a teacher? Why or why not? (Ask for clarification on why they would/wouldn’t. For example, if they say that the kids are too much, and then ask them to describe an incident or be more specific.) Could you say a little bit more about ________________? OR What do you mean by ________________?

- Is teaching a good job? Why/why not?

- What kinds of things would be appealing about being a teacher? What do you think the best parts of the job would be? Why do you think some people become teachers?

- What do you think are some of the worst parts of being a teacher?

- Do you think that teachers are respected (by kids, parents, other teachers, administrators)? (Ask for explanations and the WHYs or WHY NOTs)

- Do you or how much do you respect your teachers? What kinds of teachers earn your respect?

- What kinds of people should become teachers? Like what skills should teachers have?

- If schools were somehow different, might you be interested in becoming a teacher? How would schools have to change? Or is there no way?
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

- What do you think about the amount that teachers get paid?
- Have you heard any recent news about the teaching profession?
- Is there anything else you’d like to share? Do you have any questions for us?
Appendix F: Individual Interview Protocol

**Student Individual Interview Protocol**

- Could you talk a little about yourself as a student? (What you’re good at, how you’ve felt about school in general, the kind of student you consider yourself to be)

- How would you describe your overall experiences in schools (this one, but your elementary and middle schools too).
  
  - What was elementary school like for you? How would you describe the school? What kind of student were you? (Academics, extracurriculars, leadership, etc.)
  
  - What was middle school like for you? How would you describe the school? What kind of student were you? (Academics, extracurriculars, leadership, etc.)
  
  - What has high school been like for you? How would you describe the school? What kind of student are you? (Academics, extracurriculars, leadership, etc.)

- What kinds of careers are you interested in? What are you looking for in a future career? What kinds of things might influence your decision to pursue some careers over others?

- In the small group interviews, you described the images that came to mind when you heard the word teacher. (Refer to the specific words or images). How does this image reflect or relate to the teachers you’ve had. Can you describe what you think of as a typical teacher?

- In the small group interviews, you talked about (wanting/not wanting to become a teacher); could you say a bit more about why?

- What do you think are some of good things about being or becoming a teacher? OR What interests you about the teaching profession?

- What is it about teaching, as you see it, that isn’t appealing, or that makes teaching seem like something you wouldn’t want to do? OR Why wouldn’t you become a teacher?

- How, if at all, do you think your experiences with teachers and in elementary, middle, and high school has influenced your thinking about careers?

- How do you think your family would react if you said you wanted to be a teacher?
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

- How do you think your friends would react if you said you wanted to be a teacher?
- Something that came up a lot in the small group interviews was respect. Can you talk a little about teachers and respect? (Parents, students, administrators, other teachers)
- (Following up on small group interviews—skills required and what makes a ‘good’/’bad’/’adequate’ teacher?)
Appendix G: Parent Focus Group Protocol

Parent Focus-Group Protocol

- What kinds of qualities do you expect in a teacher?
- How satisfied have you been with the teachers your children have had?
- What do you think about the amount of respect afforded to teachers?
- What do you think about the status of teachers, or the teaching profession in general? (Professionalization)
- How would you feel if your child decided to pursue a career in teaching?
- What reservations, if any, would you have about your son/daughter deciding to be a teacher?
- What benefits, if any, could you imagine?
- What do you think would improve the status and respect afforded to teachers?
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

References


ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)


ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)

achieving teachers in schools with low performing students. Albany, NY: Teacher
Pathways Project.


ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)


ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)


Gay, G., J. Dingus, & C. Jackson (2003). *The presence and performance of teachers of color in*
ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)


ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)


ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)


ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)


ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)


ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)


ON BECOMING A TEACHER (OR NOT)


