On the Same Page: The Strong Teacher Professional Community at the Heart of a Good New York City Public Middle School

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On the Same Page: The Strong Teacher Professional Community at the Heart of a Good New York City Public Middle School

by

Nathan Warner

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

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

On the Same Page: The Strong Teacher Professional Community at the Heart of a Good New York City Public Middle School

by

Nathan Warner

Advisor: Dr. Paul Attewell

This dissertation analyzes how one high-functioning, public, non-selective middle school in New York City, the Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School (WHEELS/MS348), consistently gets strong student achievement gains. For the past three years, WHEELS has ranked near the top of all middle schools on the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) School Progress Reports, which measure student academic growth and performance in each school. At the same time its students, assigned randomly and coming from the neighborhood catchment zone, rank in the bottom decile in terms of economic advantage, and the bottom quartile in terms of elementary school academic performance upon entering WHEELS. WHEELS’ success is also exemplified by the fact that it is an Expeditionary Learning (EL) Model School, a NYCDOE Demonstration School, and its achievement gains have been documented in a handful of quantitative reports as well.

This study is the first in-depth academic analysis of the school’s inner workings. I use a mixed-methods case study approach including seven years of informal and formal ethnographic participant-observation in all areas of the school; interview data from teachers, students and administrators; NYCDOE parent and student Learning Environment survey data; and NYCDOE school-level student achievement data. I document that WHEELS’ success is driven by the collaboration, coordination, expertise, and empowerment of its strong teachers. I describe the
school’s structures, policies, and shared pedagogical practices, and analyze how they operate together to allow for cohesive teams of teachers to have maximum impact on students. In doing this, I extend teacher-student social capital theory, synthesize collective efficacy theory with the research on relational trust in schools, and analyze some strong instructional techniques and supports.

My findings will add to the relevant educational and sociological research and theory on teacher-teacher and teacher-student social interactions, school organizational characteristics, teacher quality, and student engagement and achievement processes. Of particular interest for readers contemplating educational policies and questions of replication may be the fact that as a non-charter, non-selective, neighborhood public middle school, WHEELS operates within the parameters of the teacher’s union contract, and NYCDOE regulations and funding levels.
Acknowledgements

I dedicate this dissertation to the current and former teachers, students, family members, school leaders, and school staff at the Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School. Your courage, dedication, kindness, professionalism, and care for each other are inspiring, and I have no doubt that at the end of each day the world is a little bit of a better place than it was the day before, partly because of your efforts and interactions. And, to all of you who participated in this dissertation, I owe you a special word of thanks for giving up some of your valuable time to talk to me at different points over the past few years. I greatly appreciate it.

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Chapter 1: Teacher Professional Community at the Center of School Quality

I stand at the intersection between the two schools on the fourth floor, which they share. The hallway is shaped like a “T” and I am at the center, able to see down all three hallways and all four entrances from my position. WHEELS is located at the top part of the “T”, down one straight hallway. The other middle school sharing the building shoots down the leg. I watch as WHEELS’ kids enter onto the floor, middle school students at one entrance, high school students at another. The kids walk straight to their rooms and either line up in two lines beside the door or walk directly in to their first period classrooms. Not one student runs, and they aren’t loud, yet it is not silent either. They talk to each other, some walking in groups of two or three as they proceed to class. It is orderly, calm and surprisingly not crowded considering that hundreds of students have just entered a hallway approximately one hundred yards long, ten feet wide, and holding twelve classrooms. One teacher, Ms. S, asks in a calm but sure voice for her 6th grade students to face her. She says, “Mouths closed, eyes on me please.” The kids stop talking and look at her. She then says “Good morning Six S (her class). It is wonderful to see you today”. They respond, “Good morning Ms. S”. She then says, “We have a lot to do. The Think Quick handout is on the desk where it always is. Take it and place your homework at the corner of your desk. When you finish, use any extra time to study for our quick quiz. Can I have a Say-back please?” A student raises her hand and repeats what Ms. S said. Ms. S. thanks her and then lets one line in at a time, greeting each student as they enter by name and with a smile. She greets them like this every morning. By 8:05 WHEELS’ hallway is clear--almost all of its students are in their homerooms seated and starting class. I walk past the three sixth grade classrooms. In every one of the classrooms students are already working, sitting at their desks, coats hung up, and writing in their notebooks, the classes are focused and quiet.
I come back to the top of the “T” at the intersection of the two schools. I look down the hallway of the other school. It is a loud, chaotic scene. It seems like about thirty students flood the hall in no particular order. They are engaged in loud conversations, some yelling, some running. I watch as two boys run out of a classroom and down the hallway away from an adult who’s command to stop is ignored. One boy catches the other, puts him in a headlock and spins him around. Another boy walks up, pushes them both against the wall and laughs. Judging from their body language this is play and not a real fight. I watch a girl take out her cell phone and begin to talk on it loudly. A teacher pops out of the room. “I need two lines now”, she yells. She had no choice but to raise her voice because the kids would not have heard her otherwise. One of the boys mocks her. “I need two lines now”, he cries in a high-pitched voice. Upon hearing this, another boy near him laughs, seemingly uncontrollably, hunching over in faux pain, grabbing his stomach. It seems directed at the teacher in a way that shows support and encouragement for the disrespect of her by the other boy. Most of the kids seem to ignore the teacher, continuing with their conversations, chasing, grabbing, and play fights. This scene continues loudly for the next five to ten minutes. The teacher continues to struggle to get her kids in line and then in to the classroom. It takes until just about 8:20 for this school’s one hallway to clear and the majority of students to get in to their rooms. Class started fifteen minutes ago.

To a certain degree this is a daily occurrence, and the difference between the school environments of the two schools located within the same building is always stark—one hallway quiet, the other very loud; one hallway calm with lines of students, the other chaotic with students running and pushing; one hallway where students are respected and listened to by other students and teachers, the other where teachers get ignored and disrespected and students get
bullied and pushed; one hallway where class and learning starts at 8:05, the other where students aren’t even seated in their rooms until a third of the way through the class period.

There are no demographic or original academic differences in the student bodies of the two schools sharing this building. They are both neighborhood secondary schools of similar size. The students come from the same fifteen or so blocks in Washington Heights, and all went to the same neighborhood elementary feeder schools. Neither school selects its students, as the district randomly assigns them. What, then, accounts for the differences in school learning environments between the schools? Since all other factors including outside of school sociological factors and academic background factors seemingly are controlled for, it is clearly the internal differences between the two schools responsible for this great variability in school context. (Adapted from field notes)

We know that when students of all backgrounds are imbedded in safe, communal, caring, and academically rigorous and engaging school environments, they can thrive. More specifically, when students feel strong connections to their teachers and peers as well as feel academically successful, when they feel as if they are valued and supported (academically, emotionally, socially) within a larger school community, they are more likely to engage in school and achieve, what experts have called “school connectedness” (Blum 2005; McNeeley et al. 2002). But, there is not much research to date that describes how such learning communities are constructed within schools, and how exactly they are driven by and also support teacher effectiveness, and then student achievement. This research documents and analyzes how the higher functioning of the two schools presented in the above vignette, the Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School (WHEELS, MS348), a non-selective, public, neighborhood
middle school in uptown Manhattan, supports, develops, and empowers its skilled teachers, and thereby gets strong student achievement gains, with a student population that is one of the most resilient yet economically disadvantaged in the city. To study this, I use a multi-method case-study approach (Small 2009, 2011) including seven years of informal and formal ethnographic participant-observation in all areas of the school; in depth interview data from students, teachers and administrators; survey data from the New York City Department of Education’s (NYCDOE) parent and student Learning Environment Surveys for WHEELS compared to all other NYCDOE schools; and NYCDOE school-level student achievement data in the form of the School Progress Reports.

WHEELS’ middle school ranked in the top two percent of all middle schools in the city on the 2012-2013 NYCDOE School Progress Report, in the top four percent in 2011-2012, and in the top fifteen percent the year before that. To be more specific, in 2011-2012 for example, out of almost 400 middle schools, WHEELS students ranked 7th highest in math academic progress (growth) and 20th highest in English Language Arts (ELA) academic progress. These patterns are consistent with the other two school years mentioned above. At the same time, its student body, assigned to the school randomly by the school district and coming from the immediate neighborhood catchment zone, ranked in the bottom 8% in the city in terms of economic advantage and the bottom 23% in terms of combined 4th grade ELA and math state test score performance (during elementary school one year prior to entering WHEELS).

WHEELS’ success is also exemplified by the fact that it is an Expeditionary Learning (EL) Model School, a NYCDOE model demonstration school for middle school teacher teaming, and an insideschools.org (a local non-profit) “Noteworthy” school. Moreover, its impressive student achievement gains have been documented in two quantitative academic reports (Nichols-
Barrer and Haimson 2013; UMASS Donahue Institute 2011), and one non-academic book (Kopp 2011), and most recently, President Obama mentioned WHEELS’ “tightly-knit school community” in a speech he gave on expanding college opportunities¹, and WHEELS’ “dedicated teachers” in the 2014 State of the Union Address.

But, perhaps the best endorsement of the school’s work comes from the students. One put his finger on the crux of the school’s success, its caring and expert teachers, when he said in an interview:

Q: What do the students talk about when they talk about WHEELS?
A: When we talk about WHEELS, we talk about – Sometimes we joke around, and we talk about how strict it is. I think it is a – it is a privilege, in a way. Like, we kind of, like, really respect it. Because we always compare it to different schools. And we always say that if we weren’t in this school, we wouldn’t be as successful as we are.

Q: If you were in what school? A different school other than WHEELS?
A: Yeah. If we were in a different school other than WHEELS, we wouldn’t be as successful as we are now.

Q: You guys talk about that, really?
A: Honestly, yeah, we do.

Q: You’ve got 90 kids in your class. Do you think most of them talk like that? Some of them? All of them? Just a few of them?
A: Most of them.

Q: Most of them know that if they were in other schools…?
A: I guarantee you that, yeah.

Q: If they were in other schools, what?
A: If they were in other schools, they wouldn’t be as successful as they are in WHEELS now.

Q: And you think most of the students in your grade believe that?
A: Yes. Because I honestly think that teachers in other schools don’t push their students as much as teachers in WHEELS do.

Q: What do the teachers do?

A: They motivate us.

**Q: Like what? Give me an example.**
A: Let’s see… They’re always talking about how to be really successful…And most of us, we have careers that we want to pursue…And the only way to do that is by being focused and doing well in school.

**Q: Do you think your teachers have high expectations for you?**
A: Yeah.

**Q: Do you think they trust the students?**
A: Yes.

**Q: Do you think they care about their students?**
A: Definitely
(From a student interview, June 2012)

This dissertation is the first in-depth academic study of this school’s inner workings. My findings document that WHEELS is a school that is driven, at its heart, by the organization, coordination, expertise, development, and empowerment of its strong teachers, in other words, its skilled teacher professional community. In the following pages, I describe the school’s effective structures, policies, and shared pedagogical practices, and analyze how they operate together to allow for cohesive and collaborative grade-level and subject-level teams of teachers to have maximum impact on each other and then students, both socially and academically. Because of strategic hiring practices that screen for “right fit”, like-minded teachers, distributed leadership structures focusing on school community building and developing strong instruction, and other teacher support and development structures, teacher-teacher trust and collective effectiveness is high and is channeled through the grade-level and subject-department-level teams, making them the backbones of the school.

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2A term Kruse, Louis and Bryk (1995) and Louis, Marks and Kruse (1996) explained as consisting of (amongst teachers): 1) shared values and norms; 2) collective focus on student learning; 3) collaboration; 4) deprivatized practice; and 5) reflective professional dialogue.
These teacher teams allow teachers to become empowered and highly coordinated (“on the same page” as the teachers say) with the smallest details related to student engagement, academics, organization, instruction and general well being. This teacher coordination and collaboration creates dense teacher-teacher and then teacher-student social networks that lead to the frequent support, communication, and sharing of effective practices and ideas between teachers, and the creation of caring relationships between students and teachers. Effective instructional strategies are woven through this strong learning community compounding with student engagement within classrooms, all leading to the achievement gains mentioned above. Feedback loops between achievement and engagement ensue as many students feel academically successful and see regular success from their peers, and an academic, safe, familial school learning community takes hold.

One teacher described this link between the school’s strong learning community and instruction, saying: “It is all of our hard work and teaching, plus all of the little things we (teachers) do together to build the community that creates the strong school culture, but then it is also that school culture that helps us to really be effective teachers too.” (Teresa, Spring 2013³). As such, this in-depth study, then, links up school wide organizational structures and policies that support and develop teachers, teacher-teacher and teacher-student social and interpersonal relations, and effective pedagogical practices, to positive student orientations and academic outcomes. In doing so, it describes how this neighborhood public school can function at a high level and get some of the strongest student achievement gains in the city, providing some important lessons for those interested in building effective schools.

³ All teacher and student names referenced throughout this dissertation are pseudonyms.
However, to be clear, this project should not be read as an argument that good schools (and teachers) can, *by themselves and at a large and sustainable enough scale*, alleviate social inequality generally, and systematically close the race and class based “achievement gaps” in our society. These are “opportunity gaps” (Darling Hammond 2010; Carter and Welner 2013) with roots located outside of schools and associated with the larger socio-structural problems (poverty, racial segregation, historical lack of opportunities for upward mobility, etc.).

Education scholar and former President of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Gloria Ladson Billings (2006), has argued the “achievement gap” is actually an “educational debt” owed to our nation’s low-income children and children of color for generations of oppression and lack of opportunity. She says:

…when we begin looking at the construction and compilation of what I have termed the education debt, we can better understand why the achievement gap is a logical outcome. I am arguing that the historical, economic, sociopolitical and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society have created an education debt. (Ladson Billings 2006: 5)

On this point the research is clear: the effects of poverty, underemployment and joblessness, racism, and other structural inequalities map onto inequalities in our education system--inequalities in school funding between poor and rich districts, overcrowding in poor schools, substandard teachers and leaders with low expectations in poor schools, high teacher turnover in poor districts, etc.--and compound to weigh heavily upon the shoulders of our nation’s low-income African American and Latino youth, applying downward pressure on their achievement (Kasinitz et al. 2008; Anyon 1997; Darling Hammond 2010; Kozol 1991, 2006; Orfield 1996). Clearly, we cannot and should not rely on schools to do this sociopolitical, economic, moral and historical lifting on their own because they will be unable to on a large
enough and sustainable enough scale over time (Rothstein 2004; Anyon 2005), even if we do see success in a few exceptional cases.

The causes of low-income student underachievement extend far beyond the school in to the historical, economic and socio-political spheres. And moreover, as Anyon (2005) reminds us, even when K-12 achievement is there, the flawed economic/opportunity structure may not reward it economically, and hence, economic and educational policies will have to work hand-in-hand for true social justice:

As a nation we have been counting on education to solve problems of unemployment, joblessness, and poverty for many years. But education did not cause these problems and education cannot solve them. An economic system that chases profits and casts people aside (especially people of color) is culpable…New curriculum, standardized tests, or even nurturing small schools do not create living wage jobs and do not provide poor children with the funds and supports for enough further education to make a significant difference in their lives…(but) even though economic justice may be a prerequisite for educational justice, more equitable macroeconomic policies will not by themselves create high quality urban schools. Macroeconomic policies will need to be augmented with educational policies. (Anyon 2005: 3)

In sum, I will not make the claim here, as some school reformers do, that building better teachers and schools is all society needs to do to close the “achievement gaps” on a large enough and sustainable scale. We live in one of the most economically stratified times in American history, a new Gilded Age of massive and growing economic inequality (Krugman 2009) where powerful institutions and “power elites” (Mills 1956; Domhoff 2005) buy off politicians to manipulate our government to work for their interests at the expense of the interests of the public at large, and particularly the working classes and the poor. It is not because public schools are failing that a child born poor is likely to stay poor, and one who is born rich is likely to stay rich, and that the concept of American meritocracy continues to be a myth for far too many. For instance, we know that there are significant and large “achievement gaps”--linguistic/vocabulary
and content knowledge—between poor students and their upper and middle class peers even before they step foot inside a school for kindergarten (Hart and Risely 1999; Farkas and Beron 2001) as measured, for example, by analyses of large federal data sets such as the ECLS-K (Attewell 2006).

However, research is also clear that low-income students are able, ready and willing to learn at very high levels when they are consistently provided with high quality teachers and school leaders; safe, caring and communal learning environments; rigorous and engaging curriculum and lessons; high expectations for engagement and achievement along with ongoing academic supports; mentoring; and adequate resources (Smith 2008; Macey, Decker and Eckes 2009; Ascher and Maguire 2007; Darling Hammond 2010; Tough 2009; Dobbie and Fryer 2012; Chenoweth 2009; Noguera 2008; Ladson Billings 1994). We know that individual schools can significantly alter the educational trajectories of their students. We have millions of students in our nation’s schools now who deserve the best education possible leading to the most opportunities available to them for having life-choices and secure and happy adult lives; we cannot wait for large-scale macroeconomic policies to take hold. Social and political movements take time, generations, and meanwhile there are eager, smart, hard-working students in our classrooms right now ready to learn as much as they can.

Therefore, educators can push back against the forces currently producing social inequality, in part by improving teacher and school leader quality and effectiveness, as well as the organizational/institutional structures of schools serving low-income students. High quality schools, including skilled teachers with the right mindsets about their students and the requirements of the teaching profession, will be an important factor within a constellation of other large scale social, political, and economic factors, in creating a more equal, just, and
upwardly mobile American society (Noguera 2003; Darling-Hammond 2010; Anyon 2005; Rothstein 2004; Meier 1995; Mehta 2013). Identifying strong public schools serving low-income students, and then describing and analyzing in detail the structures, policies and practices at work within them, particularly for how they support teacher quality and development, are some of the first steps in building better public schools, and school systems, from the classrooms out.

The goal of this dissertation is to dissect one such school, so as to spread knowledge about what is working at WHEELS’ middle school, how, and why. WHEELS’ middle school exemplifies what can be done successfully in a public, non-charter, neighborhood middle school in New York City that does not select its students nor push out those most difficult to teach, all with a unionized teaching staff and the same funding as other city public schools. In fact, according to the NYCDoe School Progress Report data, it is outperforming almost every charter middle school in the city in terms of overall student academic progress. WHEELS’ incoming students enter middle school as some of the lowest achieving students in the city and they leave middle school on significantly higher academic ground.

This study will unpack how this happens by explaining three major pillars responsible for the school’s success, three pillars that I believe work together to create a strong community of learning within WHEELS that supports and maximizes teacher effectiveness, in what I call a teacher-centered theory of school context. Pillar one is the building of a strong, collaborative, skilled teacher professional community, one supported by particular school structures and founded on shared beliefs, trust, communication, and coordination/collaboration between teachers, concepts I will weave together later in Chapter 3 to call teacher collective efficacy.

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4 I offer this concept as a way to help explain variability in school quality among demographically similar schools in the same way that Robert Sampson (2012) has done with his theory of neighborhood context centered on the concept of neighborhood collective efficacy. I will touch on this research in chapter 3.
Pillar two is the creation of a strong student learning community, one based in caring relationships (social capital) with teachers and feelings of academic success and growth, and generated and sustained by the cohesive teacher professional community doing its work each day. And, pillar three is the weaving of strong instructional practices, supported by teacher-teacher development structures and teacher stability, through both levels of community. Taken together, these three pillars—a strong and cohesive teacher professional community, a strong teacher-student and student-student learning community, and strong instruction and teacher development--operate as central factors constructing the positive learning community at WHEELS and leading to the maximizing of teacher effectiveness in the school.

**Analytical Framework and Relevant Literature**

*Social Inequality and Achievement*

Decades of research has documented the ways and extent to which socio-structural variables such as poverty, racism and their associated by-products (joblessness, neighborhood violence, overcrowded and underfunded public schools, lack of health care, disruptions in housing stability, homelessness, and a general lack of opportunity for upward mobility, etc.) affect low-income student academic engagement and achievement. Coleman (1966) was pessimistic that schools alone could counteract the effects of poverty on students. Even though his research methods were later shown to be suspect, his research influenced generations of education policy makers and scholars (Borman and Dowling 2010). Wilson’s (1987, 1996) research described the ways in which deindustrialization in cities caused joblessness and then concentrated poverty leading to social disorganization in neighborhoods, which then negatively affected community institutions and residents and created an urban underclass with limited
opportunities for work and avenues for escape. Massey and Denton’s (1993) work added the lens of structural racism to Wilson’s more socio-economic analysis of urban decay and described the pernicious effects that racial segregation has had on inner-city communities, including schools. Taken together, both theories correctly advocated for large-scale social and economic programs above and beyond education policy, programs aimed at ending poverty, joblessness, and racial segregation.

Using longitudinal ethnographic methods, Anderson’s (2000) research in Philadelphia linked both racial segregation and economic deindustrialization to the ways in which inner-city residents struggle to adapt to the decay of institutions and lack of governmental services in their communities. In Anderson’s work, the urban schools he studied were underfunded, overcrowded and unable to keep out some of the social problems of the impoverished neighborhoods within which they were situated. Mateo-Gelabert and Lune (2007) and Lopez (2002) found this to be true as well in their respective qualitative studies of struggling, overcrowded New York City high schools.

Anyon (1997, 2005) built off of these sorts of arguments to examine how urban public schools are constrained by the political, social, and economic contexts within which they are situated. After studying Newark’s public schools, she argued that no school reform can work, long-term, without addressing larger macro-level economic, social and political measures/policies aimed at revitalizing the cities and eliminating poverty and its widespread effects on residents. Accordingly, the causes of urban public schools’ dysfunctions are rooted deep in the socio-economic structure, in the workings of our present form of unchecked global capitalism and the colonization of the democratic (policy making) process by monnied-capital interests that extract resources and divert investment from inner-city communities and
institutions. In sum, she argued we must transform the political, social and economic systems of this country first in order to then positively transform educational policies and the quality of urban schools.

Kozol’s (1991, 2006) journalistic writings, and Rothstein’s (2004) quantitative research, among others, have similarly made strong claims about the need for educational policies addressing low-income student underachievement to be lodged within larger comprehensive anti-poverty programs, including providing much more funding for public schools, in order for there to be lasting and transformative achievement gains from students across the board.

Taken together these works have analyzed the social, economic and political macro-level contexts within which schools exist and have made a strong case that school reform cannot be the only type of policy enacted to counter the weight that socio-economic inequality, poverty, and structural racism have on low income student academic outcomes and general well-being. As Rothstein states:

If as a society we choose to preserve big social class differences, we must necessarily also accept substantial gaps between the achievement of lower-class and middle-class children. Closing those gaps requires not only better schools, although those are certainly needed, but also reform in the social and economic institutions that presently prepare students to learn in radically different ways.

(2004: 149)

_Schools and Social Reproduction_

Drilling down from these macro-level explanations for underachievement, some researchers have analyzed life within schools and uncovered how schools work to reproduce or even widen existing socio-economic and racial inequalities. Economists Bowles and Gintis (1977, 2002) argued that public schooling actively trains working-class youth to become obedient and compliant laborers, while training middle and upper class youth for more autonomous, higher status and higher paying jobs. Poor students receive less rigorous and more
rote curriculum and teaching methods than middle and upper income students. More recent research on the negative effects on students of class and race-based tracking in schools has supported Bowles and Gintis’ general conclusions about the complicity of schooling in the leveling of opportunity for low income students, particularly students of color (Oakes 1985; Tyson 2011).

Similarly focused on schooling processes, Collins’ (1977) work implicated educational credentials and argued that schools use testing and credentialing to sort students in ways that close off educational paths to high-status occupations to students coming from lower-status (class) backgrounds. For Collins, the processes of sorting, testing and credentialing are social weapons incorporated by dominant groups to limit competition for well-compensated jobs, thereby guaranteeing the generational transmission of their socio-economic privilege and status (Attewell and Lavin 2007). Relatedly, and on the topic of testing, Jencks (1998) has documented ways in which tests can be class and racially biased, while Steele and Aronson’s (1998) research showed how negative stereotypes of African American students can lower their test performance through a concept called stereotype threat.

Continuing along this line of school-based inquiry, Bourdieu (1977; 1986; 1999) advanced a more complicated view of how schools reproduce inequality in society, offering the concept of cultural capital as one form of capital individuals can possess (along with economic, social and symbolic capitals). He described how different social classes socialize their children at home to different codes of speech and ways of interaction that are then differentially rewarded or sanctioned in society’s institutions, such as schools. For example, teachers and other adult professional figures primarily come from the middle-classes and reward youth (sometimes unconsciously) with the same cultural practices and dispositions as themselves (Lareau 2003;
Delpit 2006; Allen 2006; Macleod 1987). In contrast, working-class youth are directly and indirectly sanctioned in schools for their cultural ways and often blame themselves for academic troubles sometimes leading to disengagement from disrespectful schooling processes and experiences (MacLeod 1987). All of this leads middle and upper class students to more easily and successfully navigate society’s opportunity structures, of which schools are a major part, relative to their working class peers. For Bourdieu, and those who have extended his theories in their ethnographic research (Lareau 2003; MacLeod 1987), social reproduction, rather than being an organized conspiracy of the elite economic classes and status groups, operates in hidden ways in the disconnect (or “cultural mismatch”) between institutions and working class students, thereby cloaking the processes undergirding social inequality in the ideology of meritocracy and individualism.

**Student Opposition as Resistance**

While Bourdieu and those influenced by him complicated our understanding of social reproduction processes and the roles of schooling in them, some scholars have rightly critiqued his arguments for not recognizing the agency individuals have over their lives, particularly the potential for autonomous cultural production and resistance from students of marginalized groups. Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) argued that Bourdieu ignored the dialectical relationship inherent in any construction of power dynamics. While schooling processes impose limits upon students, at the same time students produce possibilities for overcoming institutional domination in what the authors call a “transformative process” (79). They wrote, “By failing to develop a theory of ideology that speaks to the ways in which human beings dialectically create, resist, and accommodate themselves to dominant ideologies, Bourdieu excludes the active nature of both domination and resistance” (81).
Paul Willis (1977) took this angle of analysis to describe how “working class kids get working class jobs” as more than just a story of docile students subjected to class domination in the form of school policies and curriculum. In his ethnographic study of an English high school he described how working-class white students’ perceptions of limited opportunities for upward mobility led them to resist schooling, act up in class and/or skip school. They constructed their social class and youth-based identities in opposition to the education system, effectively sealing their educational and economic fates as they would subsequently be relegated to the lowest strata of the socio-economic structure for the life course after leaving school. This concept of student opposition as resistance was adapted to a US context by anthropologist John Ogbu and colleagues (Ogbu 1987; Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Ogbu and Simons 1998) who argued that some African American students are oppositional in school as a form of resistance to racism in the labor market and other parts of society, which then pushes them toward limited educational and employment outcomes at school exit. Later, Portes and Zhou (1993) and Portes and Rumbaut (2001) placed “oppositional culture”, along with other factors, at the center of their influential segmented assimilation theory of immigration, to partially explain why certain immigrant groups but not others experience downward socio-economic mobility in the second, and subsequent, generations.

Good Schools and Teachers Matter

The research summarized above, analyzed the ways in which socio-structural forces located outside of schools negatively influence individuals, particularly student engagement and achievement, and/or the ways in which schools operate to support an unequal societal status quo, rather than work toward greater equality of opportunity. However, scholars working from these perspectives do not account for the fact that the organization, quality of instruction, and internal
learning environments of schools can vary from school to school, even after controlling for socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, etc. as we saw in the opening vignette to this chapter. They overlook the fact that school quality generally--teacher and leader quality, learning environment, etc.--can matter greatly in influencing student attitudes and student academic achievement (Borman and Dowling 2010; Hilliard 2003; Steele 2003; Perry 2003). Said one student on this topic in an interview with me:

**Q: Do you think WHEELS is a community? Does it feel like a family, like a community, or not?**
A: Yes I think it does feel like a family because everybody sticks with each other, and if somebody has a problem then you’ll see like the whole group is coming together.

**Q: Just between the kids or is there community between the teachers and the students?**
A: It’s community all around, everybody gets along with everybody.

**Q: So you think that really? Because in some schools it’s like the teachers versus the students--students disrespecting teachers, teachers giving discipline to students. How is it here (at WHEELS)?**
A: It’s different here. Here everybody respects everybody. The students respect teachers, the teachers respect students, the students respect students.

**Q: And why do you think that is? Do you ever think about it?**
A: It’s just the environment like, it’s a safe environment. It’s like, the way you act is the way you’re surrounded. Like if you’re a kid and you’re surrounded in a bad neighborhood, you’re going to end up acting bad. But if you’re surrounded in a good environment, you’re going to become good.
(Charles, June 2013)

Good teachers and effective schools can make a great difference for students. We need to bring the school back in to analyses of student achievement and engagement processes in the field of the sociology of education, and get much more detailed about what is working, how exactly, and why in the field of education. For instance, on the topic of student engagement, my research in the subsequent pages supports the work of others (Smith 2008; Kasinitz et. al 2008; Tyson 2005; Harris 2006; Noguera 2008; Gelebert and Lune 2007; Hilliard 2003; Perry 2003)
who have challenged the existence of an *oppositional culture* to education as a widespread phenomenon among low-income African American and Latino students. Clearly, the institutions that students spend eight of more hours of their days in play a large role in shaping their orientations/feelings about education and school as well as their achievement trajectories. At WHEELS’ middle school, the majority of students are not oppositional to education partly because they are embedded in caring relationships with adults within a safe and communal school learning environment, and because they feel themselves regularly growing as learners in their classrooms, and see and hear about success from their peers. This finding is in support of Haris’ (2006) research on the centrality of academic success to student engagement and behavior. It also supports Mateu-Gelebert and Lune’s (2007) ethnographic research in a different NYCDOE school which sheds light on the importance of the school learning environment, primarily whether students feel as if school personnel such as teachers have adequately constructed a safe school context for them to focus on learning. On this point they wrote: “…we view students’ commitments to academic performance and behavior decisions as significantly influenced by the schools they attend and the reinforcements they perceive there (174).

Furthermore, on the effects of the quality of the instruction students receive from teachers, Hilliard (2003) put it clearly when he wrote: “The problem is (with the concept of oppositional culture), do these orientations (oppositional) appear under all conditions, especially under the conditions of inspired teaching?...On the ground things are often very different…their (students’) opposition seems to always disappear when…good teaching…is provided” (147). Or, as one WHEELS student said to me in an interview about the subject of teacher quality, “If I have a good relationship with a teacher, then I am going to work harder for him in class because
I don’t want to let him down” (Ryan, April 2012). My research, then, on this specific topic of student engagement, will add to the literature in the sociology of education and education fields by describing how, at WHEELS, students are engaged in their school, their learning and their relationships with peers and teachers, and what school structures and teacher moves created such a school community—this is an organizational perspective as well as a (granular and collective) teacher-practice perspective.

Scholars, policy-makers and practitioners concerned with education reform and issues of low-income student achievement would do well to study excellent schools, their organization and the teaching and learning practices within them, in order to impact education policy in more direct and meaningful ways. It has been well documented in the sociology of education that schools that are chaotic and violent, academically unchallenging, and socially and emotionally unsupportive can produce poor academic outcomes, alienation, leveled aspirations, and oppositional attitudes and behaviors in some students (Stanton-Salazar 2001; Valenzuela 1999; Ferguson 2001; Willis 1977; MacLeod 1987; Lopez 2003; Gelebert and Lune 2007; Fine 1991), sometimes leading to dropping out of school altogether (Lee and Burkam 2003). What have been less thoroughly examined are the exceptional cases—the successful public schools serving low-income students of color that are high functioning, and how these schools build and maintain positive, communal internal school communities, and implement and support effective instructional and assessment strategies that boost academic achievement in the face of limited resources and the challenges of poverty (See Bartlett and Garcia’s 2011 book from for a good example for this type of scholarship, also of a school in Washington Heights, a high school). Scholars such as Noguera (2008) have also advocated for this type of educational research on
exceptional cases, saying: “…one of the best ways to learn how this can be done is to study those schools and programs that have proven successful in accomplishing this goal” (23).

In the following pages, I will do this by engaging with three influential bodies of research in the sociology of education that are specifically linked to the three pillars of the school’s success I outlined above. The first two bodies of research deal with the underlying social relations between actors in schools; the first is the research on adult-level trust in schools, specifically relational trust between teachers, and the second is about the power of student-teacher relationships and social capital processes. The third strand is about teacher quality, expertise and development, specifically around strong instructional strategies and techniques, because this is where the rubber hits the road in terms of how much students learn in class. Again, these three strands—teacher community, student community, and strong instruction—wove together and reinforce each other to create a strong learning community of achievement at WHEELS’ middle school.

The Teacher-Teacher Social Relations Underpinning the School’s Success: Relational Trust

Teachers are embedded within an institutional/organizational culture of the school, and this organizational context shapes their daily work in numerous ways. Early on in the project I was aware of how important adults being on the same page with their beliefs and practices (coordination) is to WHEELS’ success, as well as the importance of effective instruction and its supports. In fact, this coordination was one of the founding principles of the school. However, over time as I delved deeper into the life of the school and the social relations underpinning the functioning of the school’s structures and policies, the concept of trust between teachers continued to come up in my own experiences, observations, and interviews with teachers as foundational to how and why the teachers initially got on and then stayed on the same page, to
how and why they bought in to communicating and collaborating so tightly together, and supporting each other over an entire school year or even multiple school years. Hearing teachers in conversations and interviews over and over talking about how much they relied on each other and trusted their colleagues--from something small like making a parent phone call to something larger and instructional like allowing one to observe a lesson and modeling an effective pedagogical technique--sent me to research the literature on the concept of trust as it relates to school quality.

Here, the most developed and relevant works were from two academic camps. The first was the large-sample, survey-based and quantitative research of Wayne Hoy and colleagues on trust as a collective property between various constituencies in schools, a conception of trust that is part of Hoy’s decades long exploration and development of the concept of school climate. He and his colleagues found that trust in schools is influenced by factors such as the multipronged concept of *academic optimism* amongst a faculty (Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk Hoy 2006), teachers’ sense of individual and collective efficacy within a school as it relates to shared-decision making influencing instruction (Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk Hoy 2004; Goddard, Hoy and Woolfolk Hoy 2000; Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, and Woolfolk Hoy 1998), and the increase in perceived levels of respect and professional competence between teachers and leaders in schools as a product, by nature, of the interdependent work relationships amongst adults working with the same kids (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, and Hoy 2001; Tschannen-Moran and Hoy 2000; Hoy and Tschannen-Moran 1999).

The second (and related) strand in the research on trust within schools is the work of Anthony Bryk and colleagues (2002; 2010). Bryk and Barbara Schneider’s influential book *Trust in Schools* (2002) introduced to the field a particular type of trust, *relational trust*, which is...
a conception of trust rooted in daily interpersonal interactions between adults in schools. In this mixed-methods, multi-year study of Chicago schools, Bryk and Schneider described and analyzed the positive effects of relational trust on student outcomes. Here, relational trust between teachers, parents, and school leaders functions as the institutional glue that steadies school structures and practices and mediates whether particular education policies succeed or fail within schools. Specifically, Bryk’s and colleagues’ work found that schools with high levels of academic growth over multiple years displayed consistently high levels of relational trust between teachers, leaders and parents. They also found that relational trust consists of four components related to individuals’ (teachers, parents, school leaders) perceptions of the actions and intentions of those around them: 1) *respect*, or whether one treats others kindly and with care; 2) *regard for others*, or whether one is willing to go outside of one’s role obligations to help other co-workers; 3) *competence*, or whether one is good at one’s job, specifically as it relates to helping students succeed; and 4) *integrity*, or whether one’s actions match one’s words and align with student needs.

In the daily, multiple interpersonal interactions between teachers, school leaders, students, and parents, individuals are constantly discerning whether one’s actions match his/her role’s understood obligations, whether one’s role obligations positively impact student learning, and to what extent, when carrying out obligations (doing one’s job), one acts in a positive fashion with regards to the four components—respect, personal regard for others, competence, and integrity. In other words, schools where faculty believed that their co-workers were respectful, had personal regard for others, were competent at their job, and had integrity, were the schools that were generating higher levels of student learning.
Hoy and colleagues’ quantitative research, and Bryk and Schneider’s mixed-methods research complement each other both methodologically and conceptually as both camps have noted (Hoy et al. 2006; Bryk and Schneider 2002), with both concluding that high levels of trust between adults in schools positively influences student achievement. Put more generally, their research has brought attention to how important the social relations inside schools are for schools to function at high levels, particularly schools serving low-income students academically behind.

State Bryk and Schneider:

…the social relationships at work in school communities comprise a fundamental feature of their operation. The nature of these social exchanges, and the local cultural features that shape them, condition a school’s capacity to improve. Designing good schools requires us to think about how best to organize the work of adults so that they are more likely to fashion together a coherent environment for the development of children. We have learned…that the broad base of trust across a school community lubricates much of a school’s day-today functioning and is a critical resource as local leaders embark on ambitious improvement plans. Moreover, we maintain that this social trust is especially important as we focus on disadvantaged urban schools…(Bryk and Schneider 2002: 5-6)

However, how is trust actually built in schools? And, what specific school structures, policies, and pedagogical practices and beliefs operating within schools actually facilitate or hinder the building of trust over time between and among teachers and other adults such as school leaders? Hoy and colleagues’ quantitative studies do not answer these social process-type questions. And, although Bryk and Schneider’s multi-methods study touched somewhat on these questions in the chapters containing their qualitative analyses of the interpersonal interactions of principals, teachers and parents, more research is needed, particularly regarding the role played by school structures and organization in all of this. Moreover, these are questions for which principals and teachers working in schools need concrete, specific answers to if they are to embark on improving the organizational conditions in their schools. Answering these questions about the creation and sustenance of relational trust at WHEELS and how it supports the
cohesive teacher professional community will be one contribution of this dissertation. Chapter 3, my first qualitative chapter, will do just this.

*The Teacher-Student Social Relations Underpinning the School’s Success: Social Capital and Organizational Embeddedness*

The next body of research moves us from teacher-teacher social relations to teacher-student social relations. In order to understand student engagement and academic processes at WHEELS and the building of healthy learning communities within the school, it is important to understand the sociological concept of social capital because student-teacher relationships and a sense of school community are so central. The term *social capital* is generally defined in the sociological literature as the networks of ties, or relationships, between individuals within a social network (Coleman 1988; Valenzuela 1999; Stanton-Salazar 2001; Noguera 2004; Suarez Orozco et al. 2008; Conchas and Rodriguez 2008). Within schools it is usually used to refer to the relationships students are engaged in with teachers and other school based adults, sometimes called “institutional agents” (Stanton Salazar 2011). It is through such relational ties between institutional agents and students that academic, cultural, emotional, and social resources and supports flow, assisting and empowering students in many ways to navigate the complicated, sometimes daunting and rigged opportunity structure in America.

Because teachers and students are embedded within organizational contexts which shape how they interact, what Small (2009) has called *organizational embeddedness*, the nature of the school’s learning environment and the quality of the adults operating within it can support the creation and sustenance of teacher-student relationships (Conchas and Rodriguez 2008; Suarez Orozco et al. 2008), or conversely, strain and break them (Valenzuela 1999; Stanton-Salazar 2001; Ferguson 2001). These relationships and networks of support between teachers (and other
adult mentors in a school) and students play vital roles in building strong learning environments that support student achievement and engagement, above and beyond the positive effects of small school size (Conchas and Rodriguez 2008; Davis and Warner 2014). Thus, many low-income students who have experienced upward socio-economic mobility have, in part, benefited directly from sustained social capital ties and the resources that flowed through them from non-family, caring adults (Smith 2008; Noguera 2008; Suarez Orozco et. al 2008; Stanton-Salazar 2001).

Given the importance of the concept of social capital in schools to social mobility, it is necessary that schools be staffed with caring, professional, talented teachers and other adults who will build social capital connections (strong relationships) with students as a central part of their pedagogical practice; but, the burden of forging these social ties cannot rest on the students (Stanton-Salazar 2001). I take this stance because teacher-student relationships are so central to student engagement and achievement processes at WHEELS, and therefore, I believe the research to date on social capital is one starting point from which to analyze the work done in WHEELS.

However, social capital theorists leave unexplored the processes by which positive social capital creation between students and adults in schools occurs. Another contribution of my findings will be to fill in some of these gaps by investigating how the major factors making up WHEELS’ strong school community—relationships (social capital and relational trust), teaching and learning processes, school structures and policies for adults and students, communication with families, etc.—interact with each other and operate collectively as they simultaneously work to structure student consciousness, particularly student academic orientations. While the aforementioned works on social capital highlight in different ways the importance of these
relationships on student achievement and engagement, these works do not articulate in enough detail what particular institutional school-wide practices and policies help teachers and other adult mentors as they initiate, build, and sustain these caring, trusting relationships with individual students and groups of students. In other words, they leave unexamined how school context, including school structures and teacher practice, mediates the processes of building relationships of trust between adults and students.

Furthermore, they also do not explicitly tell us how social capital is activated within a classroom, for example, and leveraged to produce increases in student achievement over time. Social capital by itself will not automatically translate into higher levels of achievement. Other factors must be present, such as a teacher’s instructional quality, for this to happen. There are limits to what social capital may do for students; good teachers build strong relationships with their students, but they also employ instructional best-practices every day in their classrooms, and good schools are structured to support their teachers in doing these things. Chapter 4, my second qualitative chapter, will describe how the teacher professional community at WHEELS does this work of connecting with students.

*The Centrality of Teacher Quality, Development, and Strong Instruction*

These school community socio-relational processes are important because they support high quality, collaborative instruction leading to student achievement, which feeds right in to topics of teacher development, support and empowerment around instructional quality. The importance of having agreed-upon teaching standards for the teaching profession has been convincingly argued for by education scholars such as Linda Darling-Hammond (2005, 2010) and Mehta (2013), as well as by practitioners such as Jon Saphier and colleagues (2008), Farr and colleagues (2010), Fisher and Frey (2008, 2010), Marshall (2008), Danielson (2007),
Wiggins and McTighe (2005), and Lemov (2010), among many others. For example, Lemov (2010), calls teachers “artisans”, defining this term as an expert who trains intensively in the high standards of a profession, with meticulous attention to the smallest details, and masters the body of effective techniques of a craft. Being an artisan is at the heart of being a master artist, an artist being one who applies expert technique to the creative process in order to create a work of art. By this definition, master teachers are artisans and artists. They know their field well—the knowledge base of effective teaching methods and standards—and they employ effective mindsets and techniques with precision, being very intentional as to the details of the craft. However, they apply and adapt these techniques within their classroom contexts with flexibility and fluency when they decide that they will achieve certain engagement and achievement results, and they put them away in their professional toolboxes when they do not think utilizing one will be effective.

Major works in the sociology of education over the last few decades have attempted to understand low-income student achievement and the factors influencing it from many different angles. One angle left under-researched in this subfield of sociology is that of the quality of the craft of teaching—for example, curriculum planning, unit and lesson planning; instructional delivery; checking for understanding and assessing students during class and after; and managing the classroom environment, to name a just a few pedagogical categories. It is as if sociologists have decided to leave these important topics influencing student engagement and achievement mostly to the fields of education and social psychology. This shows a lack of understanding of what good teaching is, as if to believe that it is just standing up in front of students and presenting information. Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2005) have made this point, saying: “Many people do not understand what successful teaching requires and do not see
teaching as a difficult job that requires rigorous training. Others believe that there is not much more to teaching than knowing the subject matter that children should learn” (2). This lack of attention to the quality of teaching by sociologists is unfortunate because the field of sociology has the richest tradition and deepest knowledge base of any academic field regarding the social contexts of education, exploring how topics such as poverty, racial segregation, and particular neighborhood effects, for example, influence achievement. The same can be said regarding topics within the sociology of organizations about the ways in which individuals interact with each other within institutions, and why some organizations function more effectively than others.

Yet, sociologists of education should not turn away from the reality that it is within classrooms, at the intersection of student and teacher, where learning happens (or does not) at its most powerful and granular levels. Yes, these micro-interactions are embedded within socio-structural and institutional contexts, yet if we are to avoid the trap of structural determinism we must attend to research that seriously analyzes the quality of the practice of teaching, as a profession, where certain teaching strategies, techniques and mentalities, as well as the effectiveness with which they are implemented within unique classroom contexts, lead to varied student results, some better than others.

Moreover, much like the comparison to artistry above, the analogy to surgeons and the field of medicine is helpful here, an analogy which Darling-Hammond (2010), Sahlberg (2011), and Mehta (2013) make convincingly. For, just as sociologists would rarely attempt to analyze the practice of medicine and the effects of a particular surgery on a patient’s health without a deep understanding of the scientific and medical knowledge base within which doctors perform their work, so should sociologists not ignore the work within the field of education around issues of teacher effectiveness, student engagement, and achievement. Leaving out analyses of the
nature and quality of instruction from research performed on student achievement and
enrollment leaves partially unanswered why some students achieve at higher levels than others,
and why some schools serving similar student populations vary in terms of academic outcomes.

To say this is not to negate the effects of social class inequalities, poverty, racial
segregation, historical exclusion, and other structural stratification factors operating outside of
schools to place downward pressure on student achievement (the education debt) nor the power
of the organizational characteristics of schools, including leadership quality, on teacher
effectiveness. As the sociologist Robert Sampson (2012) reminds us in his study of community
life in Chicago, there are no either-or scenarios in such analyses of the interplay of macro-,
meso- and micro-variables at work within complex social conditions. We are trying to
understand the nuances and details of social life at this time and place, and teachers and students
have some agency in these processes, while still being embedded within meso- and macro-level
social structures. WHEELS has school structures that select teachers to work at WHEELS who
are like minded and in-line with the school’s mission and beliefs about what works for its
students, and teacher support structures driven by teacher-leader roles that help develop
instructional practice around effective pedagogy. Chapter 5, my third and last qualitative
chapter, will discuss these roles, structures, policies and practices that support and develop strong
instruction, and discuss its interplay with the teacher and student communities of the previous
chapters.

Taken together, these three chapters set about describing how and why WHEELS works,
through the lens of a collective teacher-centered theory of school context, explaining how
teachers are supported by school structures and each other as they engage in the work each day
of caring for and educating their students.
The Study: Research Questions, Methods, and Data Analysis

Research Questions: My most general research question is: How and why is WHEELS a successful public middle school? After some research, I determined that the teacher teams are the backbones of the school, and three smaller questions emerged: 1) How do the cohesive teacher teams, operating within supportive school structures, function to coordinate and empower teachers and build a strong teacher professional community in the school? 2) How does the teacher professional community build and sustain a strong student learning community connected to teachers and engaged in doing well in school? And, 3) How do school structures and the teacher professional community support effective instructional practices?

To investigate these questions, I utilized a multi-method case-study approach, including seven years of ethnographic participant-observation in all areas of the school; in depth interview data from nearly forty teachers, students, and administrators; middle school parent and student survey data\(^5\) from the NYCDOE Learning Environment Surveys for WHEELS in comparison to all the averages for all NYCDOE schools on each question; and three years of NYCDOE school-level student achievement data in the form of the NYCDOE School Progress Reports. I will detail each method below.

Informal and Formal Participant-Observation: I have worked at this school for over seven years as an instructional coach of teachers, a non-supervisory role. During this time I observed countless lessons; participated in many meetings with parents, teachers, and leaders; and taught classes. I call this the informal, embedded participant-observation research phase, from September of 2006 to January of 2012. After January of 2012, I began working part-time at the school in order to focus on this dissertation. From February of 2012 to July of 2013, I

\(^5\) Teacher survey data was not able to be used because the NYCDOE did not disaggregate the WHEELS middle school teacher survey results from the WHEELS high school teacher survey results.
conducted formal participant-observation in the school in most settings, including classrooms. I took field notes and wrote analytical memos from these observations.

*Semi-Structured Interviews:* I interviewed fifteen middle school teachers (out of eighteen total teachers in the middle school) across all subjects and all grades, as well as eight former WHEELS middle school teachers now teaching in the high school in order to add a historical perspective. I also interviewed the assistant principal of the middle school and the principal of the entire school. Moreover, I interviewed twelve students across various grades. The student participants were boys and girls with various GPAs. I selected them randomly from teacher lists. I performed follow-up interviews as necessary and had interviews transcribed.

*New York City Department of Education Progress Report Data*: Every year the NYCDOE issues a “School Progress Report” for each school in the system, which documents academic progress and performance in each school. I used data from the 2010-2011, 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years. I used the Progress Report because it is a more robust indicator of school-level student achievement than using standardized test performance, and its statistical measures are designed to control (somewhat) for the demographic characteristics of students. Furthermore, parent, teacher, and student Learning Environment surveys are given in each school every year on topics such as safety and respect, engagement, communication and academic expectations. I used the parent and student survey results for the 2012-2013 school year, as it was the only year to date where the WHEELS middle school survey results were separated from the WHEELS high school survey results.

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Data Analysis and Validity: Regarding the qualitative data, I read and re-read field notes, transcriptions and analytical memos and coded them thematically. The NYCDOE data is made public in the Microsoft Excel spreadsheets cited in the footnotes, and I ran descriptive statistics in Excel to analyze this data. This allowed me to situate WHEELS as a high functioning school compared to others on a number of different metrics related to academic progress and learning environment (from the surveys).

In order to ensure validity and to guard against any potential biases as an insider, I triangulated the data in the following ways. First, the quantitative school-level student achievement data from the Progress Reports documented that WHEELS is a relatively high functioning school serving a low-income population by allowing me to compare WHEELS to all other schools in the system. Second, the ethnographic participant-observation over multiple years allowed me enough time to construct grounded claims and to analyze the effects social factors had on each other as they worked themselves out over time. Third, the interviews allowed me to gather detailed data, test hypotheses, and complicate my understandings particularly on the social mechanisms at work in the school. Fourth, the parent, teacher, and student Learning Environment surveys, broken down by question, allowed me to crosscheck the findings and assumptions from my observations and interviews against school-level and system-level survey trends. Lastly, by naming the school, others can fact-check (Duneier 1999) my claims by visiting the school and/or checking the school’s Progress Report statistics online.8

Ethnographic projects describing the internal learning environments of schools and the ways in which students and teachers respond to their school environments will add greatly to our knowledge about how and why it is that schools with similar populations of students can vary so

8 Fact-checking the Progress Report and Learning Environment Survey scores for WHEELS is possible by going to: http://schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals/06/M348/AboutUs/Statistics/default.htm.
much in their student engagement and achievement levels (Cohen el al. 2009). This detailed description of social processes and the complex, nuanced realities of everyday life is a strength of ethnographic research (Smith 2006). Moreover, ethnographic case studies examining exceptional cases offer the possibility to extend our understanding of the mechanisms involved in the shaping of the social world (Yin 1994; Small 2009a). Thus, identifying from the inside what high functioning schools serving low-income students do in order to produce high levels of student engagement and achievement is important if we are to craft effective educational policies and practices that meet the needs of all students.

My Involvement at WHEELS

While this is a multi-method case study delineated by the research design described above, the bulk of my understanding and analysis of the topics discussed in the following pages rests on my experiences as a teacher and teacher-leader in three schools in the NYCDOE over the past fifteen years. I taught social studies at IS143M, the more chaotic school in the opening vignette, for the first seven years of my career, and I have been an instructional coach at WHEELS for almost eight years. In the middle, I taught one year of 9th grade US History at a small public high school in lower Manhattan. In short, then, I have worked in the same building, in two different schools, IS143M and WHEELS, for fifteen years.

A Look Ahead

Chapter 2 will begin my argument by dissecting the NYCDOE School Progress Report for WHEELS, including student achievement results, the parent and student Learning Environment Survey results, and student demographic data. This chapter will make a
quantitative case for the fact that WHEELS is one of the highest performing middle schools in the NYCDoe. Chapters 3 through 5 will then describe, qualitatively, how these results are achieved by analyzing how the teachers collectively and effectively do their work. Chapter 3 will center on how the coordinated and cohesive teacher professional community, particularly the grade-level teams, are constructed and then operate to build and support relational trust between teachers and support and coordinate them in their daily work. Chapter 4 will then take a look at how teacher teams collectively build a strong student learning community. I will discuss here concepts such as how social capital ties are created and then sustain over time through very strategic, coordinated teacher actions. And, chapter 5 will bring teacher development, strong instruction, and pedagogical supports into the conversation and describe a few of the major instructional strategies and techniques that are supported by and also support the teacher and student communities. Taken together, as I mentioned above, chapters 3, 4 and 5 present a collective teacher-centered theory of school context as central to WHEELS’ high student engagement levels and achievement gains.
Chapter 2: Is WHEELS’ Middle School a Good School? Academic Achievement and School Learning Environment in Comparison

WHEELS is a public, neighborhood (district catchment zone), non-selective middle school (grades 6-8) in Washington Heights, a neighborhood in northern Manhattan. As a “traditional” district school, it takes all students who are assigned to it and it does not counsel/”push” out students difficult to teach. This is for philosophical/moral reasons, but also because NYCDOE guidelines make it difficult for public district schools to transfer students out of them. For the most part, once students are in WHEELS’ middle school, they stay. Moreover, it is not unusual for WHEELS to get new students throughout the year when they move in to the neighborhood. Each grade consists of three classes of about 30 students each, for a total of about 90 students per grade and around 270 students for the entire middle school. While my understanding of the school, its teachers, and its students primarily comes from my work in the school and is also informed by my years of teaching at IS143M, I understand the need for the utilization of various types of data within a multi-method case-study approach for reasons related to validity, as well as for the analytical benefits of being able to compare WHEELS’ student achievement results to other NYCDOE middle schools. Therefore, I will dissect the NYCDOE quantitative student achievement data associated with the school in the following sections of this chapter.

The data presented in this chapter will make the quantitative case that the WHEELS middle school is a successful school beating the odds—a non-selective, public, neighborhood school in a racially segregated, resilient yet economically under resourced neighborhood, where low-income students enter at 6th grade significantly behind grade level but then make academic progress in ELA and math at a higher rate than at almost every other middle school in New York
City. To do this, I use the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) Progress Reports and demographic data associated with each school’s student population reported by the NYCDOE from the school year 2011-2012, as it was the most recent progress data available at the time of this writing\(^9\). I use the NYCDOE Progress Report data specifically in order to compare other NYCDOE middle schools to WHEELS, and because it is a more robust indicator of school level student progress and performance than using only standardized test performance. Also, the NYCDOE states that the Progress Report statistical measures are designed to capture a given school’s contribution to student learning by controlling for certain demographic characteristics of the students in each school such as socio-economic status, race/ethnicity, disabilities/special education status, 4\(^{th}\) grade test scores, and English Language Learner (ELL) status. While no statistical methods can completely control for these factors, the NYCDOE Progress Reports do so to some degree, and a recent New York City Independent Budget Office report concluded this as well (New York City Independent Budget Office, 2012)\(^10\). Also, it should be said here that I do not deal with the letter grades assigned to the schools’ Reports because they are unhelpful and arbitrary. Rather, I only examine the student achievement, demographic, and survey-based data provided in the reports.

In the following sections, I first summarize the NYCDOE 2011-2012 Middle School Progress Report methodology. I then compare the Progress Report data for WHEELS to other similar schools and to all schools in the NYCDOE. For readers who want to examine the methodology more closely, a detailed account of the methods behind the reports can be found at

\(^9\) The 2010-2011, 2011-2012, and 2012-2013 Progress Report data can be found at: http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/tools/report/default.htm. Also, the 2012-2013 data is now available though it was not at the time of my writing of this chapter. WHEELS’ results on it are consistent with the 2011-2012 Progress Report data. In fact, on the 2012-2013 Report the WHEELS’ middle school ranked in the 98\(^{th}\) percentile of all middle schools in the City, up from the 96\(^{th}\) percentile on the 2011-2012 Report. Also, WHEELS’ middle school ranked in the 85\(^{th}\) percentile on the 2010-2011 Report.

\(^10\) Accessed at www.ibc.nyc.ny.us
the NYCDOE website at:
http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/tools/report/default.htm#Methods, and then by clicking on the “Elementary/Middle/K-8” link. This document is called the Educator Guide: The New York City Progress Report Elementary/Middle/K-8 2011-2012. It is the methodological appendix to the Reports.

The 2011-2012 NYCDOE Progress Report Methodology

Overview

Every year since 2006 the NYCDOE has issued what it calls “Progress Reports” for each school in the New York City Department of Education. These reports are intended to provide a general snapshot of a given school’s annual performance. For NYCDOE middle schools, which includes three types of schools, schools that are grades 5-8, 6-8, and 6-12 (minus their 9th-12th grades), there are four main areas of the Progress Report: 1) Student (Academic) Progress; 2) Student (Academic) Performance; 3) School (Internal) Learning Environment; and 4) Closing the Achievement Gap. Each school receives an “Overall Score” on the Progress Report based on a weighted sum of scores on the aforementioned four sections following the methodology outlines below. The first three sections: Student Academic Progress, Student Academic Performance, and School Learning Environment add up to a maximum of one hundred points. The Closing the Achievement Gap section is considered ”extra credit”. I will outline the statistical metrics associated with each of the four areas below. I will also explain how the final “Overall Score” is calculated.

For the 2011-2012 school year, WHEELS ranked on the 96th percentile on the middle school Progress Report’s Overall Score, number 16 out of 387 middle schools in New York City.
It was the third highest non-selective/unscreened middle school in the city on this same summative metric, ranking it in the top 1% of all unscreened middle schools. The NYCDOE uses the term “unscreened” to refer to a school that does not have any selection criteria for incoming students such as entrance exams, portfolios, performances, GPA criteria, or any sort of lottery-based selection system.

Peer Groups and Peer Index

Creating peer groups among schools is one way the NYCDOE attempts to control for the demographic and academic differences of the student bodies between schools. This method has been cited as somewhat effective in addressing demographic differences in student bodies and sampling error (NYCIBO, 2012). To do this, each school is directly compared to forty other similar schools belonging to its what is called its “peer group”. A given school’s peer group is a group of forty schools serving students demographically and academically most similar to that school—the twenty schools directly above the given school as well as the twenty directly below the given school as measured by a metric called the peer index. This peer index metric is calculated for each school. For middle schools it is computed from the following formula using data from each school’s October 31st audited register:

$$\text{Peer index} = (\text{Average 4^{th} grade New York State Exam English and Math proficiency}) - (2 \times \text{percent students with disabilities})$$

The peer index operates on a 1.0 – 4.5 scale. A lower peer index signifies a “higher need” student population. WHEELS’ peer index in 2011-2012 was 2.23, ranking it number 279 out of 387 middle schools on this metric and placing it in the bottom 28% of all middle school
peer indexes in the city. In other words, since a school’s peer index is a measure associated with student “academic disadvantage/need” upon middle school entry, one could say that WHEELS takes in some of the most academically disadvantaged students in the city, ranking within the lowest third on this metric. Another way to state this would be to say that 72% of the middle schools in the city have a higher achieving student population upon school entry than WHEELS does, as measured by the New York State ELA and Math exams taken in fourth grade.

*Student Academic Progress (60 percent/points)*

This metric is designed to measure how much the students in a given school have progressed on the New York State English Language Arts (ELA) and Math exams over the course of one academic school year. It represents the largest portion of the Progress Report’s Overall Score for a school. The NYCDOE uses *growth percentiles* as the statistical method to measure this progress on these exams. Growth percentiles compare a student’s growth on these two state exams to all other students in the city who scored the same level of proficiency on each exam the year before. It uses a scale of 0 to 100. Therefore, a student’s growth percentile indicates each student’s percentile rank on the New York State ELA and Math exams as compared to all other students in the NYCDOE scoring the exact same score the year before.

After ranking each student within a given school in this fashion, the NYCDOE calculates a *median adjusted growth percentile* for all students in the school for each of these two state exams (ELA and Math), and also for students only in the lowest third in the school on each exam. Statistical weights are assigned for students with classified disabilities, students classified as English Language Learners (ELL), and students receiving free lunch and/or living in temporary housing.11

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11 These weights can be found in the Progress report’s methodological appendix at the link presented earlier in the chapter.
In sum, then, four metrics comprise the Student Progress section of the Progress Report:
1) median adjusted growth percentile for all students in ELA; 2) median adjusted growth percentile for students in the lowest third in the school in ELA; 3) median adjusted growth percentile for all students in math; and 4) median adjusted growth percentile for students in the lowest third in the school in math. On the 2011-2012 Progress Report, WHEELS’ overall Student Progress score ranked number 17 out of 387 middle schools in the city, placing it in the 96th percentile citywide in terms of student progress.

Student Academic Performance (25 percent/points)

Aside from measuring student growth in ELA and math, the Progress Report also measures straight student performance irrespective of growth. The New York State ELA and math exams run on a 1.0 to 4.5 scale, and students receiving a three or above are considered “proficient” in that academic area by the NYCDOE. Three metrics are used to measure student academic performance in this regard. The first metric calculates the percent of students in a school receiving above level 3 on the state ELA and Math exams. The second metric takes the average student proficiency level on a 1.0 to 4.5 scale for each state exam for all students in the school. The third metric calculates the percentage of students passing the four major courses—ELA, math, social studies and science for the year. The NYCDOE combines these three metrics to create a composite student performance score. In 2011-2012, WHEELS’ overall student performance score ranked #32 out of 387 middle schools, placing it in the 91.7th percentile of all middle schools in the city.

School Environment (15 percent/points)

In the spring of each year, the NYCDOE gives teachers, students, and parents surveys asking about their impressions and feelings of the internal learning environments of their
schools. These surveys are called Learning Environment Surveys, which are given in grades six through twelve. There are four categories of questions within these surveys and each question is aligned to one of four categories. The categories are: 1) Academic Expectations; 2) Communication; 3) Engagement; and 4) Safety and Respect. Essentially, they measure aspects of a school’s internal community and culture (sometimes also called school climate). All questions on the teacher, student, and parent surveys align to one of these four categories, but the questions on the teacher, student, and parent surveys do differ in terms of content. Below I have summarized the NYCDOE’s language used to describe each of these four categories of school learning environment.

- **Academic Expectations:** This survey category measures the degree to which the adults in a school encourage students to do their best and develop rigorous academic goals.

- **Communication:** This survey category measures the degree to which adults in a school communicate educational goals, requirements, and provide feedback to students regarding their learning outcomes.

- **Engagement:** This survey category measures the degree to which the adults in a school involve students, parents, and educators in the education of the students.

- **Safety and Respect:** This category measures the degree to which students feel safe and respected in the school.

Every school receives a score of one to ten for each answer on the teacher, student, and parent surveys. Because each question is linked to one of the four categories, the NYCDOE averages the scores of the questions in each category and creates composite “category scores” on a scale from 0 to 10--each school receives a score from 0 to 10 in each of the four aforementioned categories/domains. These domain scores combine with each school’s
attendance rate to comprise the *Learning Environment* section of the Progress Report. The surveys can be viewed by going to the NYCDOE website: 

http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/tools/survey/default.htm and following the link the citywide survey report, which provides citywide averages for each question. Survey results for each school are also viewable.

There is one way the NYCDOE’s data is flawed for this section. In relation to the subset of schools that contain grades 6-12—combined middle and high schools—as WHEELS is, in 2011-2012 and prior years, the NYCDOE did not disaggregate the middle and high school survey data. Because WHEELS’ high school is not as high functioning as the middle school, the survey scores are significantly lower for each high school group—high school students, parents and teachers—and, thus, WHEELS’ 2011-2012 middle school survey results appear lower than they should be on the school progress report because the high school student, teacher and parent results are bringing them down. I still present the combined WHEELS middle school and high school survey results for 2011-2012 in the table below, however, the reader should keep this in mind. As a fix, I was able to obtain from the NYCDOE the 2012-2013 WHEELS middle school student and parent survey responses separated from the high school student and parent responses. They indeed confirm the fact that the WHEELS middle school students and parents think and feel more positively about the educational experiences at WHEELS relative to those in of the high school. I also present this middle school student and parent survey data in comparison to the city averages below as well. However, I was not able to obtain disaggregated teacher surveys for the 2012-2013 school year, as the NYCDOE did not make this available to me.

*Closing the Achievement Gap (extra points--up to 17 points)*
Regarding the Progress Report “Overall Score”, the three Progress Report sections above--Student Progress; Student Performance; and Learning Environment--add up to 100 points. However, schools are able to earn extra points for substantial progress made in an academic year by particular student subpopulations, including students with classified disabilities, students classified as English Language Learners, and Black and Hispanic students in the lowest academic third citywide in terms of proficiency levels on the state exams. I will not go in to all of the details and metrics for this section as it comprises but a fraction of the overall score; interested readers may follow the link to the methodological appendix presented above for a detailed account of the statistics used for this section of the progress report.

**Progress Report Overall Score Calculation and Comparisons**

The NYCDOE calculates the Progress Report’s Overall Score for each middle school in the following manner. First, a comparative measure called *percent of range* is calculated for each metric within the Student Progress, Student Performance and Learning Environment areas. It is essentially a standardized percentile measure. It is calculated twice, once in relation to a given school’s peer group and again in relation to the entirety of NYCDOE middle schools (citywide). These two calculations of percent of range are the way the NYCDOE compares schools on a wide range of metrics to their peer group schools, and to the entire city population of schools.

*Percent of range* is calculated in the following manner. Each metric result for a school is compared to the historical results of the group (either peer group or city) two years prior, in this case 2009-2010 and in 2010-2011. The historical mean on a metric is set to the 50th percentile and a normal curve is assumed. The NYCDOE then sets the upper bound of the range at two
standard deviations above the mean, and the lower bound at two standard deviations below the mean. Thus, the following formulas is used to do this:

\[
(metric \text{ historical average}) + 2(standard \text{ deviation}) = 100\% \text{ of range}
\]
\[
(metric \text{ historical average}) - 2(standard \text{ deviation}) = 0\% \text{ of range}
\]

A given school’s score on a metric is then placed within that range as a percent of that range using this calculation:

\[
\frac{(school \text{ result on metric} - 0\% \text{ of range})}{(100\% \text{ of range} - 0\% \text{ of range})} = \text{percent of range}.
\]

After percent of range is calculated for each metric twice, once in relation to the school’s peer group and once in relation to all New York City middle schools, point totals are assigned for each metric in the following way leading to the final Progress Report Overall Score. As another control for student demographics, peer group percent of range is weighted at 75% and New York City percent of range is weighted at 25%. The points earned for each metric is therefore calculated in the following manner:

\[
Metric \text{ Points} = \{(percent \text{ of peer range} \times 0.75) + (percent \text{ of city range} \times 0.25)\} \times \text{possible points}
\]

There are 100 total points possible for the combined metric calculations of the three major sections—Student Progress, Student Performance and School Learning Environment.
And, the Closing the Achievement Gap section of the Progress Report assigns extra points using statistical methods outlined on page 15 and 16 of the *Educator’s Guide* cited above. The maximum amount of points for this metric is seventeen.

**WHEELS Middle School’s 2011-2012 Progress Report Achievement Data in Comparison to Peer Group Schools and to all NYCDOE Middle Schools**

*NYCDOE Progress Report Overall Score*

Now that the methodology of the Progress Reports has been explained, the following tables will document WHEELS’ scores on the Progress Report metrics from 2011-2012 as well as the percent of range comparisons to peer group schools and to school across the entire city. Table 1 displays the Progress Report Overall Score. As stated previously, WHEELS received an 87.1 out of 100 on this statistic and ranked as the 16th highest middle school (out of 387) on the Progress Report, and placing it in the top 4% of all middle schools in the city on this overall metric.
Of the fifteen schools ranked above WHEELS on the report’s overall score, only two others were public, non-selective/unscreened, neighborhood schools as WHEELS is. In other words, WHEELS was the third highest unscreened middle school in the city, placing it in the top 1% of all unscreened public schools in this subgroup. Moreover, WHEELS ranked higher than many middle schools that select students by way of portfolio, exam scores, grades, or other methods, which is not controlled for by the NYCDOE’s Report methodology. Furthermore, WHEELS is outperforming the majority of charter schools, many of which have longer school days and years, less restrictions on hiring teachers, and more funding. On this point, there were thirty-one full size charter middle schools in the city in 2011-2012 and WHEELS outperformed all but six of them on this overall score. Of the six that were ranked ahead of WHEELS, four...
were from the Uncommon Schools network, one was from the KIPP network, and one was an independent charter. All of these take students by lottery from a pool of self-selected applicants.

Also, of the sixteen highest ranked middle schools in the city (top 4%), including these six charters ranked above WHEELS, WHEELS was one of only two schools (the other also a non-charter district school) that had the following combination of student background factors: unscreened student enrollment; over 20% of students classified as Special Education students; 20% of students classified as English Language Learners; a peer index under 2.25 (within the lowest third in the city); and an Economic Need Index (a measure of socio-economic status—see footnote below for more details) of greater than 0.89 (within the top 10% in the city—most socio-economically disadvantaged 10% of students in the city). More specifically, of the subset of the top sixteen middle schools, WHEELS’ peer index ranked as third lowest, its economic need index ranked as third highest, its ELL population ranked as third highest, its fourth grade ELA and math test scores were third lowest. In other words, when students enter WHEELS they are quite academically and economically disadvantaged.

Given this combination of sociological and academic background factors, many scholars and policy makers would predict continued academic underperformance in middle school from WHEELS’ student body. And, indeed, many schools in the city with similar student populations struggle to create school environments that positively influence the academic trajectories of the majority of their students. Therefore, WHEELS is clearly beating the socio-economic odds in comparison to its peer group schools and even to all middle schools in the city. It should be mentioned here, again, that the NYCDOE uses the methods described above in the methodology section—peer group comparisons, statistical weights, weighting peer group percent of range comparisons more than citywide comparisons by a factor of 3 to 1, and the Closing the
Achievement Gap points—to add in controls for such background factors that research has shown apply downward pressure on achievement. However, it is debatable whether these measures can entirely control away all of the effects these socioeconomic and academic background factors have on student achievement (NYCIBO 2012), making WHEELS student achievement, when juxtaposed against its students’ socio-economic and academic characteristics, even than much more important to study as a school succeeding.

**Student Academic Progress**

WHEELS had the 17th highest academic progress score in the city on the Student Academic Progress metric, ranking in the 96th percentile. Its ELA median adjusted growth percentile was at 70.5%, meaning that WHEELS middle school students made academic progress in ELA at a higher rate than 70.5% of their peers as measured by the New York State ELA exam. This was the 20th best result in the city on this ELA growth metric and it translated into a peer group percent of range of 87.4% and a city percent of range of 78%, both over one standard deviation above the mean. WHEELS’ math adjusted growth percentile was 83%, the seventh best result in the city on this metric, which placed at the top of both its peer group and city percent of ranges. In other words, WHEELS students are making progress in math at an adjusted rate of two standard deviations above the mean of the student bodies of other peer group schools as well as all other city middle schools.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Progress Report Metric</th>
<th>Overall Progress Report Score Percent/Points (Middle Schools)</th>
<th>WHEELS Progress Report Data</th>
<th>Comparison: WHEELS Data as a Percent of Range--Peer Group Schools 75% = 1 SD 100% = 2 SD</th>
<th>Comparison: WHEELS Data as a Percent of Range-All NYC Schools 75% = 1 SD 100% = 2 SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Academic Progress Score</td>
<td>60 Percent/60 points</td>
<td>49.6 points (ranked #17 out of 387 middle schools, the 96th percentile)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA Median Adjusted Growth Percentile All Students</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>70.5% (ranked #20 out of 387 middle schools)</td>
<td>87.4</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA Median Adjusted Growth Percentile Students in Lowest Third</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td>59.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math Median Adjusted Growth Percentile All Students</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>83% (ranked #7 out of 387 middle schools)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math Median Adjusted Growth Percentile Students in Lowest Third</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>92.4</td>
<td>94.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Student Academic Performance**

WHEELS had the 32nd highest Overall Student Academic Performance score in the city, which placed it in the 91.7th percentile on this summative performance metric. From an academic growth perspective, this result can be considered against the fact that WHEELS’ students’ 4th grade NYS ELA and Math scores combined were in the 21st percentile in the city (see table 6 below) and its peer index is in the 28th percent in the city. Although only 29% of WHEELS students are reading at levels above 3.0, this score was at the 80% of range for the peer group, yet only the 42 percent of range in the city. The average ELA proficiency was 2.69, placing it at the 93 percent of range of the peer group and the 50th percent of range in the city.

Not surprisingly, the math numbers were relatively higher. The average math proficiency was 3.27, placing in the 100 percent of range for the peer group and the city. The percent of students scoring above level 3.0 on the state math exam was 69%, placing in the 100 percent of range for the peer group and the 72.4 percent of range in the city. The core course passing rates were all above 90% and were at the higher ends of peer group and city percents of ranges.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Progress Report Metric</th>
<th>Overall Progress Report Score</th>
<th>WHEELS Progress Report Data</th>
<th>Comparison: WHEELS Data as a Percent of Range -- Peer Group Schools</th>
<th>Comparison: WHEELS Data as a Percent of Range -- All NYC Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percent/Points (Middle Schools)</td>
<td></td>
<td>75% = 1 SD</td>
<td>100% = 2 SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Overall Academic Performance Score</td>
<td>25 Percent/25 points</td>
<td>21.1 points (ranked #32 out of 387 middle schools, the 91.7 percentile)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA Percentage of Students at Proficiency (level 3 or above)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>80.5</td>
<td>42.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA Average Student Proficiency (1.0 - 4.5 scale)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>93.2</td>
<td>50(^{13})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math Percentage of Students at Proficiency (level 3 or above)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>72.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math Average Student Proficiency</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>66.3(^{14})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{13}\) WHEELS students ranked in the 12.3 percentile in the city on this metric for their 4\(^{th}\) grade ELA proficiency, an increase of 37.7 in percentile rank citywide from 4\(^{th}\) grade.

\(^{14}\) WHEELS students ranked in the 27\(^{th}\) percentile in the city on this metric for their 4\(^{th}\) grade Math proficiency, an increase of 45.4 in percentile rank citywide form 4\(^{th}\) grade.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(1.0-4.5)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ELA Course Passing Rate</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>92.1</td>
<td>75.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math Course Passing Rate</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>96.7</td>
<td>90.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science Course Passing Rate</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>95.8</td>
<td>85.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies Passing Rate</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>94.1</td>
<td>83.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Student, Parent and Teacher School Learning Environment Combined Middle and High School Data*

As described above, the school environment data is taken from parent, teacher and student surveys and from school attendance rates. Each answer (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) is quantified on a scale of 1 to 10 and then all questions in each of the four domains are averaged to create domain scores. As discussed, for the 2011-2012 Report WHEELS’ middle school survey scores and attendance rate are combined with its high school scores and attendance rate, as is the case with every 6th through 12th grade school in the city. This failure to disaggregate the middle school data from the high school data is a methodological misstep by the NYCDOE regarding 6-12th grade schools, and in the case of WHEELS, brings down the middle school survey scores and attendance rate in this category. Even given this, WHEELS’ academic expectation, communication, engagement and attendance scores are still at
or around the 75th percent of range of the peer group, and its safety and respect score is toward the top of the group.
Table 4: 2011-2012 School Learning Environment-Middle and High School Combined

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Progress Report Metric</th>
<th>Overall Progress Report Percent/Points (Middle Schools)</th>
<th>WHEELS Progress Report Data</th>
<th>Comparison: WHEELS Data as a Percent of Range--Peer Group Schools 75%=1 SD 100%=2 SD</th>
<th>Comparison: WHEELS Data as a Percent of Range-All NYC Schools 75 %=1 SD 100 %=2 SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Learning Environment (surveys plus attendance rate) Score</td>
<td>15 Percent/15 points</td>
<td>11.3 (ranked #65 out of 387 middle schools, the 83rd percentile)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Expectations</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>8.2/10</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>7.5/10</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>7.6/10</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>65.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety and Respect</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>8.3/10</td>
<td>92.3</td>
<td>82.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance Rate</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>93.5%</td>
<td>78.4</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School Learning Environment Student and Parent WHEELS Middle School Data-2012-2013 Surveys (middle school results disaggregated from the high school)

I was able to get from the NYCDOE the 2012-2013 student and parent survey scores for the WHEELS middle school separated from the WHEELS high school, though not the teacher survey scores. In the following tables, I compare the WHEELS middle school student and parent
survey results for each question to the city averages. WHEELS’ student and parent survey scores are far higher than NYCDOE averages on almost every question.
Table 5: 2012-2013 NYCDOE Learning Environment STUDENT Survey Results in Percent: WHEELS Middle School vs. NYCDOE Averages for All Secondary Schools (WHEELS MS N=239; NYCDOE N=434,838)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Environment Domain: Academic Expectations</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most of the teaching staff at my school expect all students to work hard.</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of the teaching staff at my school encourage me to keep trying on challenging work.</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of the teaching staff at my school give me extra help when I need it.</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of the teaching staff at my school are teaching me the organizational skills and work habits (like note-taking and keeping track of assignments) that I need to succeed in school.</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of the teaching staff at my school expect me to continue my education after high school.</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most adults at my school help keep me on track to be promoted to the next grade and to graduate.</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most adults at my school help keep me on track for college or</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At my school I need to work hard to get good grades.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>65</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most students at my school respect students who get good grades.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

### Learning Environment Domain: Communication

Most of the teaching staff at my school give me regular and helpful feedback on my work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>34</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most adults at my school that I see every day know my name or who I am.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>39</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At my school there is an adult whom I trust and can go to for help with a problem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

### Learning Environment Domain: Engagement

Most of the teaching staff at my school make me excited about learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most adults at my school care about me.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>27</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At my school I feel welcome.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>34</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At my school students with disabilities are included in all school activities (lunch, class trips, etc.).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>37</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Don’t know=25)

My school offers a wide enough variety of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
programs, classes and activities to keep me interested in school.

### Learning Environment Domain: Safety and Respect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At my school I am safe in my classes.</td>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At my school I am safe in the hallways, bathrooms, locker rooms, and cafeteria.</td>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At my school I am safe on school property outside the school building.</td>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At my school there are clear consequences for breaking the rules.</td>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At my school there is a person or program that helps students resolve conflicts.</td>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At my school most adults treat all students with respect.</td>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most students at my school treat each other with respect.</td>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most students at my school treat adults with respect.</td>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My school is kept clean.</td>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At my school students drink alcohol, use illegal drugs, or abuse prescription drugs while at school.</td>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At my school students get in to physical</td>
<td>WHEELS NYCDOE</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

None of the time | Some of the Time | Most of the Time | All of the Time

At my school students drink alcohol, use illegal drugs, or abuse prescription drugs while at school.

At my school students get in to physical
At my school students harass or bully other students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHEELS</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At my school students harass or bully each other based on differences (such as race, color, ethnicity, national origin, citizenship/immigration status, religion, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, disability or weight).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHEELS</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At my school there is gang activity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHEELS</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>65</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Questions the NYCDOE Did Not Include in the Progress Report Scoring

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At my school I keep trying when school work is challenging.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHEELS</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At my school I can do well if I put my mind to it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHEELS</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>64</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At my school I can become a better student if I work hard.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHEELS</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>66</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My school offers opportunities for me to be physically active before, during and after school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHEELS</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>35</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During this school year, how often have your teachers asked you to be part of a discussion where you

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHEELS</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During this school year, how often have your teachers asked you</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to complete a writing assignment or research project where you</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had to use evidence from something you read to defend your own</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>opinions or ideas?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During this school year, how often have your teachers asked you</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to complete a writing assignment or research project using more</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>than one source of information (such as books, newspapers,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>technology or other materials)?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During this school year, how often have your teachers asked</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you to complete a math task that required you to explain your</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thinking?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During this school year, how often have your teachers asked</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you to use computers (laptops, tablets,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During this school year, how often have your teachers asked</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you to use computers (laptops, tablets,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During this school year, how often have your teachers asked you</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to use computers (laptops, tablets,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
desktops, etc.) during the school day to complete a task or assignment, such as typing up responses, online research or computer-based exercises?
Table 6: 2012-2013 NYCDOE Learning Environment PARENT Survey Results in Percent: WHEELS Middle School vs. NYCDOE Averages for All Secondary Schools (WHEELS MS N=181; NYCDOE N=486,536)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Environment Domain: Academic Expectations</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school has high expectations for my child.</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school gives my child meaningful assignments that help him or her learn.</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school encourages my child not to give up on challenging work.</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school provides my child with extra help when he or she needs it.</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school is preparing my child well to be promoted to the next grade level or graduate.</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school helps keep my child on track for college, career and success in life after high school.</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How satisfied are you with the following?</td>
<td>Very Satisfied</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>Dissatisfied</td>
<td>Very Dissatisfied</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The education my</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>child has received this year.</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The overall quality of my child's teacher this year.</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am satisfied with the educational planning and IEP development process at my child's school.</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school works to achieve the goals on my child’s IEP.</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school offers a wide enough variety of activities and services (including related services and assistive and adaptive technologies where appropriate) to help improve life outcomes for my child.</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Learning Environment Domain:**

**Communication**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school keeps me informed about my child’s academic progress.</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school keeps me informed about</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>what my child is learning.</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school keeps me informed about services for me or my child, such as tutoring, after-school programs, or workshops at school.</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school communicates with me in a language that I can understand.</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school gives my child regular and helpful feedback on his or her work.</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How satisfied are you with the following?</td>
<td>Very Satisfied</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>Dissatisfied</td>
<td>Very Dissatisfied</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The response I get when I contact my child's school.</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Learning Environment Domain: Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school makes me feel welcome.</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school makes it easy for parents to attend meetings by holding them at different times of day, providing an interpreter, or in other ways.</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>WHEELS</td>
<td>5 or More Times</td>
<td>3-4 Times</td>
<td>1-2 Times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school is responsive to parent feedback.</td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school has teachers who are interested and attentive when they discuss my child.</td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school offers a wide enough variety of courses, extracurricular activities and services to keep my child interested in school.</td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school communicates to me and my child what we need to do to prepare my child for college, career and success in life after high school.</td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At my child’s school students with disabilities are included in all school activities (lunch, class trips, etc.).</td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often during this school year have you been invited to an event at your child’s school (workshop, program, etc.)?</td>
<td>NYCDOE</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Don’t know=19)

(Don’t know=22)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Environment Domain: Safety and Respect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child’s school is kept clean.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At my child’s school my child is safe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At my child’s school there is an adult whom my child trusts and can go to for help with a problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At my child’s school teachers and staff treat all students with respect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Closing the Achievement Gap

WHEELS received extra points on the progress report for making academic progress with under-resourced student subpopulations that have traditionally under-achieved in the NYCDE system—classified English Language Learners, special education students; Black and Latino students in the lowest academic third in ELA and math in the city. The table below displays that WHEELS’ score on this metric ranked in the 97th percentile of all schools in the city.
### Table 7: Closing the Achievement Gap

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Progress Report Metric</th>
<th>Overall Progress Report Score Percent/Points (Middle Schools)</th>
<th>WHEELS Progress Report Data</th>
<th>Comparison: WHEELS Data as a Percent of Range--Peer Group Schools</th>
<th>Comparison: WHEELS Data as a Percent of Range--All NYC Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Closing the Achievement Gap Score (extra points)</td>
<td>Up to 17 total points extra</td>
<td>5.1 points (ranked #14 out of 387 middle schools, the 97th percentile)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Student Background Data**

As discussed previously, WHEELS is an open-enrollment, neighborhood school in a racially segregated neighborhood serving some of the most socio-economically disadvantaged students in the city. As Table 8 displays, WHEELS students enter 6th grade in lowest quartile in the city academically in math and ELA. Furthermore, the economic need index of the student population is in the 92nd percentile in the city. In other words, socioeconomically, WHEELS students are in the bottom 10% in the city in terms of economic advantage.
## Table 8: WHEELS Student Background Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>WHEELS Students</th>
<th>Percentile Rank of all NYCDOE Middle Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peer Index(^15)</td>
<td>2.23 (on a 1.0 to 4.5 scale)</td>
<td>27.9 percentile of all middle schools in NYC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4(^{th}) Grade Combined Math/ELA Average Proficiency Score-All Students 2011-2012</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>23.8 percentile of all middle schools in NYC (18.8 percentile ELA, 28.8 percentile Math)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Students Classified as English Language Learners (ELL)</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>89.6 percentile of all middle schools in NYC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Students Classified as Special Education Students</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>58 percentile of all middle school in NYC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Need Index(^16) of Students</td>
<td>0.94 (on a 0.01 to 1.20 scale)</td>
<td>92.2 percentile of all middle schools in NYC; only 29 middle schools out of 387 have a student population more socioeconomically disadvantaged.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

\(^{15}\) See above formula and the NTCDOE Progress Report methodology section for the description and statistical formula for middle school Peer Index. Peer Index measures student ELA and Math proficiency and students with disabilities numbers.

\(^{16}\) *Economic Need Index* (ENI) is a measure of student socio-economic status more accurate/robust than using only a free or reduced lunch measure. It is calculated using the following formula:

\[
ENI = (\text{percent students in temporary housing}) + (\text{percent students HRA eligible x 0.5}) + (\text{Percent students free lunch eligible x 0.5})
\]

The percentage of students eligible for free lunch comes from the previous year’s school collected lunch forms. HRA eligible refers to students whose families have been identified by the Human Resource Administration as receiving public assistance and is based on current year data. Students who have lived in temporary housing for any amount of time over the past four years are counted towards the temporary housing metric. Students in temporary housing who are also HRA eligible count towards both percentages. Students who are HRA eligible also count toward free lunch eligible.
| Student Race/Ethnicity | 99.2% Black and Latino; 98% Latino, 1% African American |

**Conclusion**

We know that the weight of poverty and its associated factors, racial segregation, and other macro-level forces producing social inequality compound to apply downward pressure on academic engagement and achievement. And, we see from the data above that WHEELS students occupy some of the lowest socio-economic strata in the city and in elementary school had some of the lowest fourth grade ELA and math test scores in the city, resulting in them being grade-levels behind at entry into WHEELS in 6th grade. Many scholars are in agreement in understanding that the building of good schools for low-income students academically behind is a foundational piece to making our society more just and fair by changing the opportunity structure and the social trajectories for them and allowing for traversable paths to middle class life. What is not understood deeply enough, however, is how to go about doing this.

Clearly, the WHEELS middle school is outperforming almost every other in the city in terms of student academic growth. Its math and ELA academic growth (progress) rates are higher than most, as are its student and parent learning environment scores, indicating that, above and beyond raw numbers related to student achievement on standardized state tests, the school has created a safe, communal, culture of achievement within its walls, consisting of caring teachers and cared for, secure, resilient, and hard working students. The following chapters will, based on my seven years of work and almost two years of formal qualitative research in the school, explain in detail how WHEELS generates the achievement and learning environment results described above.
Chapter 3: Building a Strong Teacher Professional Community: School Structures, Shared Beliefs, Relational Trust and Teacher Collective Efficacy

“A large part of what I know about WHEELS came from the other teachers. They taught me what it meant to be a teacher here, me just watching them and them explaining the way things are.” (From a teacher interview, April 2012)

Teacher Coordination, Communication and Trust

If one spends a day in the WHEELS’ middle school what stands out almost immediately is the high level of communication, coordination and collaboration between the teachers, particularly those on the same grade level. The fact that the middle school teachers at WHEELS share many of the same beliefs about teaching and learning and engage in many of the same practices--that almost every teacher is on the “same page” as they say with certain shared beliefs, expectations and daily policies and practices--is the bedrock of the school’s success. This chapter will describe and analyze this coordinated, collaborative and empowered teacher professional community at the school, describe the school structures that underpin it, and discuss the important role played by trust in the day-to-day social processes and interactions between adults. For, as research has shown, academic achievement is higher in schools where teachers share similar expectations about their work, trust and support each other, and have a stake in the school’s decision-making processes (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk-Hoy, and Hoy 1998; Goddard, Hoy and Woolfolk-Hoy 2000; Goddard, Hoy and Woolfolk Hoy 2004; Meier 2002; Louis, Marks and Kruse 1996).

Yet, to date, with some notable exceptions outlined below, the fact that trust provides the foundation for the important socio-relational processes and interpersonal interactions operating
within schools between the various adult constituencies charged with educating children, processes and interactions that directly impact student achievement, has not been explored thoroughly enough in educational and sociological research. In fact, more attention needs to be paid to the ways in which trust is actually generated and sustained in schools between and among teachers and other adults, and the effects trust has on teacher coordination, cohesion, and instruction.

The bulk of the research on the topic of trust in schools has been produced by two sets of scholars, Anthony Bryk and his colleagues (Bryk, Lee and Holland 1993; Bryk and Schneider 2002; Bryk et. al 2010), and Wayne Hoy and his colleagues (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, and Hoy 1998; Hoy and Tschannen-Moran 1999; Goddard, Woolfolk Hoy and Hoy 2000; Tschannen-Moran and Hoy 2000; Goddard, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy 2001; Goddard, Woolfolk Hoy and Hoy 2004; Hoy, Tarter and Woolfok Hoy 2006). As described in the first chapter, their important research has taken us a long way in understanding the foundational role played by adult-level trust in schools. We now have solid empirical findings describing the positive effects that trust between and among teachers, principals, and parents has on student achievement outcomes. But, the socio-relational and organizational level mechanisms involved in facilitating the building and sustaining of trust between these adult constituencies in schools are still somewhat of a mystery. More research is needed that explains and analyzes how, why, and under what organizational conditions teachers and school leaders come to initially trust each other and then sustain such trust over time, and how exactly trust then supports important aspects of their daily work educating children.

This chapter will describe and analyze what school structures at WHEELS allow for teachers to engage in daily effective communication, collaboration and coordination around
shared beliefs, effective practices, and school-wide policies that support high levels of student engagement and achievement. Trust in this case is understood as an organizational and collective property that is dynamic and multi-directional, and once it is established in a school community with the help of certain school structures, it then strengthens teachers’ collective work moving forward within those same school structures. On its importance, Bryk and Schneider state:

Relational trust does not directly affect student learning. Rather, trust fosters a set of organizational conditions, some structural and others social-psychological, that make it more conductive for individuals to initiate and sustain the kinds of activities necessary to affect productivity improvements. (Bryk and Schneider 2002: 116)

In the first part of the chapter I will describe what shared beliefs and expectations about teaching and learning WHEELS’ teachers engage with on a daily basis, as well as the school structures that initially create this cohesion. In doing so I will discuss the faculty handbook that formalizes the school’s mission and shared beliefs, as well as the teacher recruiting and hiring process, which screens for “right fit” teachers who buy in to those beliefs. In the second part of this chapter I describe how teachers actually stay on the same page throughout the school year. This section will describe the teacher grade-level teaming structure including the importance of the Team Leader teacher-leader role, as well as the informal horizontal (teacher to teacher) socializing and support processes operating between teachers on these teams. The chapter will then conclude by synthesizing relational trust theory and collective efficacy theory, discussing how these dense teacher professional communities (the grade level teams) support high levels of communication, coordination and horizontal (informal) social control amongst teachers of the same students throughout the teaching day, which is foundational to the high levels of student engagement and achievement (explained in the next chapter). Building off of the work of the
sociologist Robert Sampson and colleagues on the concept of collective efficacy in neighborhoods, I will introduce the concept of teacher collective efficacy, synthesizing it with relational trust theory, as a way to describe and analyze how trust, coordination and communication reinforce each other and sustain over time within the teacher professional community at WHEELS. It is this teacher professional community that is at the heart of the school’s success.

As described in chapter 1, the data from this chapter comes from a variety sources. Seven years of working in the school and performing both informal and formal ethnographic research as an embedded insider is the foundation of my understanding of the social relations amongst the teachers at the school. Also, I use interview data from teachers, students and administrators. The parent and student NYCDOE Learning Environment results presented in chapter 2 were also informative.

How Do Teachers Initially Get on the Same Page? The School’s Mission and Shared Beliefs, the Faculty Handbook, and the Teacher Hiring Process

The Importance of Shared Beliefs Among Teachers

The cohesion of adults around a set of shared beliefs is the lifeblood of the school because it facilitates teachers’ daily communication and reinforces the organizational conditions within which they collectively make effective decisions regarding what is best for their students. In other words, it is these shared beliefs channeled through the individual and collective daily work of effective teachers that undergird the school’s success. I want to emphasize that these concepts reinforce each other--the particular effective beliefs and practices about teaching and learning, the organizational policies and structures which support teachers individually and
collectively, and of course, the teachers’ expertise in carrying out pedagogical practices successfully—one without the others would not be sufficient to sustain high levels of student engagement and achievement. For example, if the teachers were collaborating on enacting ineffective pedagogical practices that were unhelpful in advancing student learning, if they coalesced around beliefs about students, teaching and learning that were more subtractive (Valenzuela 1999) than additive (Bartlett and Garcia, 2010) for their students, then this project would be about why WHEELS is failing to educate kids and not why it is relatively successful. And of course, if some teachers just did not have the experience and expertise to carry out certain instructional techniques effectively the same could be said.

I emphasize this here because many schools enact the school structures I describe below and some are more successful than others in doing so. The first school I worked at, IS143M, a struggling school by any measure and the other school in the introductory vignette to chapter 1, was a case in point regarding the teacher teaming structure described below. This structure was largely ineffective at IS143M in coalescing adults around effective practice because so many other factors were not present there to make them work effectively. In other words, just because a structure, practice, or policy is in place in a school does not mean it will automatically be successful; pedagogical expertise combined with a strong teacher supportive community is needed too. Yet, the absence of particular effective school structures can make it difficult for schools to work effectively as well (Bryk et. al, 2010; Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012). In short, WHEELS functions well because there is a critical mass of skilled teachers operating cohesively within certain supportive school structures all the while engaging in similar effective pedagogical beliefs, strategies and techniques. (I will discuss particular individual and collective effective teaching techniques more in chapters 4 and 5.)
One reason why this concept of consistency in shared beliefs/expectations across adult practice even at the smallest level is so important to building a good school is because what goes on in one classroom affects all other classrooms in a multitude of ways. WHEELS’ middle school students thrive on, among other things, the care, consistency and structure they receive from teachers because, in part, their elementary school environments were often unsafe, chaotic and unstructured, a point I will discuss more in the next chapter. Given this, WHEELS teachers place a strong emphasis on building and sustaining a respectful, caring and academically oriented learning community for students. This is effectively done in the school partly because teachers and other adults are coalesced behind the same practices, policies and expectations about what such a learning environment must look like in order to maximize student academic outcomes. Put another way, the way the teachers talk about it, this type of learning environment could not be created without teachers all being “on the same page”.

A Detailed Mission Oriented Faculty Handbook

The WHEELS middle school faculty handbook, and the meetings and conversations around it at the beginning of the year, is the mechanism that initially articulates to school staff the school mission and some of the shared beliefs and policies about teaching and learning at WHEELS that all adults working in the school are expected to engage with and follow. The overwhelming majority of the teachers understand these to be beliefs, policies and practices that are a part of the successful school culture and community systems that support teacher effectiveness and academic achievement in the classroom. Said one teacher on this topic of an already established and successful school system at WHEELS, when I asked her to describe the school culture:

Q: How would you describe WHEELS’ school culture?
A: I think it is strong, without hesitation. I think largely due to the fact that it was established with that in mind and that there was a lot of time and energy devoted to that before any child ever stepped foot in the building. And I also remember very clearly when I interviewed here (three years ago) and in no uncertain terms it was communicated to me, ‘Look, this is the way we do things here. There are some things that every adult/teacher believes and does’… and there were scenarios (classroom based) posed (to me) in my interview asking how, if I might not personally agree with a school wide policy, how I would respond if blank (the example given) is one of our school wide rules and one of the things that we all agree to follow (together).

Q: During the interview process?
A: During the interview process, yeah. And I thought, yeah, this is the kind of place where I want to be because I’m coming to the school because I know that it works and that’s why I want to be here. And people have figured out a lot of these little ways to make it work, and I will buy in. I’ll buy in. So I think I was really happy to see that (belief in shared beliefs) even when I interviewed here and I thought, if this is what the selection process is like, then you’re so much more likely to get likeminded people, which helps so much when you’re working in teams (of teachers) and so on and so forth.

Q: And do you think the majority of the teachers here are like-minded at least in the middle school?
A: I would say yes. I would say the majority are like-minded. I can’t speak for the high school at all but at least with the middle school it seems like yes...We have a handbook that we follow and there might be some slight variations in how we enforce things in the handbook and how we approach things in the handbook, but by and large from most of the people that I’ve encountered in the middle school, what it says in the handbook is what we follow and that’s why we came here, a lot of us (teachers)...because this (uniformity and successful school systems) existed here.
(Fiona, September 2012)

This handbook and summer teacher professional development meetings associated with it are important mechanisms for socializing of teachers to the same sets of beliefs and practices and, thus, for helping teachers start off the school year highly coordinated and thereby able to immediately engage students in consistent practice throughout the day. The handbook was created organically in WHEELS’ second year by two teachers who were trying to address some inconsistencies they were seeing across teacher practice, particularly with the newly hired teachers, that were at the root of some student disengagement issues fraying the student
community at the time. Such an example indicates that shared decision-making and teacher empowerment have existed at the school since its early years, a point I will come back to later. The handbook has been added to and revised by teachers and leaders occasionally after that as school issues came up. Parts of it came from the knowledge a core group of teachers and the principal had developed from working together for years at the same middle school, IS143M, before opening WHEELS. Other parts came from the Expeditionary Learning (EL) organization, and still other parts were borrowed from other district and charter schools that WHEELS teachers had visited and had contacts at.

The handbook currently consists of a few parts. The first describes the mission and vision of the school along with academic achievement goals. The second part presents a series of belief statements that serve to make the mission of the school more concrete and aligned to daily practice. It also discusses the importance of creating an orderly, safe and respectful school. The third part consists of shared student routines and policies that all adults follow.

Below, I’ll briefly discuss ten of the most important school-wide beliefs about teaching and learning that the overwhelming majority of adults at the school hold. These are broad principles that the majority of teachers perform their daily work within. However, I know of one teacher, after working with him for multiple years, who clearly does not have high expectations for his students’ academic achievement or behavior in his classroom, and he does not take responsibility for the students’ poor academic results when he fails to instruct effectively, preferring to blame families and the students themselves rather than to analyze his own poor work ethic, biases, and teaching practice. And, I also know of one other teacher that genuinely believes in the principles below but has difficulty enacting them effectively in her instructional practice on a consistent basis, again sometimes to the detriment of the students. However, these
two teachers are the outliers on the teaching staff, and it is clear that most (almost all) middle school teachers share a belief in the principles outlined below and are able to generally channel them effectively into their instructional practices and interactions with parents and students.

These shared, school-wide beliefs/expectations about teaching and learning are the following. I paraphrase them from the handbook:

1) good teachers and schools hold high expectations for student academics, engagement (including behavior), and organization and they believe every student can learn at high levels;
2) good teachers and schools take responsibility for student learning;
3) good teachers and schools maximize time toward the learning goals in their classrooms and rarely if ever waste even a minute of class time;
4) good teachers and schools collect and analyze student products/evidence regularly and then reflect, re-plan and re-teach according to student strengths and needs—proof of a lesson’s success is measured in part by student (informal or formal, small or large) products;
5) good teachers and schools view parents as partners in the teaching and learning processes and take responsibility for listening to and engaging parents successfully and regularly in the life of the school;
6) good teachers and schools understand the centrality of school community and culture to student achievement, and actively build, monitor and sustain school community and culture every day;
7) good teachers and schools actively try to make learning engaging, fun and relevant to students, and understand the importance of positive framing and continuous strategic messaging to students around important pre-identified themes, including certain habits of work and learning (HOWLS);
8) good teachers try to build caring relationships with every student they teach and try to get to know and look out for students they do not teach as well;
9) good teachers and schools engage students in rigorous academic work through quality instruction and its supports and when possible align instruction across the curriculum;
10) good teachers and schools understand that they are part of a larger neighborhood and community and that the futures’ of their students are connected to their (teachers’) own—they feel a part of a larger community and a larger purpose in connection with their students, families and neighborhood—students are not just “other peoples’ children”, they are “our” children too.

Aside from these common beliefs, the teachers also share specific policies and practices related to school culture, community, and instruction. Because the current faculty handbook is primarily a school culture and community document, it does not delineate instructional policies
thoroughly, although they do exist (some of which I will describe in chapter 5). Rather, it encompasses some of the major shared beliefs, policies and practices about student community, organization and engagement.

Lastly, it should be noted that the existence of a mission-oriented handbook is just the start of the process of coordinating and coalescing teachers. Trust, coordination and collaboration amongst individuals will not naturally sustain themselves without ongoing support, even after they have initially entered in to a school community. They must be monitored and attended to over time in order to continue, and schools should be structured in order to support their endurance over time. Therefore, teachers at WHEELS reflect on the handbook’s expectations, policies and practices throughout the year in what are called grade-team meetings, and teacher leaders understand part of their role is to lead around the topics discussed in it. Said one teacher-leader about how she uses the handbook to maintain consistency amongst the teachers on her grade:

I think that we (the school staff) spend a lot of time talking about it (the handbook) at the, in the summertime, during the professional development that we do before coming here (in the summer before the start of the school year). We’ve (the teachers on the grade) revisited the handbook – even just today at team meeting (in March, 2012), where we’re kind of reminding ourselves about some of the policies and structures. We’re going to talk more about it at Thursday’s team meeting and look back at the handbook. We’re going to brainstorm and identify which ones of those things (policies, routines, expectations) we don’t think we’re doing correctly right now. So, I feel like we’re constantly coming back to it (the handbook). And then I do think that that’s one thing, me as a Team Leader, and I think most Team Leaders, I’m constantly bringing that back up (the handbook’s contents). I know that when, especially, new teachers have had questions, like, kind of, philosophical debates about, “Well, this kid had their cell phone out in class, but I wonder if it makes sense to not take it this time”. I can constantly kind of remind them, “Well, this is why we do this (take cell phones in class), and link it (the policy) to achievement. This is why it’s important for the learning environment of the classroom.” And even if we don’t agree, (I say) it’s important (for teachers) to keep consistent with other grades (what other teachers on other grades are doing) because other grades are taking this away, or other grades are doing what’s in the handbook, I say. So, I
kind of keep bringing conversations back to the handbook’s common policies and the rationale for them, and how they help student achievement.
(Jennifer, March 2012)

I will revisit this point on the importance of distributed teacher leadership and the grade-team structure later in the chapter.

*Strategic Teacher Recruiting and Hiring*

Having a successful hiring process that selects for like-minded individuals with shared beliefs about teaching and learning, what the school calls “right-fit” teachers, is also a crucial first step in creating a professional, cohesive community of educators at WHEELS. The important point to recognize here is that not every teacher hired at WHEELS was a great teacher when hired. What is more important than finding the most expert teachers is finding solid teachers with at least two years of experience who buy in to the school’s mission, beliefs, and expectations about teaching and learning, who are team players and will collaborate with others, who are hard-working and dedicated to their students, and who are coachable and willing to change aspects of their practices and experiment with advancing their teaching in new ways.

As an example of hiring for “fit”, four years ago there was a math teacher candidate who was, upon examining his students’ state test scores and references, a very successful teacher at his school. After going through the interview process, however, the hiring committee decided not to hire him because members were not completely convinced that he would buy-in completely to what was expected of teachers at WHEELS and would be willing to change some aspects of his practice, which he believed had been successful in the past. A less experienced teacher, one who was deemed to be more coachable, flexible, and more ideologically in-line with the school’s beliefs and expectations, was hired instead.
Like most aspects of the school, the hiring process evolved over time. When the school opened in the fall of 2006, it opened with only two grade-levels of students—three classes of about thirty 6th graders, and three classes of about thirty 7th graders. To teach these students there were a total of ten teachers hired that year, and eight of the ten had worked together at IS143M and had played a role in the school’s planning. There was no hiring process that year. The two teachers who were not part of that group from IS143M were found through contacts, but these two teachers did not interview or perform a demonstration lesson. They were just hired, and a teacher’s referral was taken as a sufficient screen for quality. In the second year of the school’s existence none of the original teachers left and the five new teachers hired were again all professional contacts of the current staff. Again, there was no rigorous hiring process.

By year three there was an interview and a demo lesson in place, but no recruiting of teachers, and the principal was still in charge of the process in addition to all of his other leadership duties. It was at this time that this lack of a rigorous recruiting and hiring process caught up with the school. The candidate pool that year was very small. Four of the teachers hired that year ended up not being on board with some of the school’s expectations for adults and students, causing problems throughout the year with other teachers on staff, and three of these four left the school at the end of that year (one was released and two left voluntarily). After that year, a handful of teacher leaders met and agreed on the need for the school to have a more rigorous hiring process, with a robust recruiting component that should be presided over by one person who was not the principal. This was because the principal’s day was filled with the running the school and he had no time to focus on a hiring process. This group of teachers presented their idea to the principal and got his approval. It was at this point, after the third year of the school, that the current teacher recruitment and hiring process was born as one person,
myself, took over and coordinated the efforts to build this structure. As before with the creation of the handbook, this is another example of how teachers are empowered and part of the decision-making processes at WHEELS. In the paragraphs that follow I will describe some of the details of the hiring process. I get to the granular aspects of such a school structure because, to remind the reader, one of the contributions of this work is to add to the practical knowledge bases for effective school structures and pedagogical practices.

Currently, recruiting candidates is the most important part of the process. The school starts this process relatively early, in January of each year. When I recruit teachers, I first make up a job description that describes the mission and vision of the school, the awards and statistics, like the high teacher retention rate, the requirements of the hiring process, and some general expectations about what the school is looking for in candidates. As an example, the school’s 2012-2013 teacher job description is below in italics:
WHEELS Teacher Position Announcement

School Name: Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School (WHEELS)
Grades: 6th - 12th
School Site: 511 West 182nd Street, New York, NY 10033
Website: www.WHEELSnyc.org
Send Cover Letter and Resume to: jobs@WHEELSnyc.org.

OPEN POSITIONS
We are looking for excellent middle and high school teachers of English, mathematics, social studies, science, special education, ESL, Spanish, PE/health, music, art, and/or technology.

SCHOOL DESCRIPTION
WHEELS is a nationally recognized, sixth – twelfth grade, public school located in the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City. Our mission is to work with families to prepare each student academically, emotionally, intellectually, and socially to succeed in a college of his or her choice and beyond. We have created a school culture that ensures high expectations for adults and students, fosters a respectful and supportive learning community, promotes adventure, develops our professional crafts as educators, and actively engages families as partners in the life of the school. WHEELS staff members receive regular high quality professional development through a partnership with Expeditionary Learning (EL), a nationally recognized educational organization. Our teachers are some of the best in the City and are dedicated, hardworking, experienced, and exceptionally talented. We retain over 90% of our faculty annually due to our strong school culture, the teacher development and support systems we have in place to support their continuous growth, and the sense of accomplishment we collectively feel for the regular academic gains made by our students.

AWARDS, ACCOMPLISHMENTS, AND RECOGNITION
- WHEELS’ middle school ranks in the 96th percentile of all middle schools in New York on the most recent New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) Progress Report, and ranks in the top 1% of all non-selective middle schools in the city
- WHEELS is highlighted as a “transformational” school by Wendy Kopp in her most recent book A Chance to Make History (2011), in particular for our strong school culture and achievement gains
- WHEELS’ annual teacher retention rate is over 90%, and our teachers average about nine years of teaching experience; in other words, our teachers enjoy WHEELS and feel supported
- 100% of WHEELS’ first graduating class (2012) was accepted to college
- College acceptances among WHEELS students include a diverse set of over 60 institutions including Hamilton College, Skidmore College, and Fordham University
- WHEELS was featured on NBC’s Today Show in 2011 as an excellent school getting incredible achievement results (see the piece and other media coverage on our website)
- WHEELS is an Expeditionary Learning Exemplary National Model School
- WHEELS serves as a NYCDOE Model School for our effective teacher teaming systems
- WHEELS has been selected as an InsideSchools.org Blue Ribbon Notable School award winner every year from 2007 to present
- Three WHEELS teachers have won the prestigious Gaynor McCown Excellence in Teaching Award
- Three WHEELS teachers have earned National Board certification
- WHEELS teachers received Fund for Teachers awards every year from 2008 to 2012
ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS
Candidates for this position must possess, among other things:

- New York State certification
- A mindset that takes responsibility for student results
- A deep respect for the teaching profession and a strong desire to constantly improve and extend their teaching practice in collaboration with others
- High expectations for student engagement and academic achievement and a belief that anything is possible for students
- The ability and willingness to build strong, trustful relationships with, and to work collaboratively with, students, families, teachers, and school leaders
- The determination, perseverance and willingness to be a part of WHEELS’ mission
- A personality that enjoys working with young people and influencing their lives positively
- A genuine sense of care and respect for our students, families and community
- The willingness and ability to reflect upon daily realities with humility, empathy, and from multiple perspectives

DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES
Responsibilities include but are not limited to:

- Designing and implementing “backwards-planned” curriculum that meet the City, State, Common Core, and WHEELS’ standards
- Executing high quality, productive, efficient, and rigorous lessons on a daily basis
- Designing and implementing assessments that measure academic growth towards mastering standards, and using regular student data from assessments to inform planning and instruction
- Working cooperatively with students, family members, teachers, teacher-leaders, and administrators to build and maintain a familial and safe school culture and community that supports achievement
- Participating in on- and off-site professional development opportunities
- Serving as an advisor to a small group of students, and acting as a liaison between the school and families
- Maintaining a strong work ethic, a professional attitude, and a willingness to assume a variety of roles
- Possessing a willingness to embrace certain agreed upon school-wide systems, policies and practices that we have identified as effective
- Working collaboratively with teachers, teacher-leaders, and administrators to test out different instructional methods and constantly improve student achievement outcomes

SELECTION CRITERIA
The selection process includes the following:

- A resume and cover letter
- An interview
- A demonstration lesson
- References
- At least two years of teaching experience preferred

SALARY AND BENEFITS
We offer a competitive compensation package including a salary, health benefits, and retirement pension.
After making the job description, I send it out to every member of the faculty and ask them to send it out to their networks and to post it widely. Most of the current faculty came to work at the school through these personal teacher networks. The school also recruits the TFA alumni network (more than 2 years of teaching experience and want to continue to be teachers) as well as the New York City Teaching Fellows alumni network (over two years of experience as well). Twelve of the eighteen current middle school teachers are alumni of TFA, and four are alumni of the New York City Teaching Fellows. Only two came to teaching through a “traditional” educational graduate school route. The school does not normally take first or second year teachers because it does not need to; it wants teachers who have experience in the classroom already. Furthermore, there has been, and currently still is, a hiring freeze in place for all non-charter NYCDOE schools for the past few years, meaning that only teachers already teaching at non-charter NYCDOE schools can be hired. For these two reasons, WHEELS does not currently recruit at education schools. (It should be said that charter schools are not subject to this hiring freeze and have access to a much larger teacher candidate pool—WHEELS has lost good candidates to city charter schools because of this freeze).

The hiring process consists of a thirty minute demonstration lesson done at WHEELS in front of a class of students; an interview; a review of a the candidate’s teaching portfolio that consists of sample lesson plans, unit plans, long term plans, student data reports(trackers), and student work products; and then a check of three professional references. The demonstration lesson is thirty minutes in length. During the demo-lesson, the members of the hiring committee, a mix of school leaders and teachers, observe the lesson and then evaluate it; most use an instructional rubric to record their observations. The purpose of the demo-lesson is to get a sense of how the candidates lesson plan, engage with and relate to students, and instruct.
In the interview, the main goal is to judge whether a candidate will be a good fit at the school as well as evaluate the applicant’s pedagogical skill level in some areas, such as planning and assessment. As an example, below I have included the most recent (as of June 2013) teacher interview questions document.
Interview Questions--Teachers

Resume Review/General Background
1. Walk us through your resume in a 2-3 minute overview. Point out any relevant accomplishments or highlights.
2. Why did you become a teacher? Why do you want to teach in Washington Heights?

Achievement Focused
1. I’d like to discuss your time at (pick teaching experience) ...
   a. What were your achievement goals/Long-term goals/Big goals for your students?
   b. How did you set those goals? Why were they the right goals for your students?
   c. What steps did you take to reach these goals with your students?
   d. How did the process working towards your goals test you as a teacher? What obstacles did you encounter in pursuit of these goals? What did you do to overcome them?
   e. Did you accomplish these goals? How and with what proof? If not, what prevented you from reaching them?
   f. How did you engage stakeholders (parents, students, etc.) in these goals?
   g. What percentage of your students did not reach these goals? Why? Was there anything you could have done differently?

Initiative and Persistence
1. Think about a time when you accomplished something satisfying at work despite one or more obstacles. Tell us about it.
   a. Why did you decide to start this project?
   b. What obstacles did you encounter along the way? How did you deal with them?
   c. Were you successful in the end? Why? Why not?
2. Tell us about a time when you had a student that was struggling.
   a. Why were they struggling?
   b. Did you change your goals for him/her?
   c. What happened? How did they end up doing in the end?
3. Tell us about a time when you dealt with a really stressful or difficult situation at work.
   a. What was the situation?
   b. While this was happening what were you thinking? How did you feel?

Teamwork
1. Think about a time when you participated in a group or team of people to accomplish work that was satisfying to you and tell us the story.
   a. What were you trying to accomplish? How did you get started? What happened next?
   b. What specific challenges faced the group? How did you function in the group as challenges presented themselves?
   c. What do you feel was your most significant contribution to the group?
2. Tell us about the last professional team you were on.
   a. Describe the relationship with the team.
   b. What type of work did the team work on?
   c. Were there ever any tensions on the team? If so, how did you deal with them?

Classroom Management
1. What are your expectations for student behavior? What does this look like? Can you give me some specific examples?
2. How did you get your students to meet those expectations?
3. What happened when a student did not meet that standard? Give us some examples.

Impact and Influence
1. How do you invest students in your student achievement goals and classroom culture?
2. How did you decide to use that method? Why are they effective?

Instructional Planning
1. What is your educational philosophy? How do you actualize this philosophy in your classroom?
   a. What instructional components do you think are successful?
   b. What curriculum and resources do you use?
   c. What kinds of tools do you use to measure progress? How often do you assess progress?

Instructional Delivery
1. What are the components of a quality lesson? Describe a typical lesson of yours for us.
2. How do you know as a teacher whether the students have mastered your lesson’s material? What do you do/implement to know this?

Parental Involvement/Communication
1. How much do you talk to the parents of your students? If I am a student in your class, how much do you talk to my parents? What do you talk to the parents of your students about? How do you keep track of your parental interactions?
2. In what ways do you listen to parental concerns, interests, desires, and general information as to who their children are, what they need, and how best to educate them? Give examples.

Beliefs About Teaching and Learning
1. What makes a great teacher? What mentalities about students and student achievement do great teachers have?
   1. How responsible should teachers be for the academic outcomes of their students?
   2. What actions/practices make a great teacher (in the domains of planning, instruction and assessment, building a classroom community, and beliefs about kids and learning)

The alignment of the interview questions to the belief statements in the school’s faculty handbook is clearly apparent, around topics such as valuing parental partnership in the education of their children, taking responsibility for student outcomes, holding high expectations for academics and behavior in the classroom, and working collaboratively with other teachers.

Interviews are semi-structured with many follow up questions posed by members of the
committee. Furthermore, all candidates are asked to bring teaching portfolios that contain sample long-term plans, unit plans, lesson plans, student data reports and other displays of student results, and student work products. At the interview the candidates talk through their long-term and lesson planning techniques, their assessment strategies and trackers, and the results they have gotten with their students. This is essential in giving the committee a window in to the professional skills and mentalities of the candidates. For example, by explaining some of the results they have gotten with their students, the committee is able to, first, see what academic gains students have achieved in their classes, and second, gauge whether the candidates actually take responsibility for the academic results of their students.

In summary on this point, it is central to the WHEELS’ success that it brings teachers in to the school who are philosophically in-line with the school’s belief statements in the faculty handbook and the school’s mission. Doing this screening for right-fit teachers at the “front end” is part of how WHEELS sets-up its teacher teams and teacher leaders for success at collaborating on important school decisions throughout the year. When the school has made a mistake with a teacher hire, the negative effects on the teacher culture have been strong. On a grade team of six or seven teachers, even one teacher not on board with the school’s shared beliefs, policies and practices, can cause great tension, and can fray adult (teacher, leader) community and culture, which then can fray student community and culture as the teachers become less coordinated. For this reason—the importance of teacher coordination, cohesion, collaboration, and trust to student engagement and achievement--the recruiting and hiring process is the start of building a coordinated teacher professional community.
How Do Teachers Come to Stay on the Same Page Throughout the Year? The Grade Teams, Team Leaders, and Horizontal (Informal) Teacher Socialization and Support

It is common to hear adults in the school refer to these grade-level teams and Team Leaders (a teacher-leader position described below) as the “backbones of the school”. As one teacher told me:

I don’t think our grade, or even the entire middle school, would function the way it does if you didn’t have a Team Leader and the grade teams…If we (the teachers) didn’t all have the same expectations and the same policies then we are setting up kids to fail…and there is no way we can all stay on the same page without the teaming structure.

(Kelly, April 2013)

Another teacher echoed these same feelings about the importance of the teaming model to WHEELS:

I can’t imagine not having teaming…I feel less alone in my classroom because I always know that there are people (other teachers) who know the kids, not only their academic strengths and weaknesses, but also know them on a behavioral and social level. We just communicate about those things all of the time. I think it is just the most invaluable thing about WHEELS, our team structure…It makes me feel like my job is more of a profession than a job. It adds to the professional element of things, to have this space and time provided where I can sit down with other professionals and talk about the issues we face and how to deal with them best. At my old school we didn’t have that (teaming) and I felt like I was just alone in this classroom…It (teaming) just makes it (teaching) seem more serious when we are going to regularly meet about things and talk about them together as professionals (Urena, October 2012).

In every teacher interview I conducted, my first question was to ask if the WHEELS middle school is a relatively successful school. Every teacher said yes, and one of the major reasons every teacher put forth as an explanation was because all of the teachers communicate often and are coordinated with each other regarding so much of their daily work, from understanding the school’s mission and vision, to the smallest details and expectations regarding the student behavior policies, grading and assessment policies, and instructional strategies and
expectations, among other things. One of the effects of this coordination on students is to offer them structure and consistency throughout the day as they interact many times over with all of the various school-level adults in their lives, interactions which are academically and socially beneficial to them in so many ways, some described in the following to chapters on student engagement and achievement. The following ethnographic vignette will illustrate how the team meetings, run by the Team Leaders, coordinate and collectively empower teachers. These team meetings occur twice per week during the school day.

**Ethnographic Vignette: A Grade Team Meeting**

A group of six teachers sit together around student desks in the back of a classroom. It is second period and most of the 90 students are at gym now. The few that are not in gym have gym detention and are seated at desks across the hallway in another room silently doing work. The teachers have come together for their second of two team meetings per week, and every teacher on the grade is there. The Team Leader, Kelly, starts the meeting off by going over the agenda she had created the day before in the wake of the first of the week’s team meetings two days ago, which is one of her job responsibilities as Team Leader. Most of the teachers have their laptops out and follow along on the team’s site in Google Docs where the team meeting agendas are created and stored. One of them takes notes of the meeting. The team has about forty minutes before they have to go down to the first floor to pick up the kids from gym. On the agenda today are the following topics with the name of the teacher leading each one:

1) Kid Talk: Santi, Noreene, and parental contact update—(Kelly)
2) Community Meeting Agenda: Roll out more community building events to kids: conduct sheet competition (Teresa); academic pep rally (Urena); inspirational quote (Ted); kindness dance and “I Spy” competition next Friday (Ted);
3) Academic dishonesty talk in classes—consistency of teacher message and consequences (Kelly)
4) Detention policy reminder—Lateness to school more than 15 minutes is a Friday detention, not a lunch detention. Remember to keep detention reflections organized. They are not right now. (Kelly)

5) Kindness Dance next Friday after school—Check “I Spy” packets with kids and explain to them again how to record kind classmates they spy (Teresa)

6) Coverages needed for next Wednesday—Kelly will be out, Fred will be Team Leader

7) Positive phone calls home. They go a long way. Make them when you have a spare minute. (Kelly)

8) Interim Assessments in two weeks. We need to make the schedule for that week. (Kelly, Teresa). Assessments need to be given in to the office to copy by next Thursday.

The team meeting starts and is facilitated by the Team Leader, Kelly. She begins by asking if Santi is still doing better behaviorally in the classes this week. The teachers report back that he is for the most part. Santi is a holdover with occasional behavior issues and he had been in-school suspended a few weeks ago for bullying and hitting another student in the lunchroom and then disrespecting the teacher who addressed the matter with him. The teachers agree that a positive phone call home is in order in order to motivate him to continue his improvement and also to inform his mother of his progress. Teresa says that she believes that he is getting along better with his classmates this week—she observed him interacting well in his group mates on their group work assignment in class these past few days. On a different note, Noreen has not been coming to school regularly recently. She has missed at least two days per week for the last three weeks. Parental phone conversations have occurred twice by her homeroom teacher, and now the teachers agree that the counselor should get involved and meet with the parents and the student as soon as possible. It appears that there may be some sort of issue in the home resulting in Noreen living part of the week at another relative’s apartment. This relative leaves for work early, works two jobs, and comes home late and Noreen has been taking advantage of the freedom in the morning to not come to school and hang out with older friends instead, as well as hanging out late in to the evening. The team agrees that she needs to
stay after school regularly to do her work until she catches up. Teresa agrees to call home, talk to Noreen, and to follow up with the counselor.

Next up is the conversation about tomorrow’s grade-level weekly student community meeting (I’ll describe the community meeting structure in the next chapter). A few teachers take turns discussing with the group the various student community building ideas and incentives they have come up with for this latest round, and what the details are. Some have been used for years in the school on this and other grades, such as conduct sheet competitions and the “I Spy Game”, and some are newly conceived (or borrowed from another school in this case) such as the academic pep rally. The teachers go back and forth for about ten minutes on a few of the details of each idea until consensus is reached on the exact details for each and who will roll each one out to the kids at the community meeting. There have been some instances of bullying these past few weeks and this round of community building ideas/programs is aimed at getting the kids to take ownership over their community a little more and to focus on kindness and a sense of family/togetherness within the grade. The previous round of community building incentives/activities was around boosting daily attendance, which had slipped after the new year.

A few minutes later the teachers move on to revisiting the topic of having a consistent consequence for lateness to school across all of their practices. Jackie reminds the team that the school handbook states that when a student is late more than fifteen minutes to first period, the consequence is a Friday detention for an hour, not a lunch detention. A few teachers had been giving lunch detentions instead. They agree to get back on the same page with this, remind themselves why it is important, and then move on.

The meeting proceeds like this, with teachers leading discussion and coming to consensus on the agenda’s items, facilitated by the Team Leader, Kelly. In summary, the topics ranged
from school community building incentive programs; kid behavior and emotional support; parental communication; who will cover the classes of an upcoming teacher who will be absent; keeping consistent with school policies; and the scheduling of teacher and student programs for the week of interim assessments when students take cumulative assessments of learning in each subject and the regular schedule is changed to accommodate them. The group knows they don’t have much time before gym ends and they will need to get their students, so they move briskly through the topics. Topics that come up that need to be discussed but are not on the agenda are tabled for future meetings. At the end of the meeting, they break to go pick up their students from gym. They’ll next meet again like this next Tuesday, although because they all teach right next to or across from each other, they’ll informally continue these discussions between periods, during lunch and after school most every day. (Adapted from field notes)

The grade level teams and the systems set up to support them are the major school structure that supports teacher coordination, collaboration and empowerment. They facilitate regular teacher communication about the smallest details regarding student academics, organization, community, and behavior, for example, throughout the day. Furthermore, teachers have collective autonomy, in fact, to make decisions regarding most all aspects of school life on their grade. In other words, teachers are collectively empowered within this grade team structure, teacher empowerment being an aspect of schooling that has been found to be central to a healthy school climate (Goddard et al. 2000) and teacher professional community (Louis, et al. 1996). For example, from the above vignette, important thing to notice is that the topics discussed in the team meeting are topics that in many other schools the administration would perform—teacher and student scheduling, running student assemblies, re-norming teachers
around school wide policies, and setting up coverages when a teacher is absent, for example. At WHEELS, the teachers collectively make these decisions in teams of the same grade-level led by a Team Leader.

This collective empowerment produces a sense that teaching at WHEELS feels more “like a profession and less like a job” as teacher Urena said her quote above. It also allows teachers to stay highly coordinated around the smallest details about individual and class-level student academic growth and engagement, the monitoring of the grade-level student community and culture, and the implementation of targeted instructional practices, such as teaching common vocabulary at the same time across subject areas for example. This occurs with substantial detail and accuracy rooted in the teachers’ immediate proximity to, and knowledge of, their students and classroom life. On this collective autonomy and empowerment, one teacher said to me:

At my old school if the principal left the building I was nervous about how the day would go, because we needed to run by her a lot of things. Here, I feel that my team, we are our own pod, and if the administration left for the day, it wouldn’t matter. We (her team of teachers) do everything…we’re autonomous…Like if I am going to miss a day…I tell my team and they cover for me. We cover each other’s classes, so I tell them (the other teachers when she has to miss a day of work) and they teach my lesson. You know, I have to tell administration, but if I forgot, it wouldn’t matter because my team would know and take care of it.
(Maggie, June 2012)

The Grade Team Organization

Because of the strong link between school structures and pedagogical and socio-relational processes between teachers, it is necessary for me to back-up and explain the larger organization of the school here before moving forward. WHEELS’ middle school is organized into grade level teams: the 6th grade team, the 7th grade team and the 8th grade team. Each grade occupies three to four classrooms directly next to and/or across from each other on the same hallway. On each grade there are three classes of about thirty students each, for a total of about ninety
students per grade, totaling nine classes and about two hundred and seventy students for the entire middle school. There are twelve core subject area teachers in the middle school: one English Language Arts teacher, one social studies teacher, one math teacher, and one science teacher per grade. Therefore, each grade-level has four core subject area teachers who exclusively teach the ninety students on that grade. They do not teach other grades, and this is important because it allows these four teachers to all know the same ninety students exclusively. In addition, there are six more middle school teachers who teach across all three grades: one English Language Learner (ELL) teacher; three teachers of special education in different subjects respectively (one math teacher, one ELA teacher, one social studies teacher); one gym teacher; and one music teacher. This brings the total number of teachers in the middle school to eighteen, twelve core subject area teachers who only teach one grade level, and six teachers that work with and across multiple grades. In sum then, the three grade level teacher teams are each made up of the four core subject area teachers plus two or three of the multiple grade level teachers, resulting in grade teams of about six or seven teachers and ninety students.

Teachers teach each of the three classes of students on the grade once per day, seeing every class on the grade every day of the week. They also have a small-group advisory period (called Crew) for twenty-five minutes before lunch and a thirty-minute literacy period with their first period class at the end of the day. The other two periods of the day in a teacher’s schedule are what are called “prep” periods and “professional” periods. Prep periods are periods where the teacher has total discretion about how to use the time. Most teachers grade papers, plan lessons, and perform other responsibilities directly related to their daily instruction. The professional periods are periods whereby the teacher may meet with an instructional coach, an
administrator, or a fellow teacher and perform a series of responsibilities including co-planning lessons, debriefing observations, and analyzing student data, for example.

Because teacher collaboration and communication is so important, WHEELS has scheduled teacher meeting time into the teacher schedules. For example, two of these professional periods per week are scheduled meetings between the grade-level team’s teachers, called Team Meetings, like the one in the vignette above, which take place when all of the students are at gym class allowing for all of the grade level teachers to all be free at the same time. At these meetings, teachers talk about everything related to teaching, including student academic and social needs and trends, parental contact points, planning community meetings, planning Crew periods, planning interdisciplinary project-based units called Learning Expeditions, and grade-level policies that need to be revisited, for example. While instruction is often discussed, it is safe the say that the majority of the conversation in these team meetings revolves around the monitoring and sustaining of a healthy grade level culture and community, as well as academic and social needs and supports for students. It is in the subject level departments described in a later chapter that more pedagogical conversations around subject-specific planning, instruction and assessment occur. Therefore, one could make the case that the grade level teams are the school structure primarily responsible for the creation of a high quality and healthy school community and culture at the grade levels, and that the subject-specific departments are the major school structure responsible for supporting high quality planning, instruction and assessment.

Moreover, teacher proximity matters for teacher communication and coordination as well; the fact that the four core area subject teachers teach only the same ninety students, and teach directly next to or across from each other all day is important. This allows for these
teachers to all focus only on the same group of ninety students and communicate multiple times
per day about the same students’ academic, social and emotional needs with other
teachers/colleagues who also only focus on the same kids. This creates dense teacher-teacher
social networks, and what Coleman (1987) called social closure (explained more next chapter in
relation to how it positively affects student engagement and community), whereby adult-adult
communication and “checking-in” regarding students occurs frequently throughout the day, so
that adults share information regularly about students, and students cannot “fall between the
cracks”. Students are usually not able to do something outside of what the school community
deems acceptable without at least one adult knowing and then sharing that information with the
other adults in the grade-team network. For example, if a student comes late to school without
an parental note or call, the Team Leader or the first period teacher would see this, talk to the
student, call the home and assign the required consequence if the tardy was unexcused. That
teacher would then tell all of the other adults in the grade and record it on the team’s Google Doc
site as well. Throughout the day multiple adults may check-in with this student, and usually, at
least one adult would. And, at the end of the day the student’s teachers know to make sure that
students gets to the detention to make up the work he/she missed from coming late to first period.
Hence, from a student point-of-view, one result of this dense teacher communication and
coordination is that students end up knowing that all of the adults communicate often about them
and care. Furthermore, in the example above, a high standard for a desired school behavior,
coming on time every day, is therefore enforced and upheld on a consistent basis throughout the
community to this particular student but also to the other students, as they observe the standard
for coming to school on time consistently upheld. Moreover, the particular student who came
late is prevented from falling academically behind by staying after school to do the work. In the
above team meeting vignette we also saw similar examples of this teacher communication and coordination leading to support regarding the two students discussed at that particular team meeting, Santi and Noreen. Thus, the team meeting structure and the location of the teachers’ classrooms so close to each other facilitate the regular teacher-teacher communication and coordination about even the small details of school life, and the social closure and consistent displays of care that result from such a dense teacher network. (Chapter 4 will discuss building a strong student community more in detail and examine social closure and social capital building processes more in depth.)

It is true that this teacher communication and coordination, this social closure, is necessary for keeping consistent the implementation of school policies, and consistency is key for such policies to be effective with kids. Furthermore, ninety students is a reasonable teaching load that is not heavy by NYCDOE secondary school standards. In my eight years of teaching at two different schools before working at WHEELS, I regularly taught one hundred and fifty students—five classes of thirty students for forty five minutes per day. Having fewer students makes it easier for teachers to give more time to each student academically and socially, monitor each student, and get to know all students more deeply.

*Team Leaders Leading the Grade-level Teams—Empowered Teachers and Coordination*

At the heart of each team is the position of Team Leader. The Team Leader position is a teacher-leader position and represents the teachers on the school’s leadership team. There is one Team Leader position per grade, and it is occupied by an experienced teacher. The key here is that the Team Leaders teach every student on their grade, and therefore know every kid well. On top of a regular teaching load they have leadership responsibilities that many assistant principals or deans have at other schools. In return, Team Leaders are paid an extra hour of per session
work per day, which ends up being between $7000 and $8000 per more per year. The position is another example of how leadership is distributed to teachers at WHEELS.

Team Leaders are charged with leading the other teachers on each grade in enacting school systems, routines and practices that, both proactively and reactively, build student engagement and community and in the process support student achievement. This can involve more reactive behavioral policies, such as setting up in-school suspensions or having parent meetings about a given students’ behavior, as well as more pro-active systems for student engagement and community building. Some of these are displayed in the above team meeting vignette, whereby the team was engaged in a new set of, what teachers at the school call, “joy factor” ideas/plans to be rolled out in community meeting to build grade wide community amongst the students (the “I Spy” game, the “Kindness Dance”, etc.).

Team Leaders are also the leaders of parental involvement on each grade. In the above vignette we can see the Team Leader, Kelly, reminding the teachers on her team about the power of positive phone calls home and the need to make them. Without an orderly, respectful and communal grade-wide community and culture, and high levels of communication between families and teachers, academic achievement will not reach maximum levels. For this reason, the Team Leaders are probably the most important people in the school because they lead the teachers in these efforts, and it is clear that the teachers believe this position to be the most demanding and most important as well. On a teaching staff that works hard, the average teacher works 50-60 hour weeks they tell me, the Team Leaders stand out for their expertise, leadership and dedication. The job description is below. I provide it here to give the reader a sense of the responsibilities Team Leaders carry out. It does not cover everything Team Leaders do every day, only some of the major responsibilities.
**WHEELS Team Leader Position Posting**

**Summary of the Position**
Team Leaders are members of the Leadership Team at WHEELS, reporting to the Assistant Principals and the Principal. There is one Team Leader position per grade which is filled by a teacher on the particular grade. Team Leaders are charged with leading the student discipline, grade-wide community and culture building, and student engagement processes, all in the name of supporting teachers in maximizing the amount of time students are engaged in productive learning experiences. Without an orderly, respectful, and communal grade-wide culture, academic achievement will not reach maximum levels. In addition to providing structure and stability, Team Leaders model Expeditionary Learning Core Practices and cultivate a culture of collaboration among their colleagues. Team Leaders are central to these processes.

**Responsibilities and Outcomes**

**Positive Grade-Wide and School Culture Supported by Common Expectations and Procedures Across Teacher Practices**
Outcome: WHEELS’ grade level cultures and overall school culture support the school’s mission

- Coordinate and facilitate one weekly community meeting for the grade
- With the team, strategize and implement common policies and procedures at two weekly Team Meetings.
- Set an agenda for each Team Meeting
- Facilitate each Team Meeting

**Daily Routines and Systems**
Outcome: Throughout the day, all areas of WHEELS are safe and orderly due to consistent adult implementation of common, strong systems and routines.

- Oversee, communicate and ensure that all adults on the team support and engage in common policies, routines and procedures regarding student behavior and discipline in all areas of the school
- Ensure that expectations for transitions between classes, as well as before and after school, are clear to all staff

**Order and Discipline**
Outcome: Students meet and exceed academic standards in each class with minimal interruption due to inappropriate behavior.

- Serve as point person for in-classroom and out-of-classroom incidents that require a teacher-leader’s or administrator’s intervention
- Maintain files on major student incidents and a current database for suspensions
- Meet with parents about disciplinary matters
- Conduct re-entry meetings for each student after an in-school or out-of-school suspension

**Pedagogical Leadership**
Outcome: WHEELS’ teachers implement Expeditionary Learning Core Practices.

- Incorporate Expeditionary Learning Core Practices in to routine instruction and planning
- Include pedagogical discussion and planning in Team Meetings
- Promote an open-door observational policy among teachers to facilitate communication and collaboration

**Administrative Meetings and Committees**
Outcome: The Team Leaders engage in weekly formal meetings with the principal, middle school AP, parent coordinator, mentor teacher, and other members of the leadership team in order to ensure regular pro-active, solutions-based communication about student, teacher, and school-wide needs.

- Attend one Leadership Team Meeting (cabinet) per week

Qualifications

- Minimum of four years of classroom teaching experience
- Masters degree in Education
- High level of organization and demonstrated success collaborating with teachers and parents
- Demonstrated success with classroom management
- Demonstrated success engaging families in the life of the school
- Previous coaching experience or other adult leadership experience preferred but not necessary

Compensation

- Team Leaders will complete and earn compensation for one hour of per session per school day

In sum, the Team Leader position is critical for the school’s success because it is the primary mechanism that keeps teachers on the same grade on the same page with the daily routines, structures, and policies. One teacher told me, comparing WHEELS to another school he taught at that also had grade teams but not Team Leaders:

We had grade teams at my old school, but they didn’t work as well because there wasn’t one person that held the line for teachers and students in terms of expectations…So, here (WHEELS), the Team Leader does that. We have common expectations and policies for student behavior and stuff, and the Team Leader makes sure that we are unified and consistent with the students… because that makes a huge difference for kids… At my old school, we met in teams, we had team meetings every week, but no one played that role (leader), so we (the teachers) were not on the same page with the policies and we still had too many discipline problems regularly because there weren’t consistent expectations (for students, from teachers)… It was chaotic. But, here (at WHEELS) the Team Leaders hold the line and keep us unified, and kids need that from adults, the consistency…that’s when student behavior breaks down, when there is inconsistency (amongst adults, throughout the school day).

(Brian, August 2012)

We see here teacher Brian discussing how his Team Leader keeps the grade team coordinated “on the same page” to provide consistency across the team’s teachers for students, consistency that he says that students need to be academically successful. His old school had
team meetings, but because there was no leadership apparatus in place to keep teachers working effectively within those team meetings, school culture and community broke down by his account. This highlights the interdependency of multiple school structures, beliefs, policies and practices in creating a healthy learning environment, as well as the need to empower teachers through the creation of roles such as these in schools.

*Teacher-Teacher Horizontal Socialization (informal social control)*

Even with the Team Leader “holding the line” as Brian put it as an ever-present leader for teachers and students, the shared expectations and teacher coordination around effective school policies and practices, and the trust resulting from such familiar interactions, could still break down over time unless there were other informal and formal mechanisms in place. One of the important by-products of the collective collaboration and empowerment of the grade level teams, is that teachers come to feel quite strongly accountable to each other, in fact more so than they feel to the building administrators. This “horizontal” as opposed to more top-down “vertical” accountability has some clear benefits for teacher professional community and culture, which I will explain here.

First, it is generally understood by the teachers that the principal delegates most of the school community building leadership and instructional leadership to the Team Leaders, Department Leaders and teachers. He is there for support if needed, but he mostly deals with the operational side of running the middle school and high school. This is important to mention because, contrary to much academic literature about the importance of charismatic, top-down principal-instructional-leaders to the success of schools serving low-income students, WHEELS is a school in which there is stronger horizontal (teacher-teacher) accountability (in terms of how well teachers do their jobs and whether they adhere to the agreed upon beliefs, policies and
practices about teaching and learning) than administrator-teacher vertical accountability. This form of informal accountability amongst teachers is effective because of the relational trust and respect teachers feel for one another at the school. Bryk and Schneider also found informal social control as central to successful schools in their research as well, stating:

Relational trust thus undergirds a highly efficient system of social control where extensive supervision (top down) of individuals’ work is not required and shirking behavior is minimal.
(Bryk and Schneider 2002: 34)

And, similarly, Robert Sampson (2012) and colleagues (1997, 1999) have discussed the importance of informal (horizontal) social control to the health of communities, which I will elaborate on in the conclusion of this chapter. In short, it is the teaming structure (including the Team Leader, and assisted by the close spatial proximity of teachers’ classrooms to each other) that is the mechanism that facilitates the teacher-teacher communication and familiarity supporting such informal social control amongst teachers at WHEELS. One teacher described the ways in which he feels held accountable by the high quality actions of the teachers around him, and how this motivates him to work harder:

…you never want to be the weakest link (teacher on a team). Because most of the links are so strong, like, not being the weakest link is really – Like, you have to work your butt off to not be the weakest link. Especially if you look at our team, I mean, it’s a pretty strong team, from front to back, right. And so, you do have to work hard. And so, when I’m up at, you know, eleven or twelve making materials, it’s mostly about the kids. Well, no, not even true. It’s mostly about me wanting to make sure that class goes well, right? And it’s then mostly about the kids doing well in the class. And then, a lot of that too is I want them to do well in my class so that way then, you know, they do well on each of their classes, and so they’re prepared for college, and so…I know (another teacher name) is doing well in her classes, I know (another teacher name) is teaching the math well in his classes, you know, and so on and so on. So, like, that definitely does have that affect on me personally. Like, it’s not even competitive, it’s like I want to make sure that we as a team send forward the best – almost like the best product…
(Urban, March 2012)
In the teacher interviews and conversations when I asked teachers whether they would classify the accountability structures at WHEELS “vertical, horizontal, or something else”, every teacher said horizontal, with some variation as to how much vertical presence they felt, which usually varied by grade-level. On this, another teacher said to me:

…our Team Leader – so she’s a teacher, she’s not a principal or dean or someone above, she’s doing the same job as us but she’s out leader and I think just in general – I won’t say we control each other, but, like, we hold each other accountable. So in that way more than the principal or the assistant principals hold us accountable.
(Maggie, June 2012)

This teacher went on to talk about a time during the 2011-2012 school year when her team of fellow teachers had intervened directly when another teacher on the team had “checked out” at the end of the year after getting into graduate school, and was not engaging in the agreed upon team policies and practices; she had even let her teaching slip in her classroom, not planning lessons well and letting behavioral expectations loosen, which resulted in some student-student conflicts in her class and some other examples of academic disengagement:

Q: And you mentioned a couple of things about why is it so important that teachers be unified – that teachers are consistent across the board for students?
A: I think just [developmentally] especially in middle school, I mean, actually in all schools and all levels in some ways students thrive on structure and consistency. So it’s confusing to them if they can shout out whatever they want in my class but in the ELA teacher’s class they have to raise their hands. So they have to switch mindsets, like, okay, I’m in (teacher’s name) class right now I can do this but in (teacher’s name) class I have to raise my hand…They see us as a unified front so they know the same expectations come in each classroom, and if we break the consistency…to be honest it has had moments when it has been broken and we have had to have conversations about it because it (the negative effects on students) does bleed in to other classrooms if those expectations aren’t held in every classroom.

Q: So there were moments in (your grade) when a teacher didn’t uphold the expectations and the policies and procedures that you all had agreed on?
A: There’s been moments where we felt we need to intervene and help a teacher get back to that kind of structure that we know our students need in the classroom.
Q: And when that breakdown happened how did it affect your classroom? Did behaviors come in to your classroom that had their origins in that classroom?
A: I won’t say behavior necessarily came in to my classroom then, but it can happen. And you’re on a team, our classrooms are right next to each other, so you hear things going on (student disengagement)...and we all want a great environment for our students, we don’t want a mean environment, we don’t want a chaotic classroom environment. We want our students to be learning in every classroom that they go to. Time is of the essence. So if you hear that there’s a classroom or you’re aware that there’s a classroom where it’s not necessarily that way (up to expectations) then we need to intervene and figure out how to get it back to where it need to be.

Q: And who intervened, was it the teachers, was it a horizontal intervention?
A: To be honest, we got to a point where we did do a horizontal intervention…
(Maggie, June 2012)

This is an interesting quote for a number of reasons. First, in general, the teams do an effective enough job of holding their members accountable informally, and the hiring process, the handbook, the Team Leader position provides for them three school structures that support teacher coordination and cohesion through the school year, so that these instances of teacher non-compliance are not the norm. Indirectly, teachers are surrounded by other hard-working, effective teachers and this makes them motivated to continue to push themselves to work hard and improve their practice, to “never be the weakest link” as Urban put it above. Directly, there have been cases when teachers have confronted other teachers, individually and collectively, and sent the message to “shape up”, if and when a teacher had let his or her practice slip. Most of these conversations happen behind closed doors. The situation mentioned by Maggie in the quote above resulted in three of the team’s teachers having a closed-door meeting with the teacher who had checked-out and telling her to get her act together. Then, they took the extra step of sitting in the back of her classroom during her lessons when they were on their prep periods each day until the end of the year, which was a period of about five or six weeks. They
did not ask her if this was okay, they just told her that this would happen. However, teachers generally do not enjoy these types of conversations, and so it is important to point out that while horizontal accountability measures and the school structures that support them are very effective and important to the school’s success, some vertical accountability from school leaders is needed to compliment them as well, which WHEELS’ middle school generally has, as there is an Assistant Principal position operating to these ends as well.

**Conclusion: From Relational Trust to Teacher Collective Efficacy**

*How Does Teacher Communication, Coordination, Cohesion and Empowerment Build Relational Trust?*

The strategic hiring process, mission-oriented faculty handbook, teaming structure, Team Leader position and the close proximity of teacher classrooms to others teaching on the same grade are some of the major school structures/organizational characteristics that help teachers get and then stay on the same page engaging with shared beliefs, common policies, and best-practices throughout the school year. But, the question remains, how does this all link up with relational trust, and why is this important? If we recall, relational trust is rooted in the day to day observations and discernments individuals make of other individuals’ actions, and has four components to it: 1) respect; 2) integrity; 3) personal regard for others (going outside of one’s role obligations to help others); and 4) competence in one’s work. When individuals in a professional context discern over time that others act with respect, integrity, personal regard for others, and competence, they come to trust those people and see them as assets in their collective endeavors to educate children. But, organizational context matters, and schools can be structured
in ways that can help or hinder the building of relational trust initially and then the sustenance of it over time.

The school structures described above facilitate these positive interpersonal discernments of trust within WHEELS. For example, in order to judge whether one is acting with integrity, whether one acts with respect towards others, whether one is competent in one’s role, and whether one has personal regard for others, individuals must have common reference points with which to judge where another individual falls in relation to these definitions. These are all broad concepts within which there can be much variation between individuals as to what is good (for lack of a better term) and what is not. For example, is a teacher not writing a lesson plan an act of incompetence? In the abstract, one teacher might think yes and another might not, for example, given the particular circumstances. There are hundreds of questions like this pertaining to all aspects of pedagogical practice that teachers might have differing views on. Asymmetry amongst a teaching faculty on the way the work should be done can be fertile ground for distrust and then fragmentation. WHEELS’ faculty handbook and job descriptions for out of classroom positions such as the Team Leader set such “cultural reference points” by getting all adults on the same page about why they are teaching in the school, what beliefs, policies and practices should guide their daily work, and, for example, by making clear the Team Leaders’ role obligations and how this role fits in to the mission of the school. In a way, these school structures function as pro-active mechanisms (though not the only ones) for building social cohesion amongst a staff.

For a specific example, let’s consider the concept of integrity, which Bryk and Schneider define as whether one’s actions match one’s words and whether these actions line up with what is best for kids. Having a detailed job description for the Team Leader, one purposeful in its contextualizing of the job’s responsibilities within the school’s mission, allows for all adults to
be on the same page with what the Team Leader’s daily actions should be. Therefore, when adults in the school, specifically teachers, then observe the Team Leader acting out the role’s obligations during the school day--by leading the team meetings and pushing teachers in re-norming behind a particular school policy, for example—these adults have a common foundation with which to judge whether their Team Leader is acting with integrity. In the absence of detailed and purposeful job descriptions teachers are left to their own devices or past experiences in other schools to envision what a given role’s obligations and responsibilities are and how (and whether) they fit in to the school’s mission.

The findings here on trust building are consistent with other research that has documented that shared expectations build trust, and the difficulty in building trust when they are not present (Hardin 2002; Small 2009; Sampson 2012; Bryk and Schneider 2002). The contribution this chapter makes to this research is describing exactly what school structures at WHEELS create and then sustain shared expectations among teachers throughout the school year, and then how these processes unfold within school life to create a coordinated team of teachers communicating often, which then helps ensure that the shared expectations and policies are followed through by adults throughout the year, providing consistency to kids. (The next chapter will build off of this coordinated teacher practice to discuss how it is foundational to building student engagement, community, and connectedness within the school.)

Therefore, the faculty handbook and detailed, purposeful job descriptions, particularly for less traditionally defined out-of-classroom positions such as Team Leader, are mechanisms that help in building relational trust, particularly in the beginning stages. However, they would not be sufficient for trust to be sustained over time; other mechanisms must be involved. Research on trust has shown that trust is built and sustained over time between non-family members, or
what social scientists call *weak ties* (Granovetter 1973), through repeated, familiar, and predictable interpersonal interactions within organizations (Small 2009). Thus, it is necessary that schools create structures that ensure such interactions between and among all constituencies—leaders, teachers, parents and students.

To this point, the important school mechanism supporting such repeated, predictable and familiar interactions and communication amongst teachers at WHEELS is the grade team meeting (twice per week). It is the school structure, led by the Team Leader, that brings teachers together around their work in collaborative ways. Team Meetings are familiar, predictable, consist of a clear agenda and process, and create the space for teachers to communicate and collaborate regularly. (Relatedly, regarding student-teacher trust, we’ll see in the next chapter how teachers’ classroom routines are important for relationship and trust building as well, when implemented effectively along with other practices).

*Uncovering a Fifth Component of Relational Trust*

When teachers have success collaborating together on, for example, the community building ideas to prevent bullying, trust is built and reinforced as well. Therefore, my research here has uncovered a fifth component of relational trust, regular *collective success* within a community. The teachers within WHEELS who are engaged collectively in generating strong levels of student engagement and academic success build and sustain trust between each other when they have success on endeavors they have collectively planned, usually in team meetings, and then implemented. Said one teacher, linking trust with repeated interactions and collective teacher empowerment and success: “I know we (the team) are going to make the right decisions together because we have and we do all of the time.” (Urena, October 2012).
It is on this point that the hiring structure comes in to play. By screening for teachers with similar beliefs about the students and the work of teaching them, for example, by not hiring teachers who do not in the interview present the will to take responsibility for the results of their students or the belief in the power of teachers to get strong student achievement results no matter the students’ background, the school makes it more likely that the teams will work more tightly together and have less disagreements with one another because all of the teachers are cut pretty much from the same ideological cloth. This isn’t to say disagreements do not come up, they do, and I would argue that usually when they do come up they are good for the school in helping teachers and leaders evaluate the effectiveness of practices, policies, strategies and structures within shifting everyday contexts. Also, they usually generally come up rooted from a place of strength and trust, not distrust. Said one teacher on this point:

**Q: Does teaching with adults who are on the same page, and in a more structured environment like WHEELS, allow for you to be a better teacher?**
**A: Yeah.**

**Q: Can you explain a little bit about how?**
**A: Well, because you – because at the end of the day – Like, look, there’s always going to be teachers that you disagree with, in terms of the way they handle something – like, the way they handle something. Or like, the policy is the same – Like, the ultimate goal is the same. So like, I might disagree with the way a teacher talks to a kid. But like, I know that the reason they’re – like, that their intentions are good. Whereas that’s not always the case, at a different place.

**Q: But speak about your own particular practice. So, for example, does being at WHEELS…**
**A: So like, knowing that, having the confidence – Like, again – So, the kids have to have trust in us. And for the most part, they do. Like, I would say 98% of the kids here have trust in the adults. 99%, even. And since it’s a community, like we said before, the adults have to have trust in the adults, and the adults have to have trust in the kids. So, just like the kids have trust in the adults, I have trust in the adults, too. So like, even though I might have a problem with, like, you know, the way something’s being done, I just trust…All right, I might disagree with (principal name) or (Team Leader name), but I trust that they got the best interest of the student there, right? So then, what that allows me to do, is not to feel like I have to be handling, you know, a disciplinary issue as a teacher on my own,
which is what I would have had to do at my old school. Right? So then, I can trust someone’s going to call the parent, and I can trust that, you know, everybody’s going to be on the same page, and there’s going to be communication, and emails are going to be sent out. So then, I can go home and lesson plan. Or, I can sit after (class) with a kid, and you know, go over instructions (on an assignment). So, it definitely allows for way more time in the classroom, like, direct contact with the kids regarding the academic content of what you’re teaching.

Q: So, if I could sum that up – it allows you to…
A: To be an academic teacher.
(Ed, April 2012)

In the above quote, Ed discusses the fact that any disagreements he has with his Team Leader or principal are rooted in trust. He also, like other teachers, understands the need for adults to all be on the same page and articulates how this adult-level coordination allows him to be a better teacher in the classroom. The hiring process, and its legitimacy in the teachers’ eyes (displayed in the earlier quote by Fiona), is central to ensuring that teachers understand that, as Ed puts it, all of the adults in the school act in “the best interest of the students”. Once this has been established, this trust, teacher collaboration and coordination efforts run much more smoothly and effectively, which then reinforce trust as well as teachers act collectively in their daily work and benefit from these efforts.

A New Conception of Teacher Collective Efficacy—From a Theory of Neighborhood Context to a Teacher-Centered Theory of School Context

The urban sociologist Robert Sampson has done more than any other scholar to advance the research on community studies and neighborhood effects within the larger conversations of social inequality and stratification. His theory of collective efficacy is foundational to his analysis of the unique influences neighborhood context plays on social life (Sampson, 2012). His research shows that neighborhoods hold unique, enduring properties, surely influenced by macro-level social forces such as racial segregation, deindustrialization and other economic
shifts (Wilson 1987, 1996), but also able to operate independently from such forces at times, which explains variations in levels of citizen trust, crime rates, social capital, and civic participation between neighborhoods with seemingly very similar socioeconomic and racial/ethnic compositions. In this context, Sampson uses a theory of collective efficacy to explain neighborhood quality of life variations, a theory I think is useful in helping to understand how to build schools with healthy internal learning environments and teacher professional communities.

Collective efficacy has two sides to it. The first is social cohesion or a sense of community and trust, and the second is shared expectations and informal (horizontal) social control amongst residents in a neighborhood. Sampson argues that neighborhoods high in collective efficacy have residents who are more active in monitoring and sustaining the higher qualities of life in their neighborhoods. As such, they have lower levels of crime, higher levels of civic participation, and higher levels of everyday supportive interactions amongst neighbors.

To apply this theory of collective efficacy to the specific case of WHEELS’ teacher professional community, in the hiring process, faculty handbook and the grade teaming structure we have mechanisms that help teachers: get and stay coordinated and cohere around shared expectations, policies and practices; communicate often; and informally control (socialize) each other horizontally, both indirectly and directly. Since, as discussed above, this teacher coordination, collaboration and collective empowerment supports relational trust building, we have both sides of collective efficacy—social cohesion/trust and informal social control--and as such, a new application of collective efficacy theory to schools, a concept I will call teacher collective efficacy.
I should note here that Hoy, Hoy and Goddard (2000) coined a similar term *collective teacher efficacy* in which they describe it as the sense among teachers in a school that they have the power to make important decisions that have an impact on student success (above, I refer to this concept as teacher “empowerment”). I believe their definition of collective teacher efficacy, while a great start, to be incomplete, to lack a communal and organizational aspect. Teachers rarely feel effective outside of the community of teachers around them, and this presupposes the existence of a sense of solidarity, complete with cohesion and shared expectations as well as social control (indirect and direct accountability measures) around such expectations that sustains coordination and trust over time. Furthermore, my conception of *teacher collective efficacy* differs from the concept of relational trust because relational trust only deals with social cohesion/trust part, but not with the concept of social control, which holds trust in place over time. The concept of social control, or how teachers *stay* on the same page and keep consistent over a 180-day school year needs to be added to any conception of relational trust. Maintaining trust over time is just as hard, perhaps more so, than building it up. And, if we are thinking about ways to improve schools, relying on teachers to discern for themselves which of their colleagues are competent or respectful, for example, and then to independently sustain these feelings of trust over time is not going to work well. Teachers are embedded within organizational contexts that facilitate or hinder the building of relational trust and collective efficacy, and because these socio-relational conceptions are so central to creating good schools, school leaders must set up and monitor school structures whereby, once common beliefs, practices, and policies for students and teachers are articulated, strong systems/structures are put in place to, both directly and indirectly, formally and informally, horizontally and vertically, hold adults cohesive around them, even during the toughest parts of the school year when the days feel longer.
In summary, in WHEELS we have a school with high levels of *teacher collective efficacy* combined with particular effective beliefs, policies and pedagogical practices (including instructional techniques) about teaching and learning about what is best for students achieving grade levels behind at school entry, as well as a certain level of teacher quality and leadership support, all that combine to support rigorous instruction in the classroom and also build a positive learning community for students that supports academic success. The next chapter will describe how this teacher collective efficacy builds a respectful, familial, academically oriented student learning community within the school—how the teachers, collectively, build trust and relationships with students and engage them in learning.
Chapter 4: Building a Strong Student Learning Community: Teacher Collective Efficacy, Social Capital Building, and Academic Success

“Researchers who have studied effective schools have found that such schools possess the following characteristics: 1) a clear sense of purpose, 2) core standards within a rigorous curriculum, 3) high expectations, 4) commitment to educate all children, 5) a safe and orderly learning environment, 6) strong partnerships with parents, and 7) a problem solving attitude. Although the criteria used to determine effectiveness rely almost exclusively on data from standardized tests and ignore other criteria, there is no disagreement that such schools consistently produce high levels of academic achievement among minority students. Researchers on effective schools…also cite the supportive relations that exist between teachers and students, and the ethos of caring and accountability that pervades such schools as other essential ingredients of their success.” (Noguera, 2008: 36-37)

The Importance of a School’s Learning Environment

This chapter will describe how WHEELS builds a respectful, communal, academic learning environment within its walls, and some ways this environment positively impacts student academic engagement and achievement. As I will explain, such a learning environment is created at the school because a critical mass of students are embedded within strong relationships with teachers and peers and feel engaged as growing learners within classrooms, all supporting student buy-in and, therefore, achievement. Put another way, two major school-level factors underpin the school’s strong student learning environment and both are supported by particular school structures and common policies. The first is a socio-relational factor, which is the building and sustaining of trusting, supportive relationships between students and their teachers as well as a sense of community on the grade levels. The second is an academic factor, which is regular academic growth and success within classes from a critical mass of students.

The term learning environment has been used synonymously with the terms school culture, school climate and learning community amongst many scholars and practitioners, and I will use them interchangeably here as well. A brief look at the research shows that school
climate was first written about as a factor influencing student achievement over a century ago by Perry (1908). Yet, it wasn’t until the 1960s that scholars began to focus systematically on the effects the internal climate of schools had on students (Halpin and Croft 1963). Since the 1980s, school climate has been understood, broadly, as an organizational-level property that reflects the norms, values, behaviors, goals, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, structures and policies that operate within a given school context (Cohen et al. 2009; Frieberg 1999), all of which influence student and adult subjective experiences within schools. A supportive school climate can lead to students feeling more connected to school, and this concept of school-connectedness has been shown to lead to higher academic achievement levels (Whitlock 2006; McNeely et al. 2002; Blum 2005). A positive school climate also has been linked to higher student aspiration levels leading to higher achievement levels (Plucker 1998). Conversely, low-aspirations have been linked to student behavior issues and academic underachievement in school (Willis 1977; MacLeod 1987; Valenzuela 1999; Stanton-Salazar 2001). Moreover, a supportive school climate has been linked to positive changes in student self-esteem, while a less supportive school climate has been linked to lower self-esteem levels in students (Hoge et al. 1990). (It should be noted that the NYCDOE uses the term learning environment for its parent, teacher and student surveys as described in chapter 2, while teachers and administrators at WHEELS primarily use the term school culture.)

In the following pages, I will build off of the concept of teacher collective efficacy, presented in the last chapter, by describing how the coordinated, empowered grade-level teacher teams pro-actively connect with their students to create a learning environment that supports high levels of engagement and academic growth. First, I will describe the elementary school experiences of the students at WHEELS in order to give the reader an understanding of the
school contexts and educational backgrounds that have impacted WHEELS students before entering WHEELS in 6th grade. This is important because middle school students bring with them the cumulative experiences of six years of elementary schooling, which shape not just their academic skills and knowledge bases, but also their expectations about school, teachers, peers and themselves as learners as well. Second, I will describe how and why WHEELS teachers, individually and collectively, build an orderly learning environment, in part, by engaging in the consistent application of common policies and practices across teacher practice and directly teaching “WHEELS’ school culture” as the teachers say, to students. Third, I will discuss how the teachers take advantage of the orderly environment to build trust and relationships with students and academic confidence and momentum in class. These sections will address questions of how social capital ties are actually created between teachers and students and then activated and sustained (leveraged through pedagogical techniques to increase engagement and achievement in the classrooms) and how particular school structures and teacher collective efficacy facilitate these relationship building processes. Lastly, the concluding section will apply the findings here to larger sociological conversations and theories and extend social capital theory as it pertains to the work of teachers and students within schools.

**Elementary School Experiences: Challenging Learning Environments and Academic Struggles**

As discussed in chapter 2, the majority of the students that enter WHEELS are, on average, two to three grade levels behind in math and literacy upon school entry in 6th grade. The effects of poverty, racial segregation, and other sociological background factors (Wilson 1997; Anyon 1998, Massey and Denton 1993; Ladson Billings 2006; Rothstein 2004) coupled
with the (generally) below average elementary school quality in Washington Heights (two of the three major feeder elementary schools all have student academic growth and performance levels far below city averages according to the NYCOE Progress Report data) compound to produce the majority of rising sixth grade students entering WHEELS not able to write and read on or near grade level and not fluent in basic numeracy skills (many students, roughly one half to two thirds each year do not know their times tables, for example). To be more specific, and as mentioned in chapter 2, the incoming 6th graders in 2012, for example, ranked as a group in the bottom quartile in the city in combined ELA and math achievement levels as measured by their fourth grade New York state exams. This has been the case every year since WHEELS opened.

One teacher said on this topic:

**Q: On average, how many grade levels behind are the students when they enter WHEELS?**

**A:** Reading wise, I would say at least two. Like, even our – There’s always, like, three or four kids that come in on grade level (out of 90), but the bulk of the class is at least two (grade levels behind), and then there’s a good, like, quarter of them who are three or four grade levels behind.

( Naomi, March 2012)

The table below displays the NYCDOE School Progress Report’s Overall Score percentile ranking for NYCDOE elementary schools of the three major elementary schools feeding in to WHEELS, PS 115M, PS 132M, and PS 189M for the past three years (see chapter 2 for a review of the methodology used in these reports). On average, WHEELS receives roughly an equal number of students from each school each year, and almost all of its students come from these three schools.
Table 9: NYCDOE Progress Report Overall Score Percentile Rankings Citywide for Neighborhood Elementary Schools, 2010-2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>2012-2013</th>
<th>2011-2012</th>
<th>2010-2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PS 132M</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS 115M</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS 189M</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can see that, year-to-year, two of the three major feeder elementary schools rank in the bottom quintile in the city on the Progress Report’s overall score, while PS 189 ranks solidly in the third quintile year to year. Breaking down these numbers further for the most recent data, the 2012-2013 school year, Table 2 displays student achievement indicators and school learning environment indicators for each school in comparison to peer group schools as well as to all elementary schools in the city.
Table 10: 2012-2013 Progress Report Metrics for Neighborhood Elementary Schools: Peer Group and Citywide Comparisons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2012-2013 Progress Report Metric</th>
<th>PS 132</th>
<th>PS 115</th>
<th>PS 189</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Progress Report Overall Score Percentile Ranking Citywide</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>71.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Student ELA Proficiency Percentile Ranking (Peer Group Schools/Citywide)</td>
<td>22.6/16.7</td>
<td>24.1/18.2</td>
<td>56.3/34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of Students Considered Proficient (levels 3 and 4) in ELA Percentile Ranking (Peer Group/Citywide)</td>
<td>22.6/16.7</td>
<td>24.1/18.2</td>
<td>54.2/30.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Student Math Proficiency Percentile Ranking (Peer Group Schools/Citywide)</td>
<td>19.5/18.3</td>
<td>29.0/22.2</td>
<td>48.7/34.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of Students Considered Proficient (levels 3 and 4) in Math Percentile Ranking (Peer Group/Citywide)</td>
<td>22.7/16.4</td>
<td>29.8/17.0</td>
<td>47.8/31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Environment Academic Expectations Percentile Ranking (Peer Group/Citywide)</td>
<td>6.3/15.0</td>
<td>12.5/20.0</td>
<td>44.9/45.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Environment Communication Percentile Ranking (Peer Group/Citywide)</td>
<td>0.0/11.1</td>
<td>0.0/0.0</td>
<td>42.9/50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Environment Engagement Percentile Ranking</td>
<td>12.5/2.0</td>
<td>5.3/15.0</td>
<td>43.8/45.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peer Group/Citywide</td>
<td>Peer Group/Citywide</td>
<td>Peer Group/Citywide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Environment Safety and Respect Percentile Ranking</td>
<td>0.0/0.0</td>
<td>25.0/30.0</td>
<td>22.4/35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance Rate Percentile Ranking</td>
<td>48.5/55.1</td>
<td>37.9/29.5</td>
<td>50.0/47.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* To view these schools’ Progress Reports go to the website “schools.nyc.gov”, enter the name of the school in the “school search” bar, and then click the “statistics” link for each school. Progress Reports are available online for the past three years, including learning environment survey data.

The data in this chart, supported by the NYCDOE data in chapter 2, make clear that WHEELS receives students far below average in ELA and math proficiency. Furthermore, it is striking how low the learning environment scores of the three elementary schools are, including the attendance rates, relative to the peer group and citywide numbers. For example, all three elementary schools rank in the bottom 35% of city elementary schools in the learning environment domain of safety and respect, with one school ranking as one of the lowest in the city.

The following student quotes about their elementary schools will layer qualitative student experiences onto this elementary school data. One WHEELS student, reflecting back on her elementary school environment, said:

**Q: So when you first came to WHEELS in 7th grade, what did you think about WHEELS?**
**A: I thought it was really, really strict, coming from my elementary school, which was crazy. People would cut class as, like, 6th graders. Half the time, like, nobody was in the classroom.**

**Q: What do you mean, ‘no one was in the classroom’?”**
A: Like, sometimes half of the students in the classroom weren’t there. I think we – we cut class, and we said we were volunteering to help another teacher tutor kindergarten kids…Like, even the best students at WHEELS, currently, were cutting class as elementary school students, then.

Q: How old were you all?
A: We were, like, 10, 11-year-olds, cutting class.

Q: Where would you go?
A: We would just, like, hang out in the hallways, hang out in the staircase, hang out with the kindergarteners…I helped little kindergarten kids, like, read, or I would create, I created a book club with the assistant principal, but she would never be there. So, it would be, like, a ‘Book Club’, quote-unquote, because she was supposed to supervise us and she would never be there. So, we would just end up hanging out in her office by ourselves.

Q: Were there fights at your elementary school?

Q: How often?
A: Like, I guess, twice a week. No, more. Like, every day, sometimes. Every day there was a fight, like various fights. And nobody (the adults) would do anything. They’d just be, like…you’d have a fight, and they’d just separate you guys, and then bring you back (to class)…

Q: What was the class like when you were in the classroom? Were kids listening?
A: It was, like, one teacher, and like, the teacher joked around a lot. So, I don’t remember, like…I don’t remember learning. I remember just that they (teachers) would be, like, “Oh, this is the lesson on the board.” And then the teacher would say something, and tell us to do something, and then everybody would just throw paper and go to their different seats, and just go all over.

(Bridget, March 2012)

Another student similarly remembered elementary school classroom disruptions and how this affected his learning:

Q: How was it (WHEELS) different than your elementary school?
A: Well, in my elementary school, they weren’t disciplined at all. Kids would, like, cut or do whatever. And we would just get by easily without really having to do any of the work, really. Like, I would still do my work, but I wouldn’t be as serious at it at all.

Q: What elementary school did you go to?
A: I went to PS 115.
Q: And all of your classmates went there, too?
A: Yeah, most of them.

Q: Were there more fights there?
A: Yeah, there were more fights there.

Q: Like, how many fights?
A: Oh, it wasn’t weekly. It was, like, a couple – a few a month, I guess.

Q: Were the hallways more loud and chaotic?
A: Yeah. It was just like 143 (the school WHEELS shares a building with and described in vignette 1).

Q: Describe that a little bit.
A: People (students) screaming, people chasing each other, arguing, pushing, fighting, yelling.

Q: When they transitioned between classes?
A: Yeah. Transitions, and going to the bathroom. It was chaos.

Q: And would students come in to class late?
A: Sometimes, yeah.

Q: Were there more disruptions in the classes?
A: Yes. More talkative (the students), I’d say.

Q: The kids were more talkative?
A: Yeah.

Q: Do you think that hurt your education?
A: Yeah.

Q: How so?
A: Because the bigger the class was, the more talkative it was, and the more distractions around me. So, I wouldn’t focus on the teacher and learning, I would focus on what was going on in my surrounding, the kids disrupting.
(Alfredo, June 2012)

Every student interviewed expressed these sentiments about the difference between the school environments in the elementary schools and WHEELS, and I have had numerous other conversations with students and parents over the past fifteen years about this topic. One student
expressed how his mother views the difference in school environments between WHEELS’
middle school and his elementary school.

**Q: What does your mom say about WHEELS?**
A: She likes it. She finds it way different than my elementary school because it is
more orderly. She’s the one that was telling me to stay in WHEELS as well. She
felt confident with this school, when I was in middle school. And she liked how
the teachers were helping me a lot.
(Raul, June 2012)

Furthermore, the students understand the causes of some academic difficulties as rooted
in the failures of the elementary schools they attended to meet their needs. Said one 8th grade
girl about her academic struggles upon coming to WHEELS:

**Q: So tell me about when you came to WHEELS what were your first
impressions?**
A: My first impression was, I really didn’t have a big adjustment to it because my
brother had told me about the school. He told me he likes it. He likes that it’s
close to the house and it’s a good school where he knows a lot of people…but
when, I, my personal impression was like, the school is small but there’s
something that makes it special about it. I don’t know what it is but there’s
something.

**Q: What do you mean by special?**
A: It’s a different school then other schools that I’ve been to and seen.

**Q: How is it different?**
A: It’s better.

**Q: Oh, so what makes it better?**
A: The education, the teachers, the way you’re taught. Like the “WHEELS Ways
to Be.” I never heard of that and now I’ve heard of it and it’s an actual good
thing.

**Q: So I want to talk about this point for a second. So why don’t we start by
talking about the difference between your elementary school and this school.
So can you talk about what PS132 was like? What was the education like?**
A: It was a pretty big school but it didn’t teach you. When I came to WHEELS
there were things that I was supposed to learn in elementary school that I didn’t
learn. So it made me think back of how my teachers taught me, what they didn’t
teach me at PS132. I didn’t feel like I was getting taught well enough because in
my tests (state exams) I didn’t do that well, I had twos (out of four).
Q: Okay, and what were some of those things that you think you should have learned that you didn’t?
A: Like my grammar, and my division. When I was in sixth grade those were things that I didn’t know well enough that I was supposed to learn before. I was supposed to learn geometry, something that I didn’t learn. 
(Stephanie, June 2012)

And, another student reflecting back on her unchallenging academic experiences in elementary school said:

Q: So how long have you been a student at WHEELS?
A: Since the 6th grade.

Q: Okay. And before the 6th grade what school did you go to?
A: PS189.

Q: PS189. Okay. How did you like PS189?
A: I liked it but I didn’t really feel like it challenged me in any way whatsoever.

Q: Okay. So when you came to WHEELS did you feel the same way or did you feel it was a change?
A: No, it was a change – like personally in the 6th grade…everyone (the WHEELS adults) was very strict so it was a different structure because – like in my elementary school it wasn’t really structured, you just did whatever you wanted to, and it was basically your decision to be a good student or not. But at WHEELS there’s not really a decision, like, you’re forced almost to be a good student because there’s so many teachers that want to push you. 
(Ellen, June, 2012)

Aside from the interviews and the elementary school NYCDOE achievement data, my participant observation over fifteen years in this building working at both IS143M and WHEELS also confirms that there is a general belief from teachers, parents, students and administrators that the neighborhood elementary schools struggle to prepare their students adequately for middle school, and the overwhelming majority of students enter 6th grade academically behind. WHEELS’ teachers understand the elementary school environments the incoming students come from. They realize that they must in some ways redefine the roles of student and teacher to some
incoming students, and thereby redefine the students’ ideas and experiences about school in order to maximize student achievement across the board.

Also, with students entering grade levels behind, time is of the essence. One general goal of the middle school is to catch its students up to grade level (at least) by the end of the 8th grade so that the students are prepared to tackle a rigorous college-prep high school curriculum in preparation for college. This places an emphasis on WHEELS teachers to maximize every minute of every class, and funnel every minute of the day into student learning. Achievement within this time-sensitive context occurs at the highest levels at WHEELS within an orderly, structured, caring setting where teachers and students are able to act pro-actively towards learning goals and not be constantly interrupted by, and then needing to react to, the sorts of disruptive behavior by even a few students as described in the student quotes above.

The Benefits of Consistency, Structure and Order

Vignette 2: Instruction Supported by a Strong Learning Environment

I am in a classroom observing a science teacher’s lesson. About thirty students are in the room. This is fourth period. When I enter, the lesson is less than ten minutes old and the teacher is transitioning her students from reviewing an opening activity meant to activate schema for the lesson, called a “Do Now” activity at this and many other schools. They transition quickly and silently and she then begins her mini-lesson, first having a student read the learning target for the day. Every student is with her, sitting up and looking at her with their notebooks out. The student reads the learning target, and then the teacher thanks the student, comments positively on her loud “classroom voice” and then repeats the learning target again to the class; a learning target is the achievement goal for the day. Every classroom has them posted every
class period. This one reads “I conduct a virtual lab in order to explain the scientific reasons for the seasons on the earth.”

The teacher then launches in to a mini-lecture with content aligned to the learning target. She is using the smart board and her laptop to proceed through a power point presentation, which consists of notes, diagrams and pictures. The students have a handout that the teacher made for them that accompanies this lecture, and at times they fill in note-catchers, answer questions, and read diagrams as per her directions as the mini-lecture proceeds. Sometimes, the teacher tells them to take notes on something specific, and a few times she has them do a “pair share” or a “stop-and-jot” in which students answer higher-order analytical questions either alone in writing or verbally with their partner in quick bursts. This mini-lecture lasts for about ten minutes. It is mostly teacher-driven and has 100% of the students engaged and involved all along the way—when the teacher says “turn and talk to your partner about this question” for example, every student does and as I circulate around the room it is clear that every pair is talking about the question only and not about non-academic things.

The teacher’s goal for this mini-lecture was to frontload scientific information in a quick, organized way so that when students embark on the virtual lab activity later on in the period they have enough background information and vocabulary on the topic to successfully perform it. Towards the end of the mini-lecture the teacher asks a question and then cold-calls a student in order to check for understanding and increase the pacing. The student hesitates for about ten seconds, and then responds with an incomplete answer. The rest of the students are silent and listening, not one laughs or even loses concentration. The teacher then follows up with the student, breaking down the question a bit more, asking it a different way, and prompting the student to look at the diagram in the packet and a few of the vocabulary words introduced
before. The student does for about another twenty seconds or so and then responds to the question correctly. “Exactly. Well done, Ryan”, the teacher says. The teacher then cold calls another student saying, Alexis, give me a sayback of what Ryan just said. Alexis does correctly and the teacher then repeats her answer again before moving on.

(Adapted from field notes)

Coordinated Teachers, Coordinating Students

This moment in classroom life is significant because of how the other students reacted to the change in the lesson’s pace and flow, as well as displaying that students have been taught to listen to each other, a skill that must be explicitly taught across teacher practice to be successful, and one that is central to building a community of learners. The entire exchange between the teacher and the student took close to two minutes, and during this time the other twenty-nine students did not lose concentration, stayed silent and focused, and listened to their classmate as he first incorrectly answered the teacher’s question, was corrected and prompted by the teacher, used his notes for support, thought and then answered it correctly. It is at times like these in lessons, when the pace of a lesson seems to slow down and when students need to shift attention from teacher to classmate, that they can lose focus, get distracted, and sometimes start talking to a classmate sitting next to them, thereby causing a disruption to the lesson for other students. Lessons can break down at points like these and sometimes teachers can never recover the amount of student engagement they had before such moments. In worse cases, where a teacher has failed to create a respectful classroom environment, when a student gets an answer wrong publicly other students may laugh and/or call out insults or tease. In these classrooms, students participate less and feel less safe to take intellectual risks for fear of being ridiculed and/or bullied by peers. This is not the case in the above vignette. The teacher, supported by her grade
team, have created a safe, respectful, focused learning community in her classroom whereby students can get an answer wrong, the teacher can spend time supporting that student one-on-one while the rest of the class listens, and the student has a safe space and the time to work-out the correct answer while others listen and learn from a peer’s mistake.

The three grade-level teacher teams operate as coordinated units in order to create such a classroom learning environment, and this teacher collective efficacy makes school community building more successful because it embeds students within more dense, consistent, supportive school structures and relationships across the board. Said one teacher on this coordination and its benefits for students:

Q: You said WHEELS was different than other schools you’ve taught at. Can you talk about how WHEELS is different from other schools you been at just in general?
A: Sure the thing is, each school has its own different problems, but the thing about WHEELS that was different was (it has) like-minded individuals who share a common philosophy about how they wanted the school to be. So, I think that was the number one difference. In my other schools there was always a lot of, sort of, fracturing, and different, I don’t know the word… fracturing…there were different philosophies sometimes about what should happen and things weren’t uniform in the school. I think that is one thing. Then, given that the group of teachers that are at WHEELS…had (originally) worked in schools (IS143M) where there wasn’t as much structure and where there wasn’t as much focus on school culture or behavioral activities and, sort of, the small everyday stuff, everybody (at WHEELS) kind of really had a real focus for that, a real limited tolerance for disruptions (in classrooms) and a real focus on maximizing instructional time by way of diminishing behavioral issues and increasing student engagement. And because everybody (the adults at WHEELS) is so like-minded and just so consistent, and we have shared policies, it just results in incredible culture in classrooms that allow you to really just teach in a way that at other schools; say the school I came from prior…just don’t allow you to. (Teresa, May 2013)

In this quote, the teacher, who has taught for about eight years at three different schools in the city, summed up the important connection between instructional quality and the importance of all of the teachers in the school being on the same page with shared beliefs,
policies and practices and operating as a cohesive unit within common school structures. The middle school teachers understand structure, order, care, and consistency as important components to building a strong student learning community. In fact, the middle school classrooms at WHEELS allow for student to feel safe, take academic risks, and to concentrate on their learning in various ways. And, because consistency throughout the day is so important for students to be successful and to build trust in adults, a critical mass of the adults in WHEELS’ middle school are on the same page with expectations, rules, consequences, and general school wide policies. What occurs in one classroom affects all other classrooms. If low expectations for students are the norm in one classroom, some students can carry those expectations and behaviors to other classrooms, affecting the learning there. But, when almost all of the adults in the building have high expectations for students, they rise to the challenge. Said another teacher about how her instruction benefits from WHEELS’ common systems/structures:

Q: So do you feel that because of the school culture here (at WHEELS) you are a more effective teacher?
A: Absolutely…there are other things that make an effective teacher. You need professional development, you need a master’s degree. You have to learn the pedagogy. So I think just having the (school) structures without those things wouldn’t result in the most effective teaching. But if you already have them (those aforementioned attributes) or you are getting that, then absolutely, you can get more done in your classroom and most things run incredibly smoothly and there are very few distractions, and you are just maximizing time on instruction. And you are also maximizing your mental energy on instruction, which is a good thing. You cannot deliver good instruction if you are worried about distractions and what kids are going to do, or you are constantly thinking about that and reacting to it. If you know things will work smoothly because there is a structure the kids respect, and they know what to expect, and everything is running smoothly, you can focus your mental energy on instruction. And you can do things academically that maybe you couldn’t do in a different school…There are things that I can do at WHEELS in my classroom because, you know, I can really push them (the students) because the system has them bought in to learning, you know?
(Laurie, August 2012)
These ideas about the important links between adults clearly communicating consistent expectations for students, school community, and rigorous academic achievement appear occasionally in the academic literature. For example, in her essay in the book *Young Gifted and Black* (2004) Theresa Perry writes:

African American students will achieve in school environments that have a leveling culture, a culture of achievement that extends to all of its members and a strong sense of group membership, where the expectations that everyone achieve is explicit and is regularly communicated…Usually in these schools there are academic support services in place as well as a determination to socialize students to the behaviors and values that support achievement…African American students will have difficulty achieving in school communities…that are individualistic, are highly stratified and competitive, and that make few attempts to build and ritualize a common, strong culture of achievement that extends to all students (Perry 2003: 107).

And, while Perry writes specifically about African American students here, her sentiments are in line with how WHEELS teachers understand the importance of creating a strong school community of learning for their students. However, there is a dearth of research about exactly how successful schools build and sustain a “common, strong culture of achievement” as Perry puts it. The following sections will explain how WHEELS teachers collectively do this.

*Directly Teaching How to Be a WHEELS Student*

At WHEELS, creating strong learning communities is done primarily through the grade teaming structure. As discussed in the last chapter, the hiring process, the handbook and professional development sessions around it involving these common beliefs, expectations, practices, and policies start this teacher coordinating process off. The Team Leaders and the grade teaming structure keep teachers coordinated and collaborative throughout the year. Then, once teachers are on the “same page” they can be more effective in collectively and explicitly teaching students how to be “successful WHEELS students” or as they say “teach the school
culture” to the students. Said one Team Leader on the common student expectations, their importance to learning, the need to directly teach them to kids from the start of their sixth grade year, and combining this all with “love, care and support”:

**Q: So, what is it that produces, in your opinion, that is producing the positive school community and culture you referred to earlier?**

A: Right. I think setting high behavior expectations, having consistent structures all around the school, in all the classrooms, and agree upon structures with many teachers. And really focusing on, like, very, kind of nit-picky things, like not putting your head down in class, or walking quietly in to class, or transitioning (from class to class) appropriately. Like, there’s just a lot of little things, expectations--getting right to work (once entering class), being as organized as possible, writing the learning targets when you enter class. There’s a huge – I mean, if you look at our handbook, we have, like, every single thing spelled out. And I think – And the kids know those things, and I think the majority of teachers know the majority of those things that are in there, and expect those out of students. And I think that partly creates the positive school culture.

**Q: And by consistently expecting those things out of students, do you also mean that they (teachers) all hold students to those standards?**

A: Yeah, I think for the most part. And then I think that that’s combined with a lot of love and care and support, and teachers really spending – I think the students know and see that even with all these expectations, I do think that they feel – I think every single kid would feel cared for– Well, I hope – I hope that this is true, and I think that it’s true, that kids at the school can all say that they at least feel very cared about by at least one adult in the school, and probably more.

(Jennifer, April 2012)

Another teacher said the following about the community building processes and the benefits to students, again highlighting the teacher collective efficacy processes at the team level and the importance of directly teaching how to be a successfully student at WHEELS:

**Q: Could you talk to me a little bit about what you think works at WHEELS, and why?**

A: Yes, I think that starting from the 6th grade we have high behavioral expectations that may, on their surface at first, appear to be somewhat strict, but then once they are put in place allow for freedom within the structure. So, by creating and maintaining a safe environment by having a kind of strict policy around violence, and around disrespect of teachers and other kids, we end up creating flexibility and freedom within the classroom. Kids feel safe to participate and contribute and share, and they trust their teachers in a way that, I think, people (proponents of more “open” classrooms) miss if they go straight to the
completely, like, open classroom environment. And, I think that people intend positive things when they have a completely open environment—So, what I mean by that is by allowing kids to say what that they feel at all times, and kind of sit how they want, and dress how they want, come in when they want, do their work when they want—Like, that type of permissiveness seems like it’s more democratic on the surface, but it ends up hurting the kids, I think. Whereas, our policy, where we have kids track (look at) the speaker and sit up in class, and have kids speak kindly to one another, and turn and talk (to each other) in a positive way, and, you know, address other kids and adults with respect, I think that then creates a safe environment for kids. And then, the openness and freedom in the classroom develops in a healthier way. Does that – does that make sense?

Q: So, one of the things I’d like to understand is how that’s created. So, how is that created amongst the teachers, amongst the students?
A: I think it starts in the 6th grade. I think it starts where we take kids from a whole bunch of different schools, and they come in and we teach them our school culture explicitly. So, I know that when I was teaching 6th grade…we had a Building Background Knowledge Workshop…about WHEELS’ school policies, the WHEELS’ Ways to Be, and about the way we walk in the hallways, and the way we address each other, and the systems in class, like turning and talking, or the five finger voting system, all of those things were explicitly instructed in the 6th grade. And the Team Leader made sure all the teachers on the grade understood the systems, and used those systems in their classrooms, so that the kids weren’t experiencing a completely new environment in every single class. So, by making sure the team (of teachers) is cohesive, and the systems are cohesive, and then they’re instructed explicitly, you help kids negotiate that system.

Q: When you say cohesive, do you mean that every teacher on the grade is doing that?
A: Yes, I think that you need to decide on the grade – Even simple things like how kids are asking to use the bathroom. Or, like, do we let kids get up in the middle of instruction to throw out trash. Or, is there an electric pencil sharpener in the room, do they use it and when do they use it? Exactly, so, things that seem miniscule and insignificant become kind of the crux of the first couple of weeks of school, and then once those things are in place, they provide guidelines for the rest of the school year. So I should only need to teach “Don’t sharpen your pencil while I’m talking” once, and that should be the expectation in every single classroom. Or, I should be able to say, “Okay, when we turn and talk to our partners, it looks like this in my classroom,” and that should be the same in all of the classrooms…The classroom expectations are the same, behaviorally, socially, and then, also, you can move in to, once you have that in place, you can move in to academic expectations around quality of academic work, like, this is what a paragraph looks like in my class, and you can’t hand in two sentences in your social studies class and expect to have that be okay. Like, it’s about all (teachers)
being behind ‘these are our standards across the board’. It’s an academic quality issue.

Q: From a student’s point of view?
A: From a student’s point of view, right. Like, if I become invested in the school community, and I learn how to act in a way that’s productive with my peers, it’s a lot easier to then translate – transfer that energy into my academic work, more productive work in class.
( Naomi, March 2012)

And, another teacher summed up the student academic community building processes in this way, moving from teacher collective efficacy to directly teaching students how to be productive learners, when I asked him how WHEELS produces its learning environment:

So the three big things to me is that (first) everybody (adults) is on the same page on board to start, so there is no (staff) conflict and no typical administration versus staff (conflict). (Second) All the adults have shared values about what should happen, what the school culture is. And then third, the teachers are given a lot of responsibility for a lot of the little social and academic things that happen in their classroom but they are also given a lot of authority as well to deal with that...So those are the three big things, I think. And then the fourth is that WHEELS explicitly teaches and coaches it’s expectations to the students and doesn’t assume that they will know how to be a productive student necessarily right when they come to us.
(Fernando, May 2012)

We see in these quotes the emphasis on teacher collective efficacy as the driving force behind the building and sustaining of a strong learning environment. Through teacher collective efficacy—coordination on practices and policies, and empowerment to make important decisions together—the teachers then directly teach students what behaviors, mindsets, etc. will lead to academic growth and success. Some of the major school wide policies that teachers are coordinated around are the following. I insert them here to provide a few examples for the reader. They are not exhaustive.

**Entering and Exiting Class:** There are no bells at WHEELS. Students line up in two lines before class outside of the classrooms. Teachers are in the hallways during transitions
between periods guiding this process. Once teachers let the students in to class the students take out their binders or notebooks, and for the first few minutes of class they copy the Learning Target(s) for the day and then do the Do Now/Think Quick activity. Learning targets state the skill and content objective(s) for each lesson, which I will describe in more detail next chapter. The teacher begins the lesson after this process has occurred. Periods are sixty-five minutes, and students are dismissed from class once the teacher has said so. When students leave the room they are to “leave no trace”, which means to take all of their belongings, their trash if any, and slide their chairs in. Then they line up in two lines in the hallway and wait until their next period teacher comes to get them or until their prior teacher has led them to the next classroom. The classrooms are very close together so there rarely more than ten or twenty feet to walk. The entering process begins again at the next class.

*Hallway Transitions:* Classes of students are walked by teachers everywhere in the school. The music teachers’ rooms are in the basement of the school, for example, and they pick up their classes on the fourth floor and walk to the basement together in two lines. After the class, they lead the students back up to the next class on the fourth floor. The same process happens when the students go to the cafeteria and gym periods; they are led there and picked up by their teachers and led back up to their classrooms afterwards.

*Student Body Language in the Classroom:* Students are held accountable by teachers for showing that they are listening and engaged when the teacher or another student is speaking. Specifically, teachers hold the expectation that students will sit up in class and look at them when they are talking. Teachers prompt students if they feel that students need reminding of this. This prompting takes different forms in different classrooms and is somewhat teacher specific. However, the general idea is that students should show that they are engaged in the
lesson for its entirety as well as understand that monitoring one’s body language in certain settings is important.

*The Ways to Be:* “The Ways to Be” are a set of six broad guiding principles that help to establish a respectful and academic school culture around certain broad behaviors identified as leading to successful academic achievement. They are posted in every classroom and define every student policy and routine in the language of community and responsibility. They are: 1) Be Respectful; 2) Be Responsible; 3) Be Present; 4) Be Open-Minded; 5) Be Prepared, and; 6) Be Prompt. Teachers frame their classroom policies and routines using this language. For example, looking at, and listening to, a classmate when he/she is participating is showing that one is respectful and present. Speaking loudly enough so that all of the other students in the room can hear you is showing respect for their learning as well.

*Habits of Work and Learning (HOWLS):* HOWLS are learning targets based on the Ways To Be. They are non-academic learning targets, which focus on student actions and attitudes that lead to academic success, and are the school’s attempt to clearly communicate, teach, and assess students on being a part of a community of learners—sometimes these sorts of targets are called “character education” in education policy circles (although this language is not used much at WHEELS). Teachers post a HOWL target at the beginning of every lesson along with a learning target(s). The HOWL represents the social/study skill that will be highlighted in the lesson. Examples of HOWLS are: “I can work productively in a group of my peers”; “I can give respectful body language to the speaker during the presentations”; “I can give respectful body language to the speaker during the presentations”; “I can hand in my homework by the deadline”; “I can push myself and my group mates to think in deeper ways about today’s content”; “I can speak loudly and clearly when presenting to the class”; “I can take
academic risks and participate at least once in the class discussion today when it might feel uncomfortable.”

*The Conduct Sheet and All Stars:* The conduct sheet follows each class from classroom to classroom throughout the day. It serves several purposes: teachers can communicate to each other by writing messages to other teachers; students who go to the bathroom are recorded for each class; positive recognition for a wide variety of reasons is given in the form of student names recoded as what are called All-Stars; and, a general class conduct grade is given from 1 to 4, usually aligned to one or more of the Ways to Be or specific HOWLS. In sum, the conduct sheet facilitates communication between teachers and also provides a public space where positive recognition can be given to students. A student monitor carries the sheet from period to period and it is collected at the end of every day by the homeroom teacher. Teachers discuss trends at team meetings, and different grades use different incentive systems using the conduct sheet, such as conduct sheet competitions.

*Student Internalization*

It would be wrong to view the above policies and beliefs by teachers as representing “things done to students”, in other words as external mechanisms of social control in the context of WHEELS’ middle school. Here, they are techniques and strategies implemented within a constellation of other techniques and strategies that, utilized by expert teachers, help build a strong, academic learning community within a school. To go back to the original claim of this chapter, students will “buy-in” to a school’s culture when they come to trust the adults in the school, and when they see themselves learning regularly in classes. When these things both happen, students see the school as a place that they like to come to every day and as a place that is helpful to them and aligned to their future goals. In essence, they begin to internalize the
expectations of the school because they feel a part of it, a connection to it and to the people in it, and successful as learners. The student and parent learning environment survey results and my other data show that this internalization and sense of community is present. One teacher summarized this school community building process as the following:

…so at WHEELS when students come in (initially in 6th grade) they are sometimes scared and they are kind of nervous, and explicitly and implicitly they are told the value of WHEELS and some of the stuff is implicit or explicit so they line up in lines, they raise their hand, they treat each other with respect, all of those knit-picky things, and then it goes from ‘you have to sit up straight’ to essentially in their mind ‘this place is very strict’ to eventually ‘this place is all about the work’ (academic), because then they start to see the benefits and the transition from teaching them the procedures to being asked to produce a lot more work than they ever have necessarily…and the amount of time (in class)...is much greater (than elementary school). And so eventually it doesn’t become about this teacher or that teacher. After all the evidence of the teachers that are doing their jobs and the other students are actually following the directions, then the students together with the teachers see that this is a place that’s about the learning, It’s about the work and treating everyone with respect…and they see that both by being told explicitly but then that’s followed up with absurd consistency (from teachers regarding expectations, etc.) hopefully on the sixth grade and then that’s pretty well internalized well before the end of sixth grade and even just a few weeks or months in (to the school year) students will see the benefit and then start to see the contrast with other students in the building (IS143M’s hallways)…

So the students go from perhaps listening to the expectation of ‘put your eyes on the speaker’ maybe out of fear or social pressure because everyone else has their eyes on the teacher, but then as they start to do these things as habit it becomes not something that they do because they are asked but they do because eventually most of them start to see the benefit… It becomes not just ‘do this because I said so’ but ‘do this because we have an awesome science lab we need to get done’ or ‘we have all these maps we need to investigate’, that kind of thing. And that’s the shift in their mind, but it’s all done with a lot of work that is difficult to pull off unless you have everybody (teachers) on the team with the same kinds of expectations and putting in a lot of time for holding students accountable for those expectations, explaining when they make mistakes, you know… I think… the vast majority make that shift in their mind that the way school is this way because ‘it makes things better’, on top of ‘that’s the way we do things here’… and I think they appreciate that it’s, at the end of the day, a very safe and more comfortable place to work then and learn than other places.

(Fernando, May 2012)
And, from a student point of view, one eighth grade student discussed the benefits to her and her classmates of the school’s learning environment/school culture in this way, at times contrasting it with her observations of IS143M’s hallway transitions and her elementary school experiences. She has clearly internalized the school’s culture and feels “in community” with her classmates and teachers, as exemplified by her use, for example, of the pronoun “we”:

Q: So a lot of your classmates came from PS115. So when you came to WHEELS did you feel like things were different or the same in terms of the environment?
A: Yeah. Different.

Q: Can you describe that?
A: Well, the kids weren’t as wild (at WHEELS) as they were in PS 115 and the environment felt safer since it’s like a more closed up school, like I didn’t have to worry about the school that’s under (IS143M) because I like, the protection is good and the environment feels safe. The teachers they are really nice and they really helpful.

Q: What are your thoughts about 143?
A: Like they are really, the teachers don’t have control over their students.

Q: How do you know that, what do you see?
A: I see students in the staircases cutting class. I see students screaming, something we don’t do. I have seen students talk back to teachers and teachers don’t do nothing about it.

Q: When you see that happen does it make you feel less safe?
A: It doesn’t make me feel less safe but it makes me feel, I imagine if that was me…

Q: If you went to that school?
A: Yeah I imagine how would I have acted.

Q: But here at WHEELS you feel safe?
A: Yeah.

Q: Why do you feel safe here?
A: It’s well I feel safe but I don’t know how to explain it.

Q: Do you think it’s important for students to feel safe in order to learn?
A: Yeah because if you have something that’s bothering you or you have somebody threaten you, how could you feel safe and how could you concentrate
on learning if that’s all you’re thinking about? You have to protect yourself from that person or that thing.

Q: So let’s go back to like you were talking about a little bit ago. You said when you came to WHEELS in sixth grade, what were your first impressions? You said it was a small school, what else?
A: To be small it was a really good school that I’ve seen a lot of kids’ progress in. The teachers look very like, they are strict but they are strict for a reason. Like at 143 (IS143M) those teachers aren’t that strict that’s why their kids are wild, but here the teachers are strict and firm so the kids are good.

Q: What’s the reason, like you said they are strict for a reason?
A: The reason is to make us better people, to have a good life.

Q: So do you think being strict is good for kids?
A: It depends what kind of strict because if you’re like so strict that kids will get scared and don’t want to talk or nothing. That’s not good.

Q: So what kind of strict do you see?
A: I see discipline, meaning no kids can just do what they want. They have to follow the rules.

Q: Do you think other students in the eighth grade besides yourself feel the same way?
A: I think so.

Q: Do you guys talk about it?
A: Yeah there’s a point in the day like at lunch that we talk about if we don’t like something or if we do. Like most kids don’t like detention but they earn it, if you don’t do your homework, of course, so that’s your problem. But we do talk about things. Like we have seen kids (IS143M students) coming out of lunch while we were going in and we just look at each other and say ‘wow’. (The two schools share the same cafeteria and other common spaces in the school)

Q: The kids from another school?
A: Yeah.

Q: Why do you say “wow”?
A: Because, they are running and pushing and being rude and it’s so much different than us, and it looks so bad because we imagine if that was us and somebody from like the state came to see us, they would have a really bad impression of us.

Q: From the state, you mean the education department?
A: Yeah.
Q: So it sounds like, I don’t want to put words in your mouth so correct me if I’m wrong. It sounds like you think that WHEELS students act different…

Q: Yeah.

Q: Is that true?

A: In a good way.

Q: In a good way, how so?

A: We behave well and we have good manners. Yeah.

Q: Do you think that helps with academics?

A: Yeah it does.

Q: How does that help with learning?

A: If you’re rude and or you don’t have a good way to behave, your learning will be just the same way you are, and you won’t concentrate in class…

(Tiana, June 2012)

Tiana’s quote exemplifies the fact that students at WHEELS feel a part of the school community and therefore a sense of group membership with other students and teachers in the institution. The student survey results also bear this out as well as reported in chapter 2 as WHEELS students’ positive responses are higher than the city averages on just about every question. This is very important as it relates to the sociological concept of informal social control as opposed to external social control, and which type of social control is at work within a school that has established a strong school community. More specifically, once a group identity and solidarity is established across all constituencies in a school--school connection as some call this (Blum, 2005)—the above school structures, policies and practices cease to be external mechanisms of social control imposed upon students by others (teachers), and are instead informal (and communal) mechanisms of social control circulating within a cohesive group, with “the group” now defined broadly as all actor constituencies within the WHEELS community—teachers and other school adults, students, and parents because of the established social solidarity. All constituencies also are understood to be operating toward the same collective
goals, the academic and socio-emotional growth of the students, as well as their security and happiness. Perhaps the sociologist Robert Sampson (1997) described this more informal, communal definition of social control within tight communities best when he wrote in a study of neighborhood community building processes:

although social control is often a response to deviant behavior, it should not be equated with formal regulation or forced conformity by institutions…rather (informal) social control refers generally to the capacity of a group to regulate its members according to desired principals—to realize collective, as opposed to forced goals (Sampson, et. al 1997: 918).

The following ethnographic vignette highlights some of these school-wide policies channeled through one teacher’s beginning-of-class routine during a piece of a typical day.

**Vignette 3: School-wide Policies in Action**

*It is 11:15 and I step in to the hallway as classes change. I watch as over the next three minutes groups of light-blue shirted students exit one class and line up in front of another. I count eight or nine teachers in the middle school portion of the hallway, all watching and/or talking to students. This is not a silent process, and I do not hear one teacher ask for silence. Rather, students do talk, but it is calm and all takes place within boundaries they know and have internalized. It is controlled; voices do not go about a certain level. Students walk and generally keep their hands to themselves. Anyone who has been in a middle school before will know that there is a certain level of calmness and order here that isn’t always the norm in middle schools, yet it isn’t militaristic by any means either. I watch as the Mr. E. greets his class and tells them that he wants their eyes on him and the conversations to cease. Most of the kids stop talking, but a few conversations linger. He then says, “You are definitely not going in to the room this unfocused. Stop the conversations and put your eyes on me please.” There is seriousness in his tone that was not there before. The rest of the conversations stop, he gives*
directions for the Do Now activity, and then lets one line in first, then the other. I pass by the room and I see all of the students quietly taking out their materials and beginning to copy the learning target. He starts the lesson a few minutes later by asking for a “body language check”; the students sit up and look at him. He then reads the learning target and the HOWL and calls on two students to read them as well, after which he launches in to the teacher-guided review of the entry activity using the smart board. Almost every one of Mr. E’s classes start like this and most likely every one of the students’ classes today have started like this as well.

(Adapted from field notes)

Links to Teacher Effectiveness and Achievement

By not just dismissing students in to the hallway to go where they please after one class, the school eliminates many potential negative interactions between students from ever occurring, such as those observed in Vignette One at the other school. Above in Vignette 3, Mr. E. and his team made sure to set up a regular routine consistent with the other teachers on the grade, whereby once the kids entered his classroom he would not have to waste much energy or time focusing them on the academic task. If loud conversations, play fights, etc. from the hallway come in to the classroom, the first part of class will be taken up ending the undesired behavior and talk, and focusing the kids on the lesson. Time for learning will be lost, and Mr. E understands this. Furthermore, once the students entered Mr. E’s class, they knew exactly what to do because they do the same thing in every class to some degree every day; they took out their notebooks and copied the learning targets (academic content and skill goals for the period), and started the Do Now/Think Quick activity. Just about every middle school class starts like this at WHEELS. This consistency and structure ‘clears the ground’ (so to speak) creating learning space with which the teachers should then fill with proactive moves, eliminates potential
disruptions from ever manifesting themselves in the first place, and sets the tone for the period as one of seriousness, positivity, focus and academics.

At the beginning of the year the class routines and policies get internalized by the students. Once this happens, they just become “the way we do things here” and part of a school that “benefits me” as Fernando said above, and corrections generally become minimal as the year goes on as long as the teachers stay consistent and achievement progresses for most students.

Class periods are sixty-five minutes long and Mr. E.’s kids were in and at their seats having already performed an activity activating background knowledge with sixty minutes left. This is efficient, and would not have happened if the entire hallway and entry process was not standardized in this way. When I interviewed Mr. E. about this, he said:

I feel sometimes that it (the class entry and exit policies) is too standardized, too mechanical, like a machine. But, once they (students) internalize them it doesn’t really feel like that anymore. And also I tell myself that it is all about their learning and not wasting their (the students’) time. We have a responsibility to not waste it. We already don’t have them for enough time already, and many of them are behind…I also feel that I would have to correct a lot of behavior at the beginning of class to get them focused if we didn’t do this. Having taught at 143, I know I would…And then we wouldn’t have as much time to learn. (Mr. E. Spring 2012)

Mr. E. articulates a major way the school-wide policies impact his teaching. With only so much time in a class period, and with most of the students below grade level in literacy and math skills, teachers have a responsibility to use their limited amount of time with the kids, only about five hours per week per class, as responsibly as possible; to focus on the academic needs of their students for as much of the period as possible. Wasting ten minutes at the beginning of class focusing kids on the lesson, diffusing typical teenage conflicts or conversations that began in the hallways, telling students to sit in particular places and to take out the proper materials, etc., all of which would happen regularly without organized entry and beginning-of-class procedures,
would add up to about fifty minutes of wasted class time per class, per week; this is almost a period per week of lost class time in every class, and many hours of lost instructional time per year. Another teacher compared WHEELS’ orderly environment to the chaotic environment of her former school:

...Here (WHEELS) I find that because of everything that is laid out in the handbook and because kids know exactly what’s expected, whether it’s an English class or science class there’s a lot more time for dialog about other academic things.

**Q:** Like what?
**A:** Like the time that I could have spent explaining to half a dozen kids to put their book bags in the right place when they came in to the room, that time now is spent – kids are already in the room, they know what they’re doing, I say it once if I even have to at all and for those few minutes I’m instead kneeling besides desks and talking to kids about what they’re reading or writing, or complementing kids on something.

**Q:** So you are having more academic conversations, positive conversations, things that lead directly in to high quality instruction?
**A:** Yes, definitely.

**Q:** Is it safe to say that you have more time, if I’m a student in your class compared to a student at your old school (a struggling middle school in the neighborhood), I have more time spent on academics at WHEELS?
**A:** Yes, definitely. I feel that if I compare the amount of time I spend speaking to students and what I’m actually saying to students here during a class period versus at the school that I came from, here I would say about 95% of that time is spent just talking about academics, the other 5% might be gentle remainders here and there. Whereas my old school was different, maybe 50-50 on a good day.

**Q:** So 50% of the lesson you were correcting and re-correcting behavior?
**A:** Yes. And redirecting. So maybe here during independent work time (in class) almost all of that time I’m working with kids and either conferencing on academic activities or motivating in some way. Versus about 50% of independent work time at my old school...

**Q:** And so would you say that for a student at WHEELS you’re getting hours of more instruction per week and maybe tens and tens of hours of more instruction per year as compared to a student down the block who goes to school over there?
A: Yes, which is staggering. When I’m thinking about the amount of time within a class period, it’s staggering, but I think it’s true. Definitely tens and tens of hours more per year of academics here (at WHEELS) in each class…
(Fiona, August 2012)

And, another teacher who also taught in another struggling neighborhood middle school echoed these thoughts on student productivity and also discussed how her quality of work life is better since teaching at WHEELS:

Q: So what is it about working at WHEELS that makes your quality of work life better?
A: I think I don’t have to worry the same way about classroom management the way I did before because I know no matter what when students walk in, in every single class, we are going to learn for 65 minutes. And that is an amazing thing after being somewhere else where I felt like I would have, out of a 45 minute class, I would have, like, 35 maybe 30 minutes of actual teaching. Because by the time you get everyone in from the hallway and wrangle everyone in and then everything starts, it just seems you lose so much time in the transitions (from class to class), when there is not a clear transition process. And, like, chaos in one classroom gets blown in to another classroom. And with expectations (by adults for students) in that school being so poor, that is what caused my stress levels to skyrocket in the old school. So it isn’t like that here, and it’s much more about academics here which is refreshing.
(Serena, June, 2012)

And, aside from making class time the most efficient and productive it can be, student routines also assist the teachers and students in community building and creating and academic and respectful culture within the school. From a teacher’s point of view, these routines, as Mr. E. mentioned earlier in his quote, eliminate unwanted student behaviors from ever manifesting themselves in the first place—unfocused talking in class, not taking materials out right away, walking all over the hallways and coming late to class, etc.—things a few teenagers in every school might do if given the opportunity, and it only takes a few students to disrupt the environment for all. Therefore, these school structures and policies actually set teachers and students up more for relational and academic success when implemented effectively and
consistently. On this point, and on the point that these routines were standardized across all of the classes in the school, another experienced teacher said:

These common, consistent routines prevent student behavior from ever falling below a certain level…The kids know what to do when they enter each room and this helps us all start class much more smoothly and quickly…It (the routines at the beginning of class mentioned above) cuts down on the ten or fifteen minutes of class time that can be wasted when you are waiting for kids to take out their materials, find a pencil and stop talking about the movie they saw last weekend, and it directs the kids to what the task is on hand.

(Naomi, April 2012)

In summary, at WHEELS these common policies and practices are major pro-active mechanisms that help in building this positive school culture by facilitating these relational and academic processes for teachers. When implemented consistently across the school, or at least a grade, by skilled teachers, these routines can eliminate many potential student disengagement issues before they even manifest themselves, and allow for teachers to be more positive and academic with their students as opposed to reacting to unwanted disruptions. Said a teacher on this:

They (the routines at the beginning of class) allow you to praise and connect with kids who are following them immediately at the beginning of class and hook them in for the entire lesson. You can also praise kids who are modeling good behavior or academic thinking for the other kids in front of his or her peers. ..This just helps make the class a positive place right at the beginning of class…All of the kids can have academic success and positive recognition in front of their peers…They will like your class more and each other more if they feel good within it…

(Danny, April 2012)

Trust Building and Positive Psychology

This is important regarding relationship-building between teachers and students. When teachers are regularly reacting to and correcting behaviors such as the ones mentioned, they are entering negativity in to their relationships with students by constantly telling students not to do one thing or another, telling them what to do instead, maybe even spelling out consequences if a
student breaks a rule such as coming late to class or bullying another student. These negative interactions are cumulative and can add up in the psyche of a student. A teacher will find it difficult to build a caring relationship with a teenage student if his or her negative (corrective) interactions with a student, or a group of students, outweigh the positive and academic interactions between them.

This claim is consistent with research on healthy relationship-building in the field of positive psychology (Peterson 2006; Seligman 2004). It is also consistent with the previously referenced work from Mario Small (2009) about the centrality of frequent, predictable and positive interpersonal interactions in the building of social ties and trust between non-family individuals. For, a teacher constantly reacting to student behavior every day within an unstructured school environment will, by nature, not exhibit predictable and positive behavior from a student perspective because his or her actions are determined in a reactive manner by what students do each day. Also, for middle school kids this predictability and positivity is so important because they are being pulled in so many directions by the general trials of adolescence. Things must pull them toward school. One of the most powerful forces to do this is a student’s relationships to his or her peers and the adults in the school, as we know from the research on social capital and student engagement (Valenzuela 1999; Stanton Salazar 2001; Conchas and Rodriguez 2006; Suarez Orozco et. al 2010). Therefore, it matters if students feel connected to their teachers and like school (Blum 2005). It matters if the school has built a community valuing academics and respect within the walls, and if the students have bought in to it or not. This positive learning community is difficult to build and sustain if teachers are too often forced to be reactive (corrective) with their students.
The Benefits of Care, Relationships, and Academic Confidence for Students

Going In-Depth on the Socio-Relational Axis of School Community

It is important to state clearly again that the order and engagement produced initially from consistent application of common policies and school structures by teachers could not sustain itself throughout the school year without teachers individually and collectively building trust and caring relationships with students as well as leading students to make regular academic progress, to learn, through rigorous and engaging instruction in classrooms. Therefore, the purpose of the school structures and policies at WHEELS is to create the conditions under which learning happens best, not to control students for control’s sake. Structures and policies that do not meet these ends should be changed or eliminated, and the grade teams sometimes do this as teachers regularly reflect, adapt and change the policies and practices they utilize, as exemplified in the vignette of the team meeting from the last chapter and in some of the following quotes below.

The teachers build relationships and community with and among students in many ways. It takes skill and expertise in the craft, and some are better at this than others, but most of the teachers at WHEELS understand how important for students having caring relationships with teachers is. When teachers forge these personal connections with their students, students work harder for them in their classes, take more academic risks in class, learn more, and like school more. The following student quote illustrates this connection between connecting with teachers and academic engagement in class:

Q: Do you think that when you or other students in your school trust a teacher, it makes you want to work harder in their class?
A: Yeah. Because you don’t – Because once you trust a teacher, you don’t want to lose that trust. And then you don’t want to let them down.
Q: So, do you think when students don’t trust the teacher, they might sometimes not work hard for that teacher?
A: Yeah.

Q: Do you see that happen?
A: In this school? Yeah. I’ve seen it happen a couple times.

Q: A lot, or little?
A: A little.

Q: It’s the exception?
A: Yeah. It’s just a little. Not every school is going to be perfect.

Q: Right. Do you see that – In your classes, are most students – Do they work hard?
A: Yeah.

Q: Do most students take education seriously?
A: Yeah.

Q: Do you think most students feel that they are a part of WHEELS?
A: Yeah. I’ll say they feel like they’re a part of WHEELS.

Q: Do you think they see it as a community, or a family? Or do they see it as something different?
A: I’ll say – Most of them see it as a community. And most of them see it as a family.

Q: Are there some that don’t?
A: There’s always a few.

Q: But it’s a small number or a large number?
A: It’s a small amount.
(Archer, June 2012)

Below I present two interview threads with two teachers at length. Each one will highlight some of the ways that teachers build relationships and community with students and academic confidence in their classes. The first interview thread between myself and a middle school Team Leader highlights more socio-relational topics such as the importance of teachers on the same grade level team being consistent and coordinated (teacher collective efficacy) with praise and academic celebration, and the ways in which the Team Leader led her team in creating
strategies for building relationships and community on the grade. It will also highlight how strategic and proactive the grade teams at WHEELS are around building an engaged student community. A few of the relationship building themes she discusses are: being consistent with expectations, policies, etc. in individual teacher practice and across teacher practice; strategically maximizing positive and academic interactions and experiences with students and minimizing negative ones, coupled with precise, public praise; creating a safe learning environment and holding all students to high expectations; and proving teachers care regularly and often to students. The teacher collective efficacy piece is apparent throughout the conversation as well, as the Team Leader discusses how, within the WHEELS’ common structures and policies, the team created more specific student engagement policies rooted in the specific needs of the students they teach on their grade “because we could”, as she put it referencing the teacher empowerment piece of the equation. I quote this part of the interview at length because the topic is complex and evolves in the conversation over time:

Q: One thing that the other teachers are all saying to me is that it’s very hard to build relationships with students if your negative interactions with them outweigh your positive interactions and your academic interactions, if you’re always correcting them for something. It’s easier to build relationships with students if you have so many more positive interactions and academic interactions than negative. Would you say that that’s true?

A: Completely, yeah, I would completely agree with that. And also there’s a trust factor there, I think. I think in so many ways, just in your English class or in whatever class, kids aren’t going to participate fully, kids aren’t going to take academic risks unless they trust you. And I think it’s really hard to trust an adult who is really negative most of the time. But also when they (kids) see that they (teachers) don’t necessarily have control of their situation (classroom) either that’s hard for them to trust you too. And so the more positive the interactions are and the more controlled the classroom is, the easier it is to trust that adult because (the kids think) this person is clearly in control and this person does clearly want me to do very well as opposed to just trying to get through it (the class period)…

Q: What are some of the specific ways you build trust with students or you and your team builds trust with students?
A: Well, first and foremost it is that consistency across the board (from teachers). I think when the students see that, whether they’re in my class or their math teacher’s class or the social studies class, the rules are all the same they know they’re not being treated unfairly in anyone’s classroom. So, I think that opens the door immediately to them to start to trust us a little bit more. But we (the teacher team) also are really motivating and really kind of go over the top and praise them when they do things right, or when they do things well or when they do things better…and we’re really relentless with that praise…So (for example) last year I tried to make it more of a priority to create events that can bring kids together and try to make community meetings more of a time where we can spend more time acknowledging each other’s triumphs and acknowledging each other’s improvements and using it as an opportunity (to build community) as opposed to just giving announcements. If we had anything that’s a gentle reminder of a policy, it was sandwiched between major compliments. And the more positive interactions I have with students I also find that the more likely they are to jump on board with me quickly in class, I can engage them more quickly in class because they know that when they do something well I notice and I recognize it publicly.

Q: But underneath all that there is this trust that is built up?
A: For sure. And consistency across the board with the teachers as I mentioned is so important…And we actually told the kids several times on the first day of school and I’ve repeated a couple of times since then, just being really upfront (with students), ‘We have a lot of expectations for you here and we’re going through each day with all these expectations but we work really hard for you and our biggest expectation is that you work really hard in response. So as long as we have that mutual relationship of hard work and respect then we can get a lot done, we can do some really great fun things in the process.’ And I think being more open with kids about that, saying, like look, this is what I’m trying to do here and this is how it’s going to help you and this is how it’s going to help us. I think all of that just continues to add trust.

Q: So you’re very strategic with your messages to them (students) it sounds like. Are there a couple of themes that come up in the messaging to them? Are there any strategic messages that you guys try to hit home to the students a lot?
A: Yeah, I mean we did this sort of piecemeal last year but we’ve (the teachers) tried to make a more united effort of it this year with rooting all of our language in college--college answers, college postures, college voices when you speak aloud--and just trying to have college be our anchor and explain clearly (to students) ‘This is what we’re doing, this is why we’re doing it, this is how this is getting us closer to college? How are these choices that you’re making in class, in the lunch room, everywhere, how are these getting us closer to college?, how are these helping you to mature, how are these helping you improve your reading level? And so that’s kind of the over-arching theme we (the team of teachers) chose for this year and it’s nicely aligned with the school’s mission. We keep
going back to that with them (the school’s mission of college readiness and success). And now having graduated our first class (the high school graduated its first class of 12th grader in June of 2012) the first day in school we showed pictures of graduation and tried to make it a little bit more tangible for them (the students) as opposed to this long off distant thing that looms 5 years in the future. We (teachers) were like ‘Look, there are kids right down the hall, right downstairs who are about to start applying to college and that’s going to be you one day. And we (teachers) just try to keep that in the forefront of their mind and our mind so that it kind of guides our interactions.

Q: When you say strategic messaging and being relentless about it, how often are you saying these messages to students? And I know it’s often but I think this is where schools fall down sometimes on this. They might do something once a month or even once a week…But, I know based on my observations and working with you guys (her grade team) that it’s much more frequent than that.
A: Very much more.

Q: So talk to me about that.
A: I would say especially now, day 3 of the school year, I have on average just today – I probably mentioned college about a dozen times in each class in one respect or another whether it’s to connect to what we’re doing academically, or “great college posture right now” or “I loved your college voice”, “awesome college answer”. Probably a dozen times in a period. As far as recognizing kids, that happens multiple times in a class period whether it’s just using whole class “silent of applause” when someone has a really good answer or doing “bubblegum clap” or something like that. That happens every single period I teach at least three or four times. And it’s hard to remember to do that all the time but it becomes engrained in all of the classes.

Q: What does this do for students?
A: Well, I think it keeps them engaged for sure, like if they know that on one-two you have to give a bubblegum clap for so and so. And, like now (if you are another student in the room) you know that another kid did something well, and that kind of breaks up…the class period for kids to it makes it move a little more quickly. And with 12 and 13 year olds you need to kind of redirect attention a few times a class period to keep it kind of exciting. But I think engagement is the big thing it does, first and foremost. I mean, it requires them to be much more engaged. And sometimes we can have them “shout out” to other kids and that sort of thing, all within a pretty controlled environment so it’s something that they can have fun with but we’re having fun on the count of “one, two” and then we’re going right back to work. And knowing that they can still do hard work and enjoy it and be recognized by peers or recognize each other is important and it happens really often in the course of the class period.

And then taking a step back from that, once a week we have Community Meetings where we always recognize the class that had the highest conduct sheet
score for the week and then that class gets a reward the next day. At the end of every day when we have the conduct sheet scores we always talk about what they did really well, what they can work on for tomorrow. We also do public appreciations at the end of every communally meeting, like if there’s any other little things that we want to call the entire grades attention to, like, this kid that tried out for something in band and did really well, let’s give him a shout-out, and then we do one of the shout outs (chants, songs, etc.). So those are weekly (Community Meetings).

Q: So when I look around it seems like the school has a lot of these kind of universal structures and policies, but it seems like each grade team has a lot of autonomy within them as well. It’s kind of strange because at first glance you think it’s a very kind of top down school and then you go to team meetings and you spend some time on the teams and you realize it’s teacher driven, the school...So what was the thought process from you guys around these topics? First, you said you kind of started piecemeal at the time and now you’re kind of attacking community building in a more in a systematic way. What were the conversations (in team meetings), what did you think was not there that needed to be there? What were you trying to address?

A: We wanted to make sure that our positives strongly outweigh the negatives in terms of any interactions with kids. And that was one way to do it. And in explaining that it’s more fun for students, it’s also more fun for us (teachers), like it’s more engaging for us, and it’s really fun for us to have all of these different things going on in class while we’re teaching. So I mean that helped it and that helped the buy-in (from teachers) more than anything with everybody. But, also, we saw that we could, I guess. It seems like a silly reason but we saw that we could and we have this really great opportunity where we can do this on our own. It doesn’t take any extra money...we’re able to come up with a couple of really simple things (practices, team wide) that will give us a lot of mileage in terms of student appreciation. So we started with the class conduct sheet scores and competitions and the kids love that. We planned on only doing it for about 6 months but then we were like “let’s just do it the whole year, let’s keep doing it the whole year”. And from that we sort of started adding things—we actually also do the Ways to Be awards the entire year because we were like that’s a once a month thing where we can have kids come up and be recognized in front of their class and have their pictures up (on the wall). And this is a really simple thing on our end, it’s a really simple thing to do. And it’s a really big deal, though, for kids to stand up and be recognized in front of their peers in a really big way. They love it. And we’re able to strategically spread around awards for kids who maybe don’t necessarily get recognized academically in class. And when we were rewarding kids for the Ways to Be for example, sometimes we would try to pick out a kid who isn’t recognized all of the time for academics...

Q: Is it fair to say that you (the team) noticed that “joy factor” strategies weren’t necessarily a part of the school policies as much last year, but you
believed that it could take your grade’s engagement and class participation to the next level?
A: Yeah…So last year we started off with just maybe two really organized ones (systems) and then kind of added things on here and there. And so this year we’re a little more established as a team and we’re able to really blow it up a lot more (systematically). And…we wanted to make sure that when we first saw them (the students) in the beginning of this year that they knew that this is where they’d be recognized for doing really good work immediately. And so we started off on day one really positive and definitely still demanding and norming and all of that too. But we were teaching them different fun claps, and awarding and praising them from first period on day one…But we have the opportunity to do so much more, given the common school structures that we already have in place and the fact that we don’t have to spend on ton of time on discipline…

Q: To be proactive rather than reactive.
A: Yeah. So I mean, there’s just ample opportunities for positive framing and praising and we’re doing it because we can, and because…it keeps the kids hooked in who are already engaged, that’s great, (and) it engages kids who otherwise felt marginalized, even better…there are a couple of kids, I would say even more than a couple, who aren’t use to getting that positive attention a lot, and even if it’s just a quick thing in class, like, ‘oh, let’s give a silent of applause to (this kid) who’s doing a really good job with (blank)’. I mean, that’s something that a few students are not used to getting in the past.

Q: And do you usually know who those kids who need that type of recognition are?
A: Yes.

Q: And you talk about it in team meetings?
A: Yes.

Q: And you make a point to be proactive in all of your classrooms with student engagement like this?
A: Yes, so even with the post cards (the team sends positive post cards home to families with specific messages on the back commending the child for something specifically done in class, both academic and behavioral/social)…we had a team meeting on Friday after the second day of school and the post cards had just come in and we thought, “Oh, this kid had a really rocky year last year from what we understand, these past two days he was awesome. He is going to be our first postcard kid”.

Q: Before he can mess up?
A: Yeah, call his mom, a positive call, send it home before he can mess anything up, hook him in early. So yeah, I mean, it’s very strategic and with all those ways to be winners, I mean, we’re strategically picking kids that need to be engaged— another kid, for example, real helpful, lots of academic problems in school but
super polite and really helpful so we’re going to make sure that he is acknowledged for that, and on and on. And, sometimes there’s a social pull where you see that there is one kid who’s maybe popular in some way and you know is kind of a leader (with the other students), perhaps for negative reasons, if that kid gets rewarded for something in school and thinks it’s kind of cool to do well then now you have…

Q: The followers…
A: For sure. So those are good conversations we have…we do talk a lot about that at team meetings.

Q: It is a little different on your team this year than last year. Last year it kind of came about organically and piecemeal as the year went on and now this year it’s an organized system at the start.
A: Yeah, it did.

Q: So…did you guys bring it (community building ideas) from your past schools, did other teachers bring ideas from the schools they were at? Did you bring it from the school you were at? Did you read a book about it? Did WHEELS administration talk to you about these ideas? How did they come about?
A: Yeah, I would say it was a combination of a couple of things, before I met (another teacher’s name) I didn’t know about “bubble gum clap,” or a lot of those in-class fun things, and she was like “we did this in my old school” and we (teachers on the team) watched her do it and we started doing it because we thought it was great. And then things like the class conduct sheets…I know that here in other grades they had used the conduct sheets but they would give kids all stars and stickers later, at the end of class. And so we were trying to think, like, “we want kids to feel like they’re being recognized in class right then, we don’t want to have some whole other accounting system because it just means it’s more likely to collapse at some point or it’s going to start to take over time that I should be spending on prepping for teaching my classes”. So we essentially decided that these claps and points and cheers in class would take the place of any sticker system so kids would be recognized immediately in front of everybody. And, then we already had the conduct sheets and just decided that there would be the public recognition for the conduct sheets too…

Q: And this came about over many team meetings?
A: This happened before we started school last year. I met with…

Q: This past summer?
A: Two summers ago, so summer of 2011. When (three teacher names on her team) were new to WHEELS and so I met with them and we spent about four hours going through the handbook and ironing out the common policies and procedures and then after that…we talked a little bit about that (student engagement and community topics/relationship building/engagement).
Q: And then you guys talk about this regularly at team meetings?
A: Yeah, and so we would talk about it regularly at team meetings and a lot of times, very often, pretty much all of the team would be after school doing any number of things, grading or planning, and so while we were sitting there working we’d talk, like, “what’s this kid up to and how’s he doing in your class?” Some it was really informal, but from those conversations we’d make a point to add stuff team meeting agendas as well. So it wasn’t all (done in) team meeting, and there were definitely many conversations and a lot of work outside of the regular WHEELS structure as well.
(Fiona, September 2012)

In this conversation we see a few interesting themes emerge related to how teachers individually and collectively build trusting relationships with students and community amongst students on the same grade level. First, notice that teacher collective efficacy is the driving force throughout all of the practices and ideas the Team Leader discussed. She and the teachers on her team, all like-minded because of the screening of the hiring process and all acting within the WHEELS school structures and common policies, had the professional space, freedom, initiative and scheduled meeting times to discuss how to specifically build community, trust and improve student engagement with their own students grade wide, not just in their individual classrooms. It is all done proactively and strategically, with an understanding that all kids want to learn and be successful and teachers, collectively, can build a strong student learning community that supports academic achievement, thereby hooking kids in to learning and connecting to their teachers and the school. The theme of the importance of consistency of expectations, policies and practices for students both within a teacher’s practice and between and among various teachers’ practices comes up in the conversation. Also, the importance of building a safe, caring, predictable learning environment for all students, maximizing positive interactions (and academic language with students) and minimizing negative interactions is central the team’s practices as well.
We also see that this team of teachers did all of this through instituting small, in-classroom “joy factor” practices—bubble gum claps, chants, silent applause—and other immediate public recognition practices, as well as sending positive post cards home, and using the weekly community meetings to reinforce strategic messages about community and academics that the teachers thought would help build solidarity and an academic school culture. Conduct sheet competitions also provided a structured way to weave in competition between the classes related to their participation, engagement, behavior, and other social topics, usually related to the larger themes of the Ways to Be and HOWLS “character targets”. All of this has the general impact of proving to kids on a regular basis that their teachers care about them and their learning within a safe, predictable, engaging learning environment.

Going In-Depth on the Academic Confidence Axis of School Community

The above conversation highlighted the relationship and community building themes/actions of: 1) consistency, coordination and teacher empowerment (“because we could”; 2) maximizing positive interactions, minimizing negative interactions; 3) strategic messaging around academic and social topics; 4) precise and immediate praise/recognition (whole class and individual); creating a safe environment for all learners; and proving often that teachers care about each student. All of this was channeled through the collaborative and coordinated teacher team, maximizing the impact. In my research, some other major relationship/trust building themes emerged. While the above mostly dealt with the socio-relational aspects of relationship building, these next four deal more with generating academic confidence and success within the classroom. They are the themes of: 1) structuring academic success and student confidence into lessons; 2) regularly assessing student class work and giving feedback; 3) providing students with multiple opportunities to master a learning target (to have academic success); and 4)
teachers getting to know each student, both academically and otherwise, intricately well. The reader will also see the themes of consistency, proving teachers care about students, and high expectations for academics and behavior discussed as well.

It may help to think of the themes from the above Team Leader conversation as some of the major socio-relational aspects to building trust and relationships with students, and the following to be more academic and instructional strategies to trust building, although this is in some ways a false categorization because of how intricately intertwined all of these concepts are. Again, I include a substantial segment of an interview between myself and another teacher because the detailed ideas evolve as the conversation unfolds, and because the teachers explains her thinking and techniques very clearly:

Q: So this is something that has been coming up in the student interviews I’m doing. I’m asking them, when they work hard for a particular teacher why that is. And one answer that always comes up a lot is they say…“if I see a teacher working hard for me, I’ll work hard for them”. So, can you talk a little bit about how exactly you do that in the classroom, how do you show students that you’re there for them, that you care about them that you care about the learning and you take it seriously? Get as detailed as possible for me about what you do as a teacher.

A: Okay. I guess, I’ll paint two pictures of a classroom. So there’s a classroom you can walk in to, the teacher gives a mini lesson and then sits at their desk and tells students what they should be doing, “you know, you should be solving problems”, or “you should be writing your essay”, and teacher sits at the desk for, let’s say, the next 20 minutes while they’re (the kids) working and then maybe they all share something out at the end. That’s not mine (classroom).

And then there’s the classroom where a teacher gives a mini lesson, answers questions and then assigns some work and is constantly circulating (around the room to different students) and giving them (students) feedback, which is more like mine (classroom). So, one thing that I think is (important) is just giving feedback and also having those one-on-one interactions with students in class…If I give a mini-lesson, then most of the time they’re working independently but I’m circulating and conversing with them, talking to them, showing them I appreciate that they got this problem right, or if they got this problem wrong let’s figure out what happened. And the checks-for-understanding do not happen just at the end of class but it’s a consistent work and feedback relationship.
Q: So that constant feedback for the kids, what does it for them?
A: It definitely builds confidence and helps them realize the progress they’re making so they know they’re getting this (the content). If you have a kid who never sees success it’s very hard to motivate them, it’s very hard to get them invested. But if they see success its like, “oh my god, I got this first problem, I’m going to go on to the second one, I want to get another one right”. I’ll stamp their paper or something just to show them that it is correct and they thrive on those things. But, if you put that hardest problem at number one and they struggle then you’re going to lose them. You’ve got to show them little successes in the beginning (of lessons) and then that feeling of doing well is addictive to them.

Q: So you would actually plan your lessons so that they’re scaffolded from easier to difficult problems?
A: Definitely.

Q: I’m sure it’s not the only reason, but one of the reasons is so that students build confidence going through that lesson?
A: Definitely. And yeah, so students build confidence going through the lesson. I can reach all learners even if it’s scaffolded. And I feel like for the higher achievers, even if those first problems are too easy, I can always tell them to skip them. But if I don’t even give a chance (to be successful) to those who might struggle a little bit in math or in any subject, then I’ll lose them. But a lot of it is about building confidence and endurance.

Q: And once you see that confidence built, what does that do for them, when they have it?
A: They just want to work harder for you. You’ve shown them success so they want to keep feeling that and they want to keep seeing that. And, I mean, I think when everyone around you is working hard it builds momentum in the classroom, I would say.

Q: So I have heard a couple of things you talked about, for example, the scaffolded lessons, structuring success, giving feedback, circulating. Is there anything else you do to make their success transparent to them regularly?
A: I think there’s a few things. First of all, consistently giving them feedback on their work. So if you give an exit slip (at the end of a lesson) try and give it back the next day. Homework, try to give it back the next day. Quizzes, (give back graded) at the end of each week. So first of all in terms of assessment, they’re not assessed once a month on something, they’re assessed every Friday, and then on Monday I put up (in the classroom) who got 80’s, 90’s, 100’s just to kind of celebrate their success. If we’re doing a “Do Now” (an entering class activity, usually review), it could be anything, I find those students that I know struggle and find their successes and highlight them. So, (for example) I know student ‘X’ takes longer to complete the work, so I’ll go over to them and say, “okay, you’re in charge of saying the answers for the first problem on the page”, like even
before they’ve even done that, just to motivate them. And they’re like, “I just have to get through these first problems and I get to share up with the class.” And so going around (during the lessons) and strategically trying to plan those things (strategies, in to lessons) and also being strategic in terms of who (student) you’re checking with first in terms of success – in terms of checking their work (during class). So, (for example) I’m teaching a class of 30 students, and I know the first three that struggle and also would give up because they’re struggling, (therefore) I need to make sure to get to them first so they get that extra explanation that they didn’t get from my mini-lessons so they can be successful because some students just need a little more of a push to be successful.

So it is really just about getting to know your students, where they are, where you can potentially lose them where they don’t feel successful, and trying to prevent that, and giving them constant feedback and just celebrating success through posters on the wall that show which students got, 100, 90 or 80, or giving public praise to a student for saying the correct answer. Just having that kind of language of “we celebrate academic success here”.

Q: Yeah. So it sounds to me that what you are saying is that it can’t just be once in a while, right?
A: No. It’s got to be daily interactions, like, verbal interactions, daily in-class celebrations. It’s got to be regular assessment and feedback. Also, going over as a class sometimes (during the lesson), the common mistakes (mistakes many students are making). So, if I’m a student, I know, “okay, I got this wrong but the next day here’s my teacher showing the class about how to get it right. So, I give students multiple opportunities for success…

I’m the teacher in the room, I’m responsible for making sure that they master the material. If I teach something and 60% of the class didn’t master it, like, I went wrong somewhere, and, like, I have to take responsibility and I have to fix it the next day. We can make tons of excuses of why they (students) didn’t master it (the learning target). But the bottom line is that’s my job to make sure they master it. So, them (the students) also knowing that helps. Like, they want to be responsible, and they know they need to try their best in class, but they also need to know that you’ll review things, and that if something is not mastered then there’s probably going to be another opportunity to do a re-teach the next day or at the end of the week. So using that student data to make sure that what you’re teaching is actually being mastered (by students) is extremely important.

(Maggie, June, 2012)

In the above conversation the teacher highlights a few more major pieces to building relationships with students and a community of learners, specifically within her classroom during lessons. Again, we see how proactive and strategic she is in the way she invests students in the learning goals and in motivating them to want to work hard in her classroom, and then
celebrating their success. She clearly takes responsibility for their results, and checks for understanding regularly during and after lessons, using the student data she gets from her checks to then re-plan and re-teach when students need more time and/or instruction to master the content. This gives students multiple opportunities for mastering the learning targets and the supports to do so. Said a student about this process after I asked her about what she thinks teachers do after school:

**Q:** You said that you see your teachers a lot after school. What do you see them doing?
**A:** They (teachers) do, like – Like, at the end of the day, like, exit slips.

**Q:** Exit slips?
**A:** Exit slips, or like, debriefs, which like, show your (students’) understanding – like, what you learned.

**Q:** For that lesson?
**A:** Uh-huh. [Yes] Or sometimes they’re, like, quick quizzes. And if it’s – Like, I think they (teachers) use that time (after school) to, like, grade the quick quizzes. And then if everybody failed, clearly they have to re-teach it. And all of our teachers are so willing to, like…

**Q:** And they do that?
**A:** Uh-huh. [Yes] They go back to the same lesson the next day, if everybody failed the exit slip. Or everybody, like – and sometimes they have entry slips, if there’s not enough time for exit slips. And if everybody is doing, like, horrible on them, that means that the lesson needs to be re-taught. And all our teachers are willing to re-teach a lesson

(Mary, March 2012)

Moreover, the above teacher clearly works to build student confidence in her classroom by, first, making student successes transparent to them, and then, second, by celebrating their success publicly and/or privately, and regularly. And, once she knows a student is confident, she works to sustain it, as it can be fragile in some students, particularly those who have not experienced academic success much before. In summary, she gets to know her students very well academically, partly through very frequent assessments, and also psychologically,
anticipating which students might have troubles on particular content, and then structures her lessons and supports in strategic ways to meet their needs. She then makes sure to celebrate academic growth regularly.

Taken together, these two conversations with teachers have illustrated some of the major ways that teachers, both collectively and individually, build trusting relationships with their students and in the process a strong community of learners on their grades at WHEELS. They are not in any way exhaustive and there are many, many more teacher moves and practices related to this topic, some of which I will discuss in the next chapter. Furthermore, some teachers at WHEELS are better at these aspects of pedagogy than others, of course. However, these concepts are some of the major trust building and community building teacher strategies and techniques that appear frequently in WHEELS across teacher practice. Summarized, they are:

1) Being consistent (within a teacher’s practice and also among teachers teaching the same kids) with expectations, language, policies and practices (both instructional and social)
2) Proactively maximizing positive and academic interactions and proactively minimizing potentially negative interactions
3) Strategic messaging very regularly and precise praise/academic celebrations, both academic and social
4) Creating a safe, structured learning environment with high expectations and consistent follow through—be the leader of the classroom
5) Make learning fun and relevant through high quality instruction
6) Strategically build academic momentum and success/confidence in class regularly
7) Assess/check for understanding in lessons very frequently, anticipate pitfalls kids will have in lessons, give frequent feedback
8) Celebrate academic growth and success frequently
9) Take responsibility for results and re-teach when necessary, providing multiple opportunities for learning target mastery
10) Get to know students individually; check in individually and build relationships with them. Prove you care over and over again.

To review, the school structures and common policies that the majority of teachers engage in proactively create the social space that the teachers teams then fill with teacher
collective efficacy and strong instruction, collectively engaging in practices and strategies operating along the socio-relational and academic axes of student community building and relationship building.

Student Perspectives on What Teachers Do to Build Relationships With Them and Generate Academic Engagement

The students offered interesting and important insights about what teachers do to build trust and relationships with them as well. A few themes emerged from the student interviews, as well as supported by my knowledge built up from working with students for sixteen years, that are not in the teacher conversations above. A list follows with a student quote about each:

1) Mutual respect and care

Q: Is there anything particular that teachers have done to show you respect? To build relationships with you? You talked about calling your parents earlier. Can you give me any other examples?
A: All right. For example, Mr. Smith…I was on the verge of failing it (class), but he knew that if did… I was gonna have to come to summer school…He decided to be kind enough, and help me out actually with a (giving an extra) project. Like, he really wants me to pass, and stuff. I really see that in him. I want that for myself as well, but I didn’t put as much effort in his classroom. But he stayed after school and he was helping me out. And he was being…like, helping me out and all of that stuff.

Q: So, after – How does that make you feel about Mr. Smith?
A: I look up to him…Like. I’m not gonna disrespect him in no way. Like, that’s like betrayal…

Q: And in the classroom, is your behavior and work now on point for him?
A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: And is that because of the relationship you have with him?
A: Yup.
(Raul, June 2012)

2) Teachers caring for students, connecting with students, encouraging students, and showing high expectations for students

Q: Can you tell me a time when you were successful in academics at WHEELS, and why you were successful? It can be recent. It can be long ago.
A: Well, in 6th grade, I was – like, when I just got in to WHEELS, I know the first two weeks were a really, really rocky start. But then after that, I had a
conversation with one of the teachers, Ms. Miller and after that, that’s when, like – I guess a change happened. And then after that, I was really on top of my grades, and really working towards them. And I remember, like, I got a 70, and Ms. Miller was like, “You should never be satisfied with that grade.” And I guess since that day, that’s always stuck with me. Like, I shouldn’t be satisfied with a grade, even though it is passing.

Q: So would you say Ms. Miller is a good teacher?
A: I would say Ms. Miller is an excellent teacher.

Q: What makes her excellent, from a student point of view?
A: Because she really does interact with students, besides just teaching them. And I think that’s what really makes a good teacher. Because a good teacher is the ones who actually take time to really get to know you, and to really interact with you. And most – almost all of the teachers at WHEELS do that.

Q: So, tell me what you mean when you say, “interact.” What does that look like? Like, if I had to teach a teacher how to do that better, what would your description look like?
A: Well, that’s like saying, “How do I teach a person how to be kind?” You don’t teach a person. You show them, in a way. You just set an example. And well, how do they say it, you set an example and the rest will follow. But I guess – Well, I know Ms. Miller she would always make jokes with us, and she would always, during Crew (advisory), she would always tell stories to us about her college experiences, and things like that.

Q: So, I hear two things. When teachers joke with students, and when they tell stories to students—maybe about their lives and important things like college—that it helps build relationships with students?
A: Yeah.

Q: What else do teachers do that help build relationship with you? You mentioned that she had a conversation with you about doing better, and raising your expectations—not accepting a 70. So, I hear something else there too.
A: I guess one – A student can tell when a teacher cares, and when a teacher doesn’t. And moments like when she pulled me aside and she explained to me what was going on, and what I needed to do, why she was telling me that—and it was because she really cared. That’s when I really said, “Wow. She really cares.” And she’s a really great teacher, because a teacher that wouldn’t – a good teacher – a good teacher would not, not care for a student. Good teachers do care, and they always try to help the student to reach success, and to push them forward to be successful.

(Ramond, April 2012)

3) Teachers using humor with students in the classroom and outside of it and enjoying their jobs as teachers
Q: What do your teachers do to build relationships with you?
A: I think, like, a lot of teachers are really witty.

Q: Witty. Like, funny?
A: Yeah. Cleverly funny. And not too serious. So, the way that – Okay, when somebody loves their job, you can tell they’re happy. And our teachers, I think, seem like that. They are not just, like, serious all the time with the students. But they – they make, like, the lessons seem fun, and like, in a clever way. So as I said, I used the word witty. And it’s so interactive. And they just make themselves seem, like, easy-going people. So easy that you could approach them after school, approach them anytime when you need help. So, you’re more willing to go up to them, because they seem like – I don’t know, more loose than, like, intense.

(Ellen, March 2012)

4) Teachers sharing personal stories/experiences with students and relating to students

Q: Who has been your favorite teacher at WHEELS? I want you to describe in detail why that is.
A: I guess even though Ms. Sosa and Ms. Bennett really helped me, and really helped change me, I guess, my favorite teacher has to be Mr. Gabriel.

Q: So, describe for me. Why?
A: Because in a way, Mr. Gabriel, when he was younger, he told me how he struggled. And he had many things, which I shouldn’t say—many things that went on in his life. But then there was a point where he decided that he had to change. And even though there was a lot of things going on in the background, so to say, he still managed to go through high school, and get to college, and become a teacher, and be successful, and be a professional. And I really think, like, that I can relate to him in a way as if – as there are many things going on in the background that in a way keep you back, and try to keep you down from being successful. But I guess if I keep on pushing forward, I can be successful.

Q: So that conversation he had with you made an impact on you?
A: I guess that story he told just helped me – just, that was one of the times that I really understood that he is a human, in a way. Because sometimes we see our teachers as teachers, and just, in a way, as a big walking textbook that teaches us. But in a way, I felt like, “Wow, he is really a person, and he really can relate. You really can relate to him.”

Q: So, is the learning is always there, in Mr. Gabriel’s class? Are the lessons good lessons?
A: They’re always good lessons.

Q: Interesting lessons?
A: Yep.

Q: Do you work a lot? Does he push you?
A: He does push us. A lot of writing. A lot of writing.

Q: Do you use every second in class toward learning?
A: Yeah.

Q: And is the classroom environment a positive classroom environment?
A: Yeah. I would have to say it is. I think it’s one of those classrooms where every single student in the room is learning, and every single student is like, ‘Wow. I want to know more. That interests me.’
(Raymond, April 2012)

5) Teachers working hard and staying after school to give extra help to students

Q: Do you see a lot of your teachers after school?
A: Yes.

Q: Is that normal? Is that a normal thing, or is it just once in a while after school?
A: No – All the – Most of the teachers, unless they have a class… they usually stay here and, like, they grade their papers and they allow students to approach them.

Q: Do they help students after school, to?
A: Yes. So like, any time you see teacher after school, you can just go in to their room and ask them for help. Or, they tell you to come sometimes.

Q: Do you think that matters to students?
A: I think it does, because they’re there, and they’re willing to help you.

Q: So, when a teacher’s after school, what message does that give to the students?
A: That they’re actually – they care about our learning. They’re willing to grade with care and detail, whatever they’re doing. Or they’re actually working hard to, like, plan a lesson for us…
(Juan, June 2012)

6) Making lessons interesting and relevant to life outside of school

Q: Describe your teachers at WHEELS. And it doesn’t just have to be teachers this year; it can be teachers in the past. Have they done things that have helped you be successful?
A: I think the way they engage things. Like, they make, like – They find ways to connect it outside of the classroom, outside of – Like, they make math problems that have to do with real-life situations, or like, real things that – It’s not just words that – I don’t know, like – It’s just not like school thinking. You think outside the box. You think of real-life situations that might really help you, why you should be doing that. That it’s going to help you outside of WHEELS, beyond the current class you’re taking.
7) Teachers appear to students to enjoy teaching them

Q: Describe yourself as a learner in WHEELS.
A: I’ve gotten stronger. Because I think at first (in elementary school), I learned a lot on my own because I wanted to be like my sisters. So, whatever they were learning, I would try to learn it. Although, like, I didn’t have the capacity of learning it, because I didn’t have the previous understanding. But WHEELS, like, makes it easier to be able to learn something you don’t know. Or like, if you even want to ask a question, outside of school, about a problem or anything else, it’s just so easy and accessible, because all the teachers always are willing to, like, help. And each teacher loves – like, loves the subject they’re teaching so in depth that they’re willing to go outside what material they’re teaching to just help you. So, I think it’s just – like, the openness, and the open-mindedness of each teacher.

(Bridget, April 2012)

If one were to condense all of the above methods described above for building trust and community between teachers and students, one could do so in three statements, which I will phrase here from a student’s perspective:

1) prove to me often that you care a lot for me as an individual—see me, recognize me, listen to me, get to know me, encourage me, support me, challenge me, teach me;

2) prove to me often, show me/make me feel, that I am academically successful and growing regularly as a learner in your class;

3) make your classroom safe to participate in and take risks in. academically interesting, relevant, and engaging through quality instruction.

Conclusion: Extending Social Capital Theory—School-based Social Closure, Positive Relationships, and Organizational Embeddedness

This chapter focuses on how the teachers at WHEELS build a tight-knit school community rooted in relationships of care and trust between students and teachers, as well as how this, in some ways, supports academic engagement and achievement. To conclude, I will
apply the above findings to the sociological conversations around the concept of social capital. The two most familiar sociological schools of thought regarding the concept have come from the work of two sociologists of two different theoretical camps, namely James Coleman and his rational actor models of human behavior, and Pierre Bourdieu and his conflict theory of multiple forms of capitals centered on social class reproduction. Both are useful as a starting point for helping to analyze the findings above regarding how WHEELS teachers actually build a strong school community of learners.

Coleman developed his theory of social capital as a way to explain unequal student academic outcomes between Catholic school students and public school students when funding was held constant. Decades ago, he observed in his data set that, generally, Catholic school students were outperforming public school students even at Catholic schools where funding was equal or less than that of similar public schools (Coleman and Hoffer 1987). Because he thought that the unequal distribution of economic capital was not at issue in his data, Coleman developed his theory of social capital to account for other non-monetary resources and supports Catholic school pupils received from their school communities at higher levels than public school student received from theirs. For Coleman, Catholic school communities were more socially additive than those of public schools. He zeroed in on two features that he claimed Catholic schools have and public schools do not that assist Catholic school students in acquiring academic resources: “social closure” and “dense adult social networks”. Both concepts operate in tandem to create a certain level of “social control” within a community from which youth benefit, as they receive a certain level of guidance from various community-level adults.

Specifically, social closure within social networks is one concept Coleman used to explain how community norms are upheld across generations, outlined in his influential essay on
the topic (Coleman 1988). Social closure refers to whether the adults in a community talk often and monitor the needs, behaviors, etc. of their children and then support and guide them. The mantra “it takes a village to raise a child” applies. In a community with high levels of social closure, adults, through dense networks of communication facilitated by living in close proximity to each other as well as engagement in neighborhood institutions such as churches, PTAs, etc. (Putnam 2001), talk often about their children, share information about them, their schools, certain programs, etc., and essentially help raise each other’s kids.

Applied to schooling, Coleman used the concept social closure to describe the level of closed network communication about students between school adults and parents, as well as among parents of students in the same school. Catholic schools, for Coleman, had more dense, unbroken networks of communication between these adult constituencies than public schools did, with one result being that adolescents were more tightly monitored and guided when exhibiting behaviors deemed unwanted by the community, and norms for behaviors associated with success in school were upheld across the community. Coleman further claimed that social closure is one of the necessary ingredients for trustworthiness within a community because obligations are more likely to be upheld in a community with high levels of social closure; fulfillment of obligations was central to trust building, Coleman thought. More recently, Noguera (2003) and others have argued for schools to take it upon themselves to build social closure between public school parents and teachers, something everyone can agree on.

Strangely, Coleman did not cite the work of Pierre Bourdieu in his work on social capital even though Bourdieu was writing about the concept at the same time, albeit it from a different theoretical perspective (Bourdieu 1986). One of Bourdieu’s contributions on this topic was to situate the concept of social capital within a class inequality perspective (Lareau 2003; Stanton
Salazar 2001). Realizing that economic, social, cultural and symbolic resources (capitals) are distributed unequally within the class hierarchy in society, and that institutions such as schools can operate to favor the privileged classes, Bourdieu argued that working class students have less access to social capital (as well as economic and cultural capitals), relative to their middle class and upper class peers, leading schools to operate more like social sorting machines rather than zones of meritocracy.

Therefore, given the importance of the concept of social capital to social mobility, one could draw the conclusion that it is necessary for schools to take on the responsibility to staff themselves with caring, professional, talented teachers and other adults that will build social capital connections, social ties, with students as a central part of their pedagogical practice, for all of the academic, social and emotional benefits to students that stem from these relationships. I take this stance and, thus, believe Bourdieu’s and Coleman’s conceptions of social capital are both helpful as a starting point from which to situate the data I have presented in this chapter on trust and relationship building between teachers and students.

However, I also believe their theories to be incomplete, as neither talks about how these social ties within schools are, or could be, first *initially formed* and then *sustained* over time within schools. Here lie the theoretical and practical contributions of this chapter, particularly in the synthesis of the concepts of teacher collective efficacy (social cohesion/trust and informal communal social control) and social closure, with care, trust and student-teacher relationships--the coordinated work of the grade level teams of teachers as a major school structure that helps teachers build trustful relationships with students.
School-Based Social Closure

To this point, WHEELS’ empowered teacher teams--specifically the teacher collective efficacy that produces their coordination and consistency in the application of school wide mindsets, policies and best practices--engage in a form of teacher-to-teacher social closure within the school, and this social closure is a central foundational block of the building of healthy relationships between students and teachers and a general sense of community among students. In essence, the data above explicates how the teacher teams engage in, what I will introduce here as school based social closure, a concept I have not seen in the literature to date. It is this school based social closure between teachers of the same students--the fact that teachers are all on the same page within the dense teacher-based social networks of the grade level and department teams, and that they communicate often about their students after school but also at the scheduled bi-weekly team meetings—that is an important piece of creating the conditions for learning at WHEELS, as we see above in the teacher quotes about how their instructional practices benefit from teaching within WHEELS’ common systems. Therefore, we could say that school based social closure is essential part of the social capital building processes at WHEELS and therefore to central to academic achievement as well. When the teachers say “we’re all on the same page” this is what they mean.

However, if students did not perceive themselves as succeeding academically while at the same time feeling embedded within strong relationships of trust with their teachers, any school-based order created by the common policies and high expectations would break down over time, as some students would disengage from learning specifically, and from the school, generally, as a place where “I like to go and am successful within—a place that is ‘helpful to me and my future”. It is clear that Coleman stopped at the more superficial level of external social control
by way of social closure (between teachers and parents, and parents and parents) and its associated sanctions on behavior. Thus, he incorrectly assumed that external social control for control’s sake is sufficient for students to succeed in school over time.

The data from WHEELS woven together with my experiences as a teacher describe how the teachers and students understand that what really is at the heart of building and then sustaining a healthy and engaged student learning community. One needs both: 1) dense social ties/relationships of trust and care between students and teachers; and 2) academic success.

School based social closure only works if it supports these deeper processes. These are the two axes (socio-relational and academic) of building a strong student learning environment/community.

School based social closure, facilitated by teacher collective efficacy--the teaming structure, Team Leader position and bi-weekly team meetings--is together, one of the social mechanisms needed for school community building, but it must be accompanied by effective teacher pedagogical techniques for relationship building/community building, making academic success transparent and celebrated, building academic confidence, and solid rigorous instruction. At WHEELS, social solidarity is established between students and teachers, a school community of “us/us” not “us/Them”, which then supports an informal and communal type of social control that sustains/supports academic engagement and achievement over the length of the school year.

Bourdieu’s and Coleman’s theories of social capital lack analysis of how social ties are created and then sustained over time between individuals in schools, and particularly how institutions facilitate or hinder this.
On this point the recent work of Mario Small is helpful, particularly his organizational embeddedness perspective on social capital generation, articulated gracefully in his multi-method case study of childcare centers (2009). In it he states:

People’s social capital depends fundamentally on the organizations in which they participate routinely, and that, through multiple mechanisms, organizations can create and reproduce network advantages in ways their members may not expect or even have to work for. Some organizations are more effective than others, and others not effective at all. But understanding people’s connections—and how much connections generate social inequality—requires understanding the organizations within which those connections are embedded. It requires conceiving of people as organizationally embedded actors, as actors whose social and organizational ties—and the resources both available and mobilized through them—respond to institutional constraints, imperatives and opportunities (5-6).

And:

The organizational embeddedness perspective suggests, above all, that what researchers have called a person’s social capital depends substantially on the institutional practices of the organizations in which that individual routinely participates. If embedded in the right organizations, a person can acquire significant networks, which yield palpable effects on their wellbeing (177).

In sum, what the findings in the last two chapters have shown is how the organizational conditions, the school structures and school wide policies and shared beliefs at WHEELS facilitate the building and sustaining of social ties between teachers and other teachers (last chapter), and then between teachers and students (this chapter), and some of the ways in which this positively impacts student engagement and achievement. However, without rigorous, engaging instruction trust and community would not lead to student learning, but rather to, at best, a comfortable but academically under-productive school. The next chapter will discuss the concept of instruction and academic rigor as the third leg of the teacher-centered theory of school context at WHEELS that I introduced earlier:
1) *teacher collective efficacy*—get the teachers on the same page with effective mentalities/shared beliefs, policies and practices; distribute leadership to them; and empower them (last chapter);

2) teacher-student organizationally embedded social capital—build caring relationships with students and academic confidence through *teacher collective efficacy* (this chapter);

3) develop high quality instruction and academic rigor supported by school structures and teacher-leader roles—(next chapter).

Perhaps Alejandro Portes (1998) said it best about the limits of social capital when he wrote in a widely cited article:

One must not be overly optimistic about what enforceable trust and bounded solidarity can accomplish at the collective level, especially in the absence of material resources. Social capital can be a powerful force promoting group projects but, as noted previously, it consists of the ability to marshal resources, not the resources themselves...social capital is not a substitute for the provision of credits, material infrastructure, and education. What social capital can do is to increase the ‘yield’ of such resources by reinforcing them with the voluntary efforts of participants and their capacity to prevent malfeasance (Portes 1998: 146).

Bryk and Schneider said something similar relating to their related concept of relational trust:

relational trust does not directly affect student learning. Rather, trust fosters a set of organizational conditions, some structural and others social and psychological, that make it more conducive for individuals to initiate and sustain the kinds of activities necessary to affect productivity improvements (Bryk and Schneider 2002: 116).

The students at WHEELS would not learn at the levels they do if high quality instruction were not woven through the teacher and student school community processes I described in the last two chapters. Yet, it is because of these school community/learning environment processes
that instruction and learning can happen at the levels that they do, as education scholar and former public school teacher Pedro Noguera mentions in the opening quote to this chapter. The next chapter will review some of the important instructional practices the teachers at WHEELS employ as they leverage the strong school community and their relationships with students into academic progress.
Chapter 5: Strong Instruction and Teachers Developing Teachers

“Far from the popular image of the teacher standing at the front of the room lecturing from a textbook and giving a quiz at the end of the week, we now know that teachers whose students demonstrate strong achievement do much more. Effective teachers use many different tools to assess how their students learn as well as what the students know. They use the information to help all students advance from where they are to where they need to be. They carefully organize activities, materials and instructions based on students’ prior knowledge and level of development so that all students can be successful. They know what conceptions students bring with them about the subject and what misconceptions are likely to cause them confusion—and they design their lessons to overcome these misconceptions. They adapt the curriculum to different students’ needs, for example, making content more accessible for students who are still learning and for those who have special needs. Effective teachers engage students in active learning—debating, discussing, researching, writing, evaluating, experimenting, and constructing models, papers and products in addition to listening and reading information, watching demonstrations and practicing skills. They make their expectations for high quality work very clear and they provide models for student work that meets these standards. They also provide constant feedback that helps students improve as they continuously revise their work toward these standards. They design and manage a well-functioning, respectful classroom that allows students to work productively. Finally, they involve parents in the learning process and help create strong connections between home and school so that students have fewer obstacles and more supports for their learning. And they do all of this while collaborating with other teachers and administrators to create a seamless curriculum and supportive environment throughout the school.”
(Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden 2005: 2-3)

“There is a right and a wrong place for every tool and it will always fall to the unique style and vision of great teachers to apply them. That, in a word, is artistry. Great teaching is no less great because the teacher mastered specific skills systematically than is David a lesser reflection of Michelangelo’s genius because Michelangelo mastered the grammar of the chisel before he created the statue. Given the tools here (in the book), I believe teachers will make insightful, independent decisions about how and when to use the techniques of the craft as they go about becoming masters of the art of teaching.”
(Lemov 2010: 13)

“The good classroom is rich in small moments of intelligence and care. There is the big stuff of course—the week-long science experiment, the dramalogue, the reporting of one’s research—but important as well are the spontaneous question, the inviting gesture, the tone in a voice. They reveal the cognitive and philosophical intimacy of a room.”
(Rose 2011: 32)

Great teachers are not born, they are made. Teaching is a very difficult, complex profession, and when done well it involves a multiplex of skills and a deep knowledge of subject
matter, students, and learning processes applied deftly within shifting classroom and interpersonal contexts. Jackson (1968) estimated that teachers make thousands of micro-decisions daily in response to dynamic interpersonal and social contexts in their classrooms and the larger school setting. Based on my experience working in schools this seems accurate. Great teachers draw on a deep knowledge of their profession’s effective methods and techniques as well of their subject’s content, combined with an understanding of how to motivate, engage and encourage their students. This takes time to develop. It also requires effective pre-service selection and rigorous training, on-going high-quality mentoring with instructional observations and feedback on lessons, watching great teachers in action, reflection, perseverance, and of course, practicing effective techniques in classrooms, among other things. It is beautiful to watch a master teacher at work inside his or her classroom, much like watching world-class athletes playing in their prime, whose mastery on the field rests upon hours and hours of hard work, dedication, preparation, analysis, reflection and coaching, often done behind the scenes. As Muhammad Ali said about training for a match: “The fight is won or lost far away from witnesses, behind the lines, in the gym, and out there on the road, long before I dance under those lights.”

While one of the purposes of this study is to place the expertise of the teachers at WHEELS’ middle school within its proper organizational and socio-relational contexts, this work would be incomplete we did not examine some of the effective teaching and learning processes and practices implemented within the classrooms at WHEELS, for it is here at the intersection of teachers with students that learning happens, of course, and any sociological work seeking to understand academic achievement leaves out a significant piece of the puzzle if the nature and quality of the instruction students experience daily is not examined. As Richard
Ellmore (2004), a Harvard professor and expert on high quality schools and programs has written, and I paraphrase here: no education policy will be entirely effective unless it directly impacts the quality of teaching inside of classrooms. This he calls education policy “from the inside out”.

Many important studies in the sociology of education lack a thorough analysis of instruction as a factor that influences student achievement and engagement in schools. While the previous two chapters of this study examined how a strong teacher professional community and culture is built and sustained, and then how teachers collectively and individually build relationships of trust and student engagement, it is also true that without consistently strong instruction from high quality teachers, students would still not learn at the levels they need to at WHEELS. A happy, comfortable, safe school is not necessarily a school where students learn as much as possible. High quality instruction of a rigorous, strategically planned, standards-based curriculum is a requirement in this endeavor (Darling-Hammond 2010).

From the fields of education and economics we know from quantitative and qualitative projects that teacher quality/effectiveness is a major within-school factor influencing achievement (Rockoff 2004; Hanuchek 2011; Haycock 1998; Darling-Hammond and Youngs 2002; Darling Hammond 2010; Rivkin, Hanuchek and Kane 2005; Nye, Konstantopoulos and Hedges 2005; Chetty, Friedman and Rockoff 2011). This chapter will describe in detail some of the pedagogical practices used throughout the WHEELS middle school. Because instruction is such a huge topic, I will document only a few of the most widely used and effective instructional strategies at the school. My reason for going into such depth is to contribute to efforts to build up the professional knowledge base of teaching in general, an endeavor which is central to improving American public education (Darling Hammond 2010; Mehta 2013). As I
mentioned in chapter 4, many times a school structure, policy or practice/technique succeeds or fails based on the smallest details of how and when it was implemented in the classroom. Master teachers are incredibly intentional down to the smallest detail in all aspects of their practice. This attention to detail is important for separating good and average teachers from the great ones.

Perhaps the most widely used framework for analyzing teaching was created by Charlotte Danielson (2007). Danielson’s framework breaks up teaching into four domains: 1) planning; 2) the classroom environment/community/culture; 3) instruction (including assessment); and 4) professional responsibilities. Because previous chapters already discussed teacher professional community building, and how teachers build a strong student community of learners, which fall in to Danielson’s domains two and four respectively, I will avoid discussing techniques within those domains in this chapter. I will instead focus on domains 1, planning, and 3, instruction, and the school structures, particularly teacher development structures, that directly support quality practice within them. I will conclude by tying this analysis of pedagogical techniques and school structures in to an analysis of teacher stability at WHEELS, which positively impacts instruction and the informal development of teachers. The data for this chapter come from my hundreds and hundreds of classroom observations at WHEELS, as well as planning and feedback sessions with the teachers, over the course of the past seven years in my capacity as an Instructional Coach, as well as my general participant observation throughout the school.

Some Effective Pedagogical Strategies and Techniques

The Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (GRR)—An Overview

WHEELS uses a model for instructional delivery and overall lesson structure. A model is not a script. An instructional script linearly prescribes a set of behaviors to be done one after
the other, essentially taking professional decision-making and expertise away from teachers and de-professionalizing them. By contrast, an instructional model, or framework, is a general structure for a lesson or series of lessons meant to increase precision in the instructional process, and should be dynamic and flexible as teachers assess their students’ needs in the moment, and over time, and respond accordingly. In this way it is fluid and iterative, adjusting to where students are with their learning at any given time and building off of that. Models in the teaching profession increase teacher effectiveness by building off research and classroom practice on how students learn best, and adding strategy and intentionality to complex, sometimes seemingly amorphous, teaching and learning processes. Models leave room for teachers to adjust to the context of their classrooms, and specifically to the needs of the learners in front of them. Using instructional models, teachers are allowed to be professionals, operating from a professional body of knowledge, but not bound to it. Instructional scripts on the other hand do not assume this level of expertise and professionalism from teachers and actually aim to prevent such professional autonomy.

The lesson model that WHEELS’ middle school uses is called the Gradual Release of Responsibility model (GRR), and it is based on the work of Douglass Fisher and Nancy Frey in their book Better Learning Through Structured Teaching: A Framework for the Gradual Release of Responsibility (2008). The current middle school Assistant Principal brought the GRR instructional model with her from another school where she had taught prior to teaching at WHEELS five years ago. During her first year at WHEELS as a teacher, she used GRR in her classroom to great success. That same year, the WHEELS administration and teacher-leaders, after a series of classroom walk-throughs and observations, identified a school-wide issue with the way instruction was being delivered across many classrooms in the school. Teachers, almost
across the board, were talking too much and doing too much of the cognitive lifting; the ratios of teacher talking and thinking to student working and thinking were skewed too far towards the teachers’ side, and learning was not advancing as it should, as teachers monopolized too much of their class periods’ time. Specifically, out of a sixty-five minute period, students were listening and watching the teacher for around two-thirds of it, and working, practicing and thinking deeply for only the remainder of the time. Teachers were not being strategic with their language usage and lesson structures, and students were not thinking and working enough during class.

The following year to address this issue the teacher mentioned above, in another example of teacher leadership and empowerment at WHEELS, and along with a few other teacher-leaders, instituted and led a series of professional development sessions for all teachers throughout the first part of the school year, establishing the GRR model as the instructional model of the school. The result was to institute in to the school’s professional culture certain standards and effective techniques for how students learn best and how lessons, units and long-term plans should be generally structured. Since then, every teacher new to WHEELS receives a copy of Fisher and Frey’s book, as well as professional development on the GRR model given in the summer before the year starts.

In keeping with the ideas behind GRR being a model and not a script, teachers at WHEELS are not mandated to plan every lesson in the GRR framework. (In fact, lesson plans are not collected at WHEELS.) Nevertheless, many of their lessons are structured by such a framework, particularly when teaching new content, and when teachers use other lesson plan structures, such as inquiry or discussion-based lessons like Socratic Seminars, they understand how a different model addresses the learning goals better than GRR does. The general point is that the GRR model is established effective practice in the profession, but WHEELS teachers are
also professionals empowered to make decisions about what pedagogical strategies to employ within the context of their classrooms and with the particular students they teach. On this point Fisher and Frey (2008) write, citing Fullan, Hill and Crevola’s (2006) work:

This instructional model is intentional, purposeful and explicit. However, we want to distinguish this approach from highly prescriptive teaching. Gradual Release of Responsibility is not a script that teachers follow. Instead this model helps teachers increase precision in their teaching. As Hill and Crevola note, we don’t need more prescription in our teaching, but rather more precision in our teaching. Precision requires that teachers know their students and content well, that they regularly assess students’ understandings of the content, and that they purposefully plan lessons that transfer responsibility from the teacher to the student. It is through this very purposeful classroom structure that learning occurs. (16)

Fisher and Frey base the GRR model on several theories including Piaget’s (1965) work on cognitive structures and schemas, Vygotsky’s (1962, 1978) work on zones of proximal development, Bandura’s (1965) work on attention, reproduction and motivation, and Wood, Brunner and Ross’s (1976) work on scaffolded instruction. They write: “Taken together, these theories suggest that learning occurs through interactions with others, and when these interactions are intentional, specific learning occurs” (2008: 3). Furthermore, synthesizing this body of knowledge, Fisher and Frey base the GRR model upon certain understandings about how individuals learn in a variety of contexts, not just within schools. First, individuals learn from explicit modeling, feedback, collaboration and peer support, re-teaching, and (eventually) individual practice. Second, this modeling is detailed, intentional and purposeful. Third, individuals learn by interacting with others, including those doing the modeling but also others in similar positions engaged in the process of learning. Lastly, learning happens when the cognitive load shifts strategically over time from the teacher modeling, to joint student-teacher learning and practice, to student-student learning and practice, and finally to individual learning. Fisher and Frey translate these understandings into an instructional framework (lesson structure) with
four general components: 1) a focus lesson (direct instruction) including clear modeling of the
cognitive processes leading to the learning goal; 2) guided instruction; 3) collaborative learning;
and 4) independent learning/application/practice.

At WHEELS this is the structure of the GRR instructional model. Depending on the
scope of the learning goal and student proficiency related to it, a teacher may perform two GRR
lessons during one period (somewhat rare and used with smaller learning goals), one during a
period (more common), or stretch this structure out over a couple of days. On this point, for
example, it is not uncommon, particularly in classrooms where there are large concentrations of
English Language Learners and/or students with disabilities (both groups constitute over 20% of
WHEELS’ student body), to see a teacher present a structured focus lesson, and then move in to
guided practice and collaborative learning in one lesson with points of re-teaching, and then the
next day perform a refresher mini-focus lesson, a quick guided practice or collaborative learning
exercise, and then move in to independent practice and application for the remainder of the
period of day two, with individual teacher-student conferences occurring during this independent
learning time in order to differentiate instruction. This is an example of how the GRR model
would stretch out over two days, the teacher adapting it to the needs of his/her students.

Because a goal of this chapter is to add, at a granular level, to the professional knowledge
base about effective middle school instruction (note: the GRR model is effective in WHEELS’
high school classrooms as well), and thus the topics of teacher quality and student achievement
within the field of the sociology of education, I will explain below in some detail each part of the
GRR instructional framework as it looks at WHEELS. What I describe should be generally
understood to be effective techniques amongst the teachers at the school. It is not the case that
every teacher does these things every lesson, nor is it the case that every teacher implements
every piece of the GRR model at high levels. Individual teachers have their strengths and weaknesses just like others in complex professions do, and some are better at certain aspects of the craft than others. Having observed every teacher in the middle school numerous times going back (for some) seven years, and all of them as recently as the Spring of 2013 in my capacity as instructional coach, however, I can say that it is the case that most teachers generally implement the GRR model with at least some amount of expertise, and that at the very least, most are aware of the importance of the teacher-talk to student-work ratio, and the teacher-thinking to student-thinking ratio during lessons; they also generally structure lessons that involve clear modeling and then gradual release, ramping up the cognitive heavy lifting done by students over time.

The following descriptions of some best practices within the GRR model are generalizations. Deviations do and should occur when teachers adapt to their classroom context and their students’ strengths and needs. Furthermore, inquiry and discussion-based lesson structures are also common, though probably not implemented as much at WHEELS as GRR, so I won’t go in to them in this chapter.

*Learning Targets Driving Lessons*

In every classroom, every lesson has the instructional goals posted at the front of the room. In Expeditionary Learning schools the learning goal is called a *learning target*. Good learning targets are crafted with some clear guidelines in mind. First, they should be rooted in state (Common Core) standards, rigorous and doable in one class period. (Learning targets that span more than one or two class periods are called power targets, and are larger in scope). Second, learning targets should be measurable and product centered: at the end of a lesson a teacher should be able to look at student products from that lesson—work from the student
practice or exit tickets\(^{17}\) done at the end of class, for example—and be able to measure individual and collective student mastery against the learning target for that class period, ultimately determining the overall success of a lesson in this way. Third, learning targets should be written in clear, student friendly language. Fourth, learning targets should align with what the student practice/learning experience was for the class period; this is called target-practice match.

An example of a learning target that meets these criteria is this one from a 7\(^{th}\) grade history class: *I can compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of the North’s and South’s militaries at the beginning of the Civil War by reading historical charts and writing a high quality analytical paragraph.* This learning target is appropriate because it meets all of the above criteria. It is rooted in the New York State middle school Common Core Social Studies standards. It can be rigorous and doable in one class period if students have a certain level of proficiency with these social studies and writing skills already. (This depends on the strengths and needs of the students in a class at the beginning of the lesson of which teachers should be constantly taking in to account in their planning). It is measurable in that a student product, presumably questions related to reading particular historical charts, and an analytical paragraph on the charts’ content, can be collected as proof of where each student is in relation to learning target mastery at the end of the lesson. And, if the lesson is structured appropriately, the learning target will match up with what the students do during the period, particularly during the independent practice portion.

One example of a learning target that is not crafted properly would be: *I can review the differences between the North’s and South’s militaries before the Civil War.* This learning target

\(^{17}\) An exit ticket is a very short, low-stakes assessment covering the lesson’s content and/or skills. Good exit tickets align to the Learning Target and therefore, to the student learning portion of a lesson. Teachers at WHEELS rarely grade exit tickets, as they are not a summative assessment. Rather, teachers assess their students’ mastery on exit tickets to inform their planning for the next day’s lesson. If exit ticket mastery is low, teachers know they will need to reteach portions of the lesson, for example.
is not measurable nor product centered; the word review is not specific enough and student learning during the period cannot be measured by this wording. This is what is called a process centered learning target. There is no clear measure with which to judge student mastery levels against. The verb “review” in this target should be broken up, reworded and defined at grade-level or above to be rigorous (or if the students are below grade level, then at a level that the teacher feels is rigorous but still meets them where they are). The teacher here would need to think more specifically about what student learning should look like during this lesson and what student work product embodies this learning, and then craft a learning target with a different verb other than review that links to the student actions during the lesson that create the product that embodies the learning in the target.

Activating Schema and the Focus Lesson

When students enter the classrooms at WHEELS, they first engage in an activity called a Do Now or Think Quick, depending on the teacher. The Do Now is a short 2-5 minute activity meant to activate conceptual schema from previous lessons, to spiral back and review a past skill, build background knowledge, or reinforce vocabulary relevant to the upcoming lesson. It is almost always done by each student independently. A structured, focused, quiet Do Now also sets the tone and classroom environment for the period as one of academics and seriousness, which is one reason why teachers have consistent entry routines, as discussed in the last chapter. After the Do Now, teachers review it, generally in just a few minutes, and then launch into the focus lesson.

The focus lesson is where the bulk of teacher direct instruction and modeling takes place. Effective focus lessons are appropriately timed for student engagement, lasting between 5 and 15 minutes generally, establish a purpose for the lesson linking this to the learning target, and then
clearly demonstrate and model the cognitive process(es) (steps, strategies) leading to successful completion of an academic task related to the learning target. Teachers do not just show students the end product, they show/unpack each step of the thought process as it unfolds. The idea here is that kids need to see and hear an expert, here the teacher, perform a cognitive, complex process leading to a learning outcome in real time, and they need to be exposed to the thinking processes behind it.

A focus lesson should generally be uninterrupted, teachers usually do not ask questions during it, and it should flow so as to not break student concentration, with the teacher using strategic and efficient language accompanied by visuals (called anchor charts) that depict the process and examples that the teacher is presenting. It is very important that there be visuals for students to see the process along with hearing it, and that teachers display to students just how they are using the visual charts to assist them as they perform the task. (This is particularly true for students that have learning disabilities or are English Language Learners.) Teachers describe step by step their thought process and model each step clearly, as well as use high-quality “think-alouds” to make their thinking explicit to the students. (WHEELS teachers talk about this practice as “letting the students in” to their thinking.) Teachers model at least one complete task, problem, etc. in this way during a focus lesson, and sometimes more. Teachers may also model a common pitfall, or mistake, and how to avoid it/them. Anticipating such common mistakes students might make comes from knowing one’s students well as well as experience teaching a topic more than once (which has strong links to teacher retention). At the end of the modeling, teachers should link the process back to the learning target and summarize the entire process in very concise language again.
The focus lesson section is not a time when students get to practice. They watch and listen as an academic process unfolds before them. Furthermore, teacher language needs to be very strategic, efficient and thoughtfully presented. The best teacher of focus lessons at WHEELS, a veteran of ten years, scripts out her focus lessons beforehand down to the exact word. This is not the norm amongst WHEELS teachers, but it is clearly effective within the context of her practice, as her language is very precise and the process clearly organized and modeled for her students.

Guided Instruction and Collaborative Learning

Guided instruction and Collaborative Practice/Learning constitutes the next stage in the GRR model. It occurs right after the focus lesson and it is the first time that students get experience doing the learning process that was modeled in the focus lesson. This is also a time when students can ask questions (to teachers and sometimes peers) and teachers can check for understanding in a number of ways and re-teach to individuals, groups and the entire class as necessary based on the data they get from their students by questioning and circulating the room, for example. One guided practice model performed by many teachers at WHEELS is called a Whole Class Guided Practice, whereby the teacher leads the class step by step through the a different problem or activity with the same cognitive process/steps as the focus lesson example. Sometimes when the learning target involves a new or complex process this is the pedagogical strategy teachers employ coming out of a focus lesson. ELLs and students with disabilities many times benefit from this type of scaffold (much like another effective instructional model, the SIOP model of ELL instruction, also used at WHEELS, states as well).

If teachers read their class and judge that this amount of scaffolding need not apply, a Partner-work Guided Practice or Group-work guided practice (should generally not be more
than four students) is then usually the next step; in this case, teachers would have the class perform an activity or activities similar to that of the focus lesson in these collaborative groupings. These student groups should be created before the lesson, be strategic in their configurations of who works with who, and crafted in the best way for peer-peer support during this time. When teachers are not re-teaching during the guided practice they are constantly circulating around the room and checking in with students, questioning and prompting them to utilize the anchor charts to facilitate self-sufficiency in relation to utilizing the strategies involved, thereby checking for understanding. This is a way that teachers gather data about how their students are doing on the academic tasks at hand and determining what the next teacher move should be, answering questions about whether students (and which ones) are ready to release to more independent practice, application., and more rigorous activities, or whether they need more scaffolding, support, and re-teaching, for example.

Lastly, this lesson stage is where teachers can effectively differentiate instruction for their students in the lesson. One math teacher at WHEELS often groups students into three or four groupings (though still sitting in pairs) and creates lesson materials that have different problem sequences aligned to the groups’ general strengths and needs, all based on previous results on assessments and diagnostics. Also, English teachers sometimes will have leveled texts for students based on their reading abilities, while having students still working on the same types of academic activities. For example, an ELA teacher might teach a particular strategy on how to find the theme of a novel in the focus lesson. In the guided instruction, students may be grouped by reading level with partners, and in partners practice the strategy on their leveled book or on a book judged to be accessible for all learners in the class, before applying the strategies to their
own personal reading book during the next phase of the lesson, the independent learning time. (Differentiation also occurs in the independent practice/learning phase, as I will discuss below).

In sum, the guided instruction phase is the connection, bridging the focus lesson the teacher performed with the independent learning/practice students will be performing. In general, the guided practice will also take between five and fifteen minutes. However, again, teachers may deviate from this when, after checking for understanding, they judge that it should go either longer or shorter or be skipped all together. The important point here is that teachers are constantly gathering data from their students and then using that to inform their next instructional move(s). As Fisher and Frey state, “The art and science of teaching come together in this phase (guided instruction) as the teacher responds to the nuances of understanding exhibited by each student.” (Fisher and Frey 2008: 60).

Independent Learning and Differentiation

Once teachers have deemed that students can assume even more of the responsibility for the learning at hand, then the independent practice portion of the lesson begins. It is important that students get time to work independently towards the learning target(s). They will not be with their teacher or peers in most situations outside of the classroom, and the thought is that they need to be self-sufficient and independent learners as well as be able to work effectively with peers. This does not mean that they should not also benefit from the social and other skills related to working with partners and groups on common tasks and goals, which does generally happen in the earlier guided instruction phase. However, the independent practice/learning should be a time when students work efficiently and productively on academic tasks of increasing rigor, and get a good bit of practice deepening and extending their understanding of the cognitive processes inherent in the learning activity(ies).
WHEELS teachers aim for about 20 to 25 minutes of independent practice per class period, but again, they may deviate from this when they judge it best for their students. Also, this is the time when teachers can circulate the classroom and work individually with students because the rest of the students are engaged in independent work (as we saw from the teacher quote last chapter), allowing teachers to focus more on one student and less on the entire group as they work the classroom. Differentiation also characterizes this portion of the lesson, as it did during the guided instruction. Teachers can plan different independent learning activities for different levels of students as happens in the guided instruction phase. Also, many times re-teaching occurs here as with the other sections of the GRR framework, as teachers circulate and talk to more and more students, gather more information about what their students need in relation to the learning goal, and judge that is best to stop the class and address a common mistake many students are making, for example, or insert a mini-strategy to ramp up rigor or apply a cognitive process in a different situation.

Students generally appreciate the GRR structure, particularly the mix of direct instruction, partner and group work and the chance to learn independently. One middle school girl told me when I asked her to describe herself as a learner:

Well, before WHEELS, I guess…I was learning on my own. Like, whatever I wasn’t taught in elementary school…I actually, like, wanted to learn…So, then, coming to WHEELS I felt like I was actually being given information to take-in in class, versus at my old school where I wasn’t getting information. And, the good thing about WHEELS is not just that we do work…but like…I do both individual work, group work and teacher work (direct instruction and modeling), which I think helps us (students), because as an individual you get to do your work and learn on your own, and like, try to figure things out on your own. With group work, you get the ideas of the other people, other students, and you get to see their (thought) process and how they think. And then with the teacher you don’t just get the answer, but you get the answers and you get a way of how to get the answers (process modeling) which helps. (Brenda, March 2012)
Another student echoed these statements on the effectiveness of GRR saying:

So I always feel like there is a lot of practice (in lessons at WHEELS)...like I don’t know how to put it in to words, but a lot of process thinking. Like, we have to put our brains to work to get—to solve—to learn something. So, to solve a problem, we have to think on our own and develop our own way of thinking. So, I feel like that’s a good thing about WHEELS. We get a lot of practice by ourselves, with our peers, with the teachers, and even outside of (class), like with our homework. So, I feel like that’s the reason why I feel I can learn so easily, because I get practice in class, and not just hear something the teacher is saying and then have to guess...how to do it.
(Mary, March 2012)

The Lesson’s Debrief and Checking for Understanding

At the end of a lesson, most teachers typically give what is called an exit ticket. It is usually preceded by a debrief in which the teacher wraps up the independent practice, and summarizes the major points of the direct instruction, among other things. High quality debriefs are key because they hit the students with very strategic language related to the cognitive process/steps embedded within the learning target after the students have had guided and independent learning experiences, which has the effect of deepening understanding in a way that does not happen in the focus lesson because of where it is placed in relation to the other parts of the lesson. In other words, the teacher’s strategic language hits students differently, more deeply, after they have practiced and learned in various configurations.

The end of class consists of a two to four minute exit ticket in which teachers assign one or two problems/activities that align to the work done in the independent practice. The reason for this exit ticket is not for students to get more practice, but rather to give the teacher a piece of evidence of where each student is in terms of mastery of the learning target(s). Teachers collect these exit tickets and do not grade them usually, but rather, after a lesson they look through them as a check for understanding and to judge the effectiveness of the lesson. Using actual student products is important for accurate teacher reflection.. Teachers then adjust the following day’s
lesson accordingly. If the majority of students did not do well on the exit ticket, for example, a teacher may decide to completely or partially re-teach the lesson. If most students showed mastery, then a new learning target can be introduced. The point is that teachers adjust their instruction using student evidence/products from each lesson as proof of their learning, and then make adjustments from there. This reflection and re-teaching, and the multiple opportunities for students to learn, is crucial to student success. 

*Student Reflection*

Also, central to WHEELS’ instructional philosophy is that students get opportunities to regularly reflect upon their academic growth and their mastery of learning objectives/targets. WHEELS teachers often use what they call “learning target trackers” to help students do this. These trackers are given to students occasionally, and time in class is used for self-reflection activities and to set individual learning goals about their strengths and needs moving forward. And, as mentioned in the last chapter, teachers give students multiple opportunities for success on learning targets. I heard one teacher recently tell her 6th grade class upon passing back quizzes: “If you want to retake a quiz on these learning targets again to improve, I will be after school Thursday and you can sign up to retake it, and you can come study Wednesday when I’ll be here too.” This statement came just after she reminded them about the importance of having a Growth Mindset (Dweck 2007) and how important hard work is to success (an example that also links back up with the discussion last chapter of how teachers use strategic language to build a student community of learning). Another teacher explained in an interview about the importance of having students reflect on their progress against the learning targets:

…I think the whole idea of looking at learning targets, and re-reading them, and reflecting on them for students is really important…Let’s take essay writing (for example). Kids generally improve on this over the course of the year. So, I’ll…have them throughout the year sort of take out the writing learning targets
and track their progress and look at the different writing products they have done to see their progress over time. Kids can say (for example) ‘here is where I stand (in relation to the target) as I go along, and I’m getting quicker and better at generating ideas, one. And two, I’m doing a better job of some things that go into the body paragraphs like analysis or providing evidence’. And so being able to help them track their learning on a daily basis but also on a longer-term scale so that they can see that they are doing better is really important.

(Danny, April 2012)

Effective Planning: Backwards Planning-the Understanding by Design Model (UBD)

Moving from the domain of instruction to the domain of planning, the guiding belief at WHEELS is to plan everything backwards from the year-end learning goals, which should be standards-based student products, now rooted in the Common Core standards. This applies to yearly long-term plans (sometimes called curriculum maps in other schools), unit plans, and lesson plans. In doing this, teachers ask themselves questions such as “I will know I have been successful when my students leave my classroom in June able to do (blank).” The central strategies used by the school in this endeavor come from the Understanding by Design backwards planning principles developed by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005). The general idea behind backwards planning is that teachers must know where it is they want their students to go--exactly what they want their students to achieve in terms of content and skills acquisition and application, and exactly what student products capture the learning of such skills, concepts and content at the end of the year, as well as along the way at various stages. This is all aligned to state standards, in the past the New York State standards, and now the new Common Core standards.

In subject-based departments, teachers work together on crafting their long-term plans and unit plans throughout the year, as well on the alignment of the curriculum from 6th to 8th grades. A teacher-leader called a Department Leader guides this work. Department Leaders are teacher-leaders who have a lighter teaching load and in return take on certain responsibilities.
around running the department. This includes planning and running the department meetings, which meet weekly on Friday afternoons, supporting their teachers on the crafting of high quality long-term plans and unit plans, occasionally observing lessons and giving feedback to their teachers, sharing effective techniques, and analyzing student data with their teachers. Departments and Department Leaders are the school structure that supports teacher quality primarily in the important domain of curriculum (and unit) planning, including the crafting of quality assessments and the alignment of curriculum with the new Common Core standards. Friday’s class periods are ten minutes shorter and students are dismissed about ninety minutes earlier than the other days. Teachers meet in departments during this time on a weekly basis.

**Teachers Developing Teachers: Formal Instructional Coaching**

The success of these instructional techniques rests upon a certain level of individual teacher expertise, but it is also positively impacted by teacher collective efficacy, school-based social closure, and the resulting engaged student community described in the last chapter. Regarding the development of teachers and the support of strong planning and instruction, there are two main school structures (along with teacher-leader roles) that support teachers in doing this work: the subject level departments and the teacher-leader role of Department Leader, discussed briefly above, and the general instructional coaching of teachers through lesson observation and feedback cycles aligned to the role of Instructional Coach, a role I have occupied.

Department Leaders and Instructional Coaches are responsible for developing groups of teachers assigned to them. Department Leaders coach the teachers in their subject level departments, and Instructional Coaches work with teachers assigned to them by the
administration. At the beginning of the year this set of teachers includes all of the teachers newly hired to WHEELS, no matter how long they have been teaching. These coaching cycles consist of weekly planning meetings, lesson observations and debrief meetings. They serve to improve instruction and planning, and also informally socialize teachers to the school wide pedagogical practices, beliefs and policies of the school. If the grade teams are the backbones of the school around teacher and student community and culture, then the departments and instructional coaching cycles in general are the backbones of the school in terms of instructional quality and development.

Teacher Stability at WHEELS and Informal Coaching of Teachers

One of the things that supports WHEELS’ teacher development and quality is the school’s relatively high levels of teacher stability from year to year, as teachers stay year after year and develop within the various school support structures, such as the departments and teams. Over the last seven years, WHEELS’ teacher retention from one year to the next averages over 80%. Most recently, from the 2012 to the 2013 school year WHEELS’ middle school teacher retention rate was 94%, as it needed to replace only one teacher out of eighteen. Going back three years, from 2010-2011 to 2012-2013, the year-to-year retention rate averaged 87%. Moreover, WHEELS’ teachers average about eight years of experience teaching in the NYCDOE.

These teacher retention rates are higher than the city averages. A recent report by the NYU Steinhardt School of Education Research Alliance on New York City Schools (Marinell and Coca 2013) found that 27% of middle school teachers leave after their first year teaching, 45% after year two, and 55% after year three. It also found that NYC middle school teachers
leave their schools at higher rates than their elementary and high school teaching peers. The NYU study found that the top three reasons middle school teachers left their schools were: 1) lack of student discipline; 2) lack of support from administration; and 3) wanting to have more influence over school policies. Furthermore, as the NYU report states, these high attrition numbers pose serious problems for school improvement efforts from the instability caused by such turnover. The negative effects of teacher turnover on school quality have been documented in other research (Ingersol 2004). Johnson, Craft, and Papay (2012) trace the roots of teacher turnover in high poverty schools to the poor quality of the learning environments in such schools.

By contrast, and related to its strong learning environment, WHEELS’ middle school teacher retention rates are higher than the averages in New York City from year to year and are represented in the table below for the past three years.
Table 11: Teacher Retention Rates at WHEELS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year/Grades</th>
<th>Number of Teachers WHEELS MS</th>
<th>Number of WHEELS MS Teachers that Did Not Return Following Year By Choice</th>
<th>Middle School Teacher Retention Rate Year to Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010-2011</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data from internal school staffing documents 2010-2013.

From my conversations and interviews with teachers, I have identified several reasons for why most teachers stay at WHEELS’ middle school year to year. They are in no particular order of importance, but rather, all intertwine. They are also not exhaustive, but are the major strands pulled out of my qualitative research. First, I as stated in chapter 3, aspects of a strong teacher collective efficacy, including a strong teacher-teacher relational trust levels and teachers feeling empowered to make important decisions about the work, cause teachers to feel a part of a successful team, enjoy where they work, and thus, want to return year after year. This collegial atmosphere reinforces teacher stability and vice-versa. Second, as chapter four discussed, the grade level teacher teams have created strong school systems that have engaged students in the life of the school and embedded them within dense teacher-student and student-student relationships. The resulting student buy-in leads to higher levels of engagement in the classrooms and less behavioral disruptions, for example. Teachers, then, need to react less to behavioral disruptions and feel like they teach more, and they have more positive and academic interactions with their students, as the teacher quotes in that chapter highlighted.
Third, WHEELS teachers say they generally feel supported and empowered by school’s administration. On these first three points, interestingly, the aforementioned NYU study found that the top three reasons middle school teachers left their schools were: 1) lack of student discipline; 2) lack of support from administration; and 3) wanting to have more influence over school policies.

Fourth, WHEELS’ teacher schedule could be classified as relatively “teacher friendly”. Teachers only teach about 90 students. In many other middle schools this load can be as high as 150 to 180 students resulting in hours more grading for each assignment as well as more time spent on planning, contacting families, etc. For example, when I taught at IS143M, the normal teaching load was 150 students, five classes of thirty students, and one year I had 180 students. Also, class periods at WHEELS are sixty-five minutes as opposed to the usual 45 minutes in other schools. This extra twenty minutes allows teachers to vary the structure of their lessons more, add rigor to lessons, take more time with individual students in class, re-teach, and allow for more student work time in class, all of which impact student achievement positively. One teacher recently told me that this was a major reason why she decided to work at WHEELS over other schools. This is a school structure that, because it is outside of union contract guidelines, is voted on every year by the teachers and every year it passes overwhelmingly, if not unanimously in the middle school. Another aspect of the teacher schedule is the team meeting time built in to the teaching day, already discussed in a previous chapters. Also, on Fridays students are dismissed an hour early and teachers meet in departments, or as an entire school, to engage in professional development sessions. It is sometimes said at the school that “you value what you schedule, and you schedule what you value”, and having these meetings for teams and
departments scheduled into the teaching day and not after school shows teachers that administration values teacher coordination, collaboration, empowerment, and communication. And lastly, although many teacher choose to run after school, Saturday, and summer programs during the year, they are not required to do so, as is the case in many charter schools. Teachers often say that one of the reasons they chose to teach at WHEELS rather than at a successful charter school is because of the need to have more of a work life-personal life balance, particularly, but not exclusively the teachers who are parents.

Fifth, there are opportunities for teacher leadership at WHEELS. This mostly comes in the form of the Team Leader and Department Leader positions. There are three Team Leaders, one per grade, and four Department Leaders, one per major subject. Furthermore, ELL and Special Education teachers in the middle school have leadership responsibilities regarding the services of their students. And, one former middle school teacher is now the middle school Assistant Principal. In sum, roughly half of the middle school teaching staff are in formal teacher leadership positions or have been in the past. Team Leaders and Department Leaders are compensated for their extra work, which formalized these positions even more as well.

Lastly, and related to my first point, there is a sense that success breeds success amongst the staff. In other words, it is nice to be a part of a successful team, and one where your colleagues are competent. Time and time again I hear from the teachers that they enjoy being a part of a school that works, and how important this is to their effectiveness in the classroom. This is similar to what I documented in the third chapter with how trust was built on the grade teams when they collectively have success on initiatives they have come up with regarding educating their students the right way.
In summary, this stability in the teaching force improves and supports instructional quality in a few ways. Individual teachers improve their practice over time, and the school generally makes a point to keep teachers in the same grade level and subject area year after year so that they can build on their knowledge of curriculum from year to year and improve their long-term plans, unit plans and lesson plans. This link between teacher experience and effectiveness is documented in the literature on teacher retention, and, while experience does not guarantee improving teacher effectiveness over time, as with much in education, it is a necessary but not sufficient condition.

Also, staff stability allows for experienced teachers to show new teachers to WHEELS exactly how things should occur at the granular level in the day to day teaching and learning processes. Take, as an example, the following quote from a teacher interview:

My first year at WHEELS on day 1, I remember…We had gone over the handbook in team meetings days before and talked about it a lot on the team, and I knew what having high expectations for student engagement meant at my old school…but it wasn’t until I saw it in action here that first day of school that I was like, ‘so that’s what they (WHEELS teachers) mean when they say body language check, and that’s what they mean when they say ‘all eyes on me’, they really mean all eyes on me every time…We had just brought the kids up from the gym and Taryn (a second year WHEELS teacher) was with me and the class, and I remember, I started giving directions to the class (of newly arrived sixth graders) and she stopped me right there and she said ‘I’m sorry Ms. Rogers, but we’re not moving on until we get 100% eyes up here and pencils down and everyone listening’, and I was like, “so that is what getting positive body language means”…and she was with me the entire first day…

Just watching her was very helpful seeing exactly how things are done here and what things are supposed to look like in real life…And I think, we’re (6th grade team of teachers) always doing that, like watching each other all of the time and influencing each other because we’re all (in the same area of the school) right next to each other and we’re in each other’s classrooms on our preps, and you just pick up stuff without even thinking about it. And then also when you want to pick stuff up too, when you are thinking about it, you just ask, we just ask each other, you know, to show me the best way to introduce this, or say this, or what’s working with this kid or that class, and then you go in to their class on your prep and watch… (Teresa, April 2013)
These informal teacher-teacher interactions of modeling, even mentoring, in some cases, compound with the formal structures of the grade teams, Team Leaders, departments and Department Leaders, and Instructional Coaches to encase new teachers to WHEELS within webs of support and modeling for effective pedagogy. The effects are to, as chapter 3 discussed, get them on the same page with colleagues regarding expectations for students and teachers throughout the day, as well as to support solid instruction and allow for teacher-teacher pedagogical conversations around effective practice to occur.

**Conclusion: Instructional Quality and Activating Social Capital**

This chapter brings the quality of instruction, some effective pedagogical techniques and strategies that WHEELS teachers hold about their work, and some school structures supporting teacher development, further into sociological conversations and research around student achievement. Leaving out analyses of the nature and quality of instruction from research performed on student achievement and engagement leaves partially unanswered why some students achieve at higher levels than others, and why some schools serving similar student populations can vary in terms of academic outcomes.

For example, take the work on the importance of social capital between students and teachers in schools. It is good and very important research for many reasons, one being that it “brings the school back in” (Valenzuela 1999) to understandings of low-income minority student engagement and achievement by analyzing part of the constellation of factors that reside at the nexus of institutional life and student academic orientations and learning. Yet, as Portes (1998) and Small (2009) have stated accurately in separate works, social capital must be “activated” in order for the benefits of acquiring resources within a given field to accrue to the recipient(s).
schools it is teachers who, influenced by organizational and socio-structural contexts, of course, can still perform this activation, socio-relationally as we saw last chapter, and academically as shown above through consistently implementing high quality instruction. When teachers do this effectively academic achievement improves. In other words, high quality instruction plus student engagement (discussed last chapter) will lead to student learning. Therefore, if we are really going to “bring the school back in” to the sociology of education, and to conversations about social capital, for example, we need to bring detailed descriptions and analyses of instructional quality and teacher effectiveness, and the school structures and socio-relational processes surrounding them, in with it.

The pendulum of education policy is beginning to swing back away from the harmful punitive accountability measures of No Child Left Behind and toward defining what good teaching is and how to develop and support it. For example, a 2010 New York Times op-ed piece by Elizabeth Green (New York Times Op-Ed, March 2, 2010) discussed a shift in mindsets regarding teacher preparation and development in a few of the nation’s top education schools towards a more pragmatic, clinical approach to teacher training. As this policy pendulum swings back, sociologists need to participate in these educational conversations in order to help provide the sociological context, complexity, and nuance about issues related to social inequality, poverty, organizational theory, and student achievement, within which teacher selection, training, development and retention policies are implemented. A lack of sociological understanding surrounding these educational topics will, I fear, lead to focusing on ineffective policies, obsessed with quantification and degrees removed from the classroom, which is exactly what we have seen over the past decade—a focus on evaluating teachers instead of smartly selecting and robustly developing them; a focus on standardized testing instead of quality
instruction and assessment; and a general degrading and simplifying of a profession rather than building up and spreading its knowledge and skill bases about what exactly works in the classroom.
Chapter 6: Conclusion: Organizational Embeddedness and Teachers

“The impassioned leadership and staff have partnered with students and families to co-construct a school culture that produces academic strivers who value their school community and one another.”

(Taken from the latest NYCDOE Quality Review for WHEELS, 2011-2012 school year)\(^\text{18}\)

There is no silver bullet for generating and sustaining high levels of student achievement and learning. We know that schools work well when they work collaboratively with all stakeholders including parents; foster safe, communal and orderly learning environments conducive to learning; support quality teaching and retain good teachers year after year; have strong “school culture/community” leadership at the student and teacher levels, and have strong instructional leadership at the teacher level; provide regular and effective instructional coaching and development opportunities; utilize a rigorous, standards-based curriculum; and use proven pedagogical practices across all classrooms. Schools also succeed when teachers are empowered and have a strong voice in school operations and available distributed leadership pathways/positions.

But it is not enough to make lists like these of broad principals, concepts, school structures, strategies, and practices/techniques. If we are truly to impact the quality of teaching and leading in schools we need to go deeper and unpack each concept to analyze when, where, why, and how each succeeds and/or fails. Many schools do some of the things listed above, but it seems that few are supported and structured to do them all very well.

Outside of school factors related to social inequality matter greatly in narrowing the opportunity structure for working class kids, as do inequalities between more well off and less well-off districts and schools (Darling Hammond 2010). As I discussed in the first chapter, these larger political, economic and social variables need to be addressed holistically by our society. Yet, while doing that, we also need to comprehensively improve factors operating within schools as well. Schools are complex organizations and the individual and collective expertise of the practitioners in a school building, the quality of the social relations they are engaged in, as well as the organizational (school structural) characteristics they are embedded within, all will determine how well a school runs day in and day out. The teaching and principal professions (including the sectoral infrastructure around them) have not been built up to high enough levels of professional quality on a large scale the way the fields of engineering and medicine have here in this country (Mehta 2013), or the way teaching has in a country such as Finland (Sahlberg, 2011). This is one reason, for example, we see IS143M, the struggling school sharing the same building as WHEELS, implementing teacher teaming less successfully than WHEELS does, or why we see schools within the same district or network sharing many common beliefs, strategies and schools structures but varying in terms of quality. WHEELS borrowed the grade-team model and the Team Leader position from IS143M, but the teams at WHEELS are much more cohesive, coordinated, collaborative and effective than at IS143M, partly because there is a critical mass of quality educators operating with the same shared beliefs and effective mindsets about teaching and learning, and with a certain base-line level of pedagogical expertise, all within supportive school structures that empower them on a daily basis. I say this having been a Team Leader at IS143 for two years.
Key Findings

I wrote this dissertation to dissect a successful, neighborhood public school to analyze at a granular level how it operates in order to contribute to a professional knowledge base of what works for educating kids in a low income community, from the classroom on out. WHEELS’ middle school is a model NYCDOE middle school as well as a model Expeditionary Learning school, one of the few chosen out of hundreds of schools in both networks. It has received recognition for its strong student achievement gains in articles and reports. And, its most recent NYCDOE qualitative review, called a Quality Review, described it as “well developed”, the highest designation a school can receive on this review.

Chapter 2 Findings Summary

Chapter Two’s presentation for the NYCDOE Progress Report data added quantitative support, and comparative analysis, to the claim that WHEELS’ is a high functioning school. WHEELS is one of the highest rated middle schools in the city, ranking on the Overall Progress Report Score in the 98th percentile for 2012-2013, the 96th percentile for 2011-2012, and the 85th percentile for 2010-2011, and a school where its students make some of the most academic growth in ELA and math out of any middle school in the city, sometimes at standard deviations above the mean.

Student Academic Progress: Breaking that down for 2011-2012, the latest publicly released Progress Report upon writing this dissertation, we see that WHEELS students make academic growth in ELA and math at some of the highest rates in the city. In 2011-2012, for example, their ELA median adjusted growth percentile was 70.5%, meaning that taken together as a student body (6th, 7th and 8th graders) WHEELS students’ ELA academic progress (growth) rate from one year to the next was in the 70.5th percentile in the city. This was nearly 1.5
standard deviations above the mean against peer group schools and just barely over one standard deviation above the mean against all city middle schools. Math academic progress scores were even more impressive. Here, WHEELS’ students median adjusted growth percentile was at the 75th percentile in the city. This was two standard deviations above the mean for peer group schools and also against all city schools, meaning that WHEELS’ students growth in math, according the NYS exams from year to year, was some of the highest in the city, out of almost four hundred middle schools.

*Student Academic Performance (proficiency)*: For straight academic proficiency, it is important to keep in mind that students enter WHEELS as some of the lowest performing students in the city on these state exams. WHEELS’ students’ 4th grade ELA average proficiency score (I do not have data on their 5th grade test scores) was at the 12.3rd percentile in the city and their 4th grade math average proficiency score was at the 27th percentile. With this in mind, in 2011-2012 WHEELS’ student body’s (6th, 7th and 8th grade combined) straight ELA average proficiency was 2.69 (on a scale of between 1.0 and 4.5, with the NYCDOE saying that 3.0 was “on grade level” for this test). This ranked at the 93.2 percentile compared to other schools in the peer group on straight ELA proficiency, approaching two standard deviations above the mean, but only at the 50th percentile for ELA proficiency compared to all city schools, right at the mean. Given that these students ranked at the 12.3 percentile in 4th grade, they have climbed almost forty percentile places against their citywide peers on this metric in the time they have been at WHEELS (minus their fifth grades, which were still at their elementary schools).

Regarding math proficiency, WHEELS’ students’ 4th grade elementary math proficiency scores, averaged, were at the 27th percentile in the city. In 2011-2012, their average proficiency score was 3.27 (on the same 1.0 to 4.5 scale, with 3.0 considered on grade level by the NYCDOE
on this test). This ranked at the 100th percentile, two standard deviations above the mean, against peer group schools, and at the 66th percentile against all city schools, above the average, but less than one standard deviation above it. Again, when compared to their 4th grade average proficiency scores at the 27th percentile, WHEELS students have climbed almost forty percentile points against their citywide peers since being in WHEELS (again, with the exception of their fifth grade year in the elementary schools).

Student Demographics: Many schools that are lauded for being high functioning do not have large numbers of student sub-populations that may need extra academic supports. A quick look at the Progress Report data show that some of the charter schools in New York City that score high do not have high numbers of English Language Learners (ELLS) for example, or show high rates of free or reduced priced lunch students, but have Economic Need Index numbers closer the city median--in other words, some educate the “richer of the poor”, reminding us that free and reduced priced lunch calculations extend well above 100% of the poverty line, as Baker and Ferris (2011) have documented elsewhere.

This is not the case for WHEELS. WHEELS is a non-charter, public, non-selective, neighborhood school that accepts the students that the district sends it. Usually school officials get the lists of students only weeks before the doors open for the September start of school. As such, WHEELS does not screen out any students at entry. In 2011-2012, WHEELS’ middle school had 27.8 percent of its students classified as English Language Learners (ELL), which ranked in the 89th percentile compared to all other city middle schools. It also had 20.8 percent of its students classified as Special Education students, which was in the 59th percentile in the city. In terms of socio-economics, WHEELS students ranked in the lowest 10% in the city on
the Economic Need Index (ENI), the metric the NYCDOE uses to measure socio-economic status, a more accurate statistic in this regard than the free and reduced priced lunch metric.

WHEELS, therefore, gets its strong student achievement results without “gaming the system” demographically. Its students represent the neighborhood in which it is situated, as was meant to be the case when it opened. Comparatively, it has one of the most impoverished student bodies in the city, one of the highest percentages of English Language Learners (ELLs), and an average number of special education students. It should be said here, again, that the NYCDOE adds in statistical weights to control for these student background factors, but because it is impossible to completely control for student demographics, as the NYCIBO report cited in Chapter 2 showed, WHEELS’ student achievement gains seem to be even more important to study.

Chapter 3 Findings Summary

So how is this done? The bulk of this dissertation explains this qualitatively, based on my years of experience working in the school, which I call informal and formal participant observation; interview data with students, teachers and administrators; and the NYCDOE Learning Environment surveys for students and parents. To start, the cohesive teacher professional community is the bedrock of the school’s success. Chapter 3 documents how it is created. I argued that WHEELS success rests on the collective, coordinated, collaborative expertise of its teachers. I called this concept teacher collective efficacy, a synthesis of Sampson’s (2012) concept of neighborhood collective efficacy and Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) concept of relational trust.

School structures/organization support teachers in building community with each other and coordinating with their colleagues. The first thing to consider here is that WHEELS started
from scratch as a small school of ten teachers, one principal and less than two hundred students. Most of its initial teachers (8 of the 10 total) and principal had all worked together at IS143M. In that large school, they were attracted to each other because they were of similar mindsets about teaching and learning. WHEELS is not a story of a turn-around school, in other words, and this matters because high levels of teacher coordination and cohesion around the school’s mission and the nature of the work of teaching were present from the beginning. That being said, upon that initial foundation, getting the right people on board each year continued to be vitally important. The hiring process, aligned to the school’s mission and shared beliefs about what makes good teachers and schools work, starts the work of building a coordinated an collaborative teacher community. Once like-minded teachers are hired, then the faculty handbook and professional development/meetings around it in the summers, initially, help to start WHEELS teachers off “on the same page” at the beginning of the school year. And, then moving throughout the year, school structures such as the teaming model (and teachers close proximity to each other’s classrooms), the Team Leader position, and two team meetings per week keep teachers cohesive and communicative.

Two other school structures I described in Chapter 5 involving instructional coaching, the work of Department Leaders in developing their teachers as well as the coaching of all new teachers to WHEELS by generalist instructional coaches, have also assisted in socializing and developing teachers around the expected effective mindsets and pedagogical/instructional practices expected of educators at WHEELS. And, low teacher turnover strengthens all of this by building up capacity on the grade levels and in departments in which established WHEELS teachers guide new teachers to the school as well as model effective practice for them in numerous ways. All of these school structures embed WHEELS’ teachers within tight-knit
vertical (subject level departments) and horizontal (grade-teams) professional layers that have the effect of supporting them, developing them, and informally socializing them to “what it means to be a WHELS teacher”.

Getting teachers on the same page and then keeping them on the same page through the year, keeping them coordinated, communicative, collaborative, supportive, and empowered to make important instructional decisions to the benefit of their students, requires and also supports a foundation of relational trust. Relational trust is the glue that holds the community together, as Bryk and Schneider first described for us. And, my research here documents high levels of relational trust between teachers in departments and on the same grade levels primarily because the school is organized to facilitate such trust building processes. Selecting like-minded teachers to work at WHEELS on the front-end makes the work of collaborating on teacher teams much more likely to succeed and be productive later on. Success, collaboratively, then reinforces relational trust as teachers feel a part of a strong, cohesive team and see the positive impacts of their collective efforts reflected in positive student engagement and achievement gains. This was a fifth dimension of relational trust my research uncovered. Summing up the centrality of adults working together in schools, Bryk and Schneider (2002) said, “Good schools are intrinsically social enterprises that depend heavily on cooperative endeavors among the varied participants who comprise the school community” (144). Rightly so, and I would just add that here that teacher cooperation depends heavily on the organizational characteristics they are embedded in.

However the literature on relational trust did not capture all I was witnessing among the teachers at WHEELS. The sustainment of trust throughout the year, and particularly the forces keeping teachers “on the same page” with even the smallest details related to student engagement, organization, and achievement throughout the school day, meant that other
mechanisms of informal social control were at work, otherwise, teachers would fragment, particularly when the work got tough. Here, the concept of collective efficacy added a temporal dimension to relational trust building and explained for me how teachers kept trusting each other over time and kept coordinated, communicative and collaborative—how they “stayed on the same page” throughout the year. Teacher collective efficacy combined the concepts of social cohesion, or trust broadly speaking, with informal social control, coalescing individuals around certain agreed upon community values, shared beliefs and best practices.

I view the school structures at WHEELS described above as facilitating this informal social control. The Team Leader position, a teacher leader position which is charged with leading the student community building efforts on each grade, encompasses many of the responsibilities assistant principals do at other schools. This teacher distributed leadership position is probably the most important in the school currently, the most demanding, clearly, and teachers look up to them and highly respect them. They are experienced WHEELS teachers who have been at the school for three years or more, and they work right alongside the teachers, teaching the same kids all day long, with leadership responsibilities added on. The example these teachers set for other teachers is enough by itself for other teachers on their grades to follow their lead and keep consistent with the school policies, practices and expectations that are in place (again, the hiring process assists with this by screening out candidates with different general mindsets), as well as to collaborate productively on important decisions regarding their students. Team Leaders walk the walk with the teachers and students. They are the proactive presence for school community and culture building, and teacher leadership. The same can be said, somewhat, for Department Leaders around topics of instructional leadership, but because departments interact much less than teams do, to a lesser but still significant extent.
In summary, then, I have called these social processes that encompass coordinated, cohesive, communicative, empowered teacher teams, *teacher collective efficacy*, the next frontier of relational trust, one that explains how trust and coordination around shared beliefs and practices is sustained over time in a teacher professional community throughout the school year, by linking such social processes and interpersonal interactions up to WHEELS’ organization, its school structures. Thus, this chapter answered the *how* and *why* questions (highlighting the social mechanisms at work) about relational trust and teacher collective efficacy building and sustainment at WHEELS.

*Chapter 4 Findings Summary*

My findings in Chapter 4 build off of this concept of teacher collective efficacy and discusses how a strong student learning community—student engagement, positive teacher-student relationships, etc.—is forged within the school by the grade level teams of teachers. I could not explain teacher-student relationships at WHEELS without first discussing how teacher come to get on the same page and work together effectively, because it is the collective aspect of the work of teachers engaging with students that is the key to high levels of student engagement and achievement. Over the past few decades, much has been written about the importance of teacher-student relationships, social capital, and the like, but my findings at WHEELS document that this school is as successful as it is because these teacher-student social relations are driven by a coordinated community of teachers, which offers strong levels of consistency, predictability, and security to students throughout each day—what I call *school-based social closure*, an extension of Coleman’s original concept bringing it into the school between teachers of the same students—all foundational to trust building between students and teachers. In other words, students are embedded with dense social networks with their teacher and are constantly
receiving micro-messages that they are valued, cared for, that school is serious and important, that learning is fun and relevant, among many others.

Specifically, I showed in chapter 4 how the teams of teacher build relationships with students and “school connectedness” with students, and essentially define the school as a positive institution in the students’ eyes, both socially and academically. This is very important for WHEELS students because for too many of their elementary schools were not that. My theory of student engagement in this chapter rests on the notion that two foundational axes underlie how connected students feel to school and, therefore, how much they will buy in to (engage positively in) classroom life. These two axes are a socio-relational axis and an academic axis. Along the socio-relational axis, my findings showed that teacher-student relationships are very important. Adolescent students need to feel connected to their teachers, seen by them, trusted by them, and safe and secure. They want to know that the adults in the school care for them and this needs to be proven often. Along the academic axis, students need to feel academically successful and to see regular academic success. This builds confidence that generates higher levels of effort in class. This chapter showed how teachers on the grade teams work along both strands of this axis of student connectedness/engagement.

Again, this is done collectively by teachers engaging in the same or very similar pedagogical practices across the classrooms on the same grade and communicating about their students often, so that from a student perspective positive interactions build up every day and are cumulative (outweighing “negative” experiences), and resulting in feelings of solidarity/community and connectedness to teachers and the school at large. I referenced works of “positive psychology” in this chapter to discuss how teachers think about how strategic they should be regarding their micro-interactions as they celebrate learning and try to build positive
relationships with all of their students. As with the last chapter, school organization/structures, and now teacher collective efficacy as well, generating school based social closure, set teachers up to have success in these endeavors. I concluded this chapter by taking an organizational embeddedness perspective, from Small’s (2009) research, and applying it to WHEELS’ inner-workings as a way to describe how building relationships (social capital connections) between teachers and students is facilitated by school structures/organizational characteristics, and teacher collective efficacy, which itself is also facilitated by the school organizational characteristics and structures described in chapter 3. In doing so I answered some underexplored sociological questions regarding how, and under what organizational conditions, social capital is actually built and sustained within schools by teachers.

Chapter 5 Summary of Findings

While the health of the social relations within schools is vitally important to school success, a critical mass of instructional quality across teacher practice must be present as well. If we think of chapter 3 as explaining how a strong, coordinated WHEELS teacher community is created and sustained, and chapter 4 as how a strong, engaged student learning community (resulting in high levels of student engagement) is created and sustained, then chapter 5 adds the instructional dimension to what I call a teacher centered theory of school context, one that can be used to understand variability in school quality between schools with similar demographics. At WHEELS, strong instruction is supported by the strong learning communities—students are more engaged in classes; there is more class time spent on learning; there is consistency between teachers regarding pedagogical practices and common language/vocabulary deepening student understanding and skill fluency, etc.—and strong instruction supports a positive school
community as well as teachers and students feel more successful and buy in to school more as a result.

In this chapter I laid out just a few important pedagogical practices and the school structures that support them. I did this in order to add to a much-needed conversation in sociology about quality instruction and the granular aspects of particular instructional techniques that can either make or break a strategy. In other words, to add to the building up of a knowledge and skill base for the profession of teaching, a profession that needs to be developed more deeply and the needs to spread detailed best practices more widely. I also described some of the instructional techniques and strategies operating in the school because, in keeping with the major theme from the previous chapters of organizational embeddedness, instructional techniques specifically, and teacher quality generally at WHEELS, are supported, again, by school structures, teacher leadership roles operating within such structures, and teacher collective efficacy as well. The subject level departments, led by the Department Leaders, experienced teachers within each subject, lead the subject level long-term (curriculum) and unit planning, as well as important professional development sessions about effective subject-specific pedagogical practices. Furthermore, Department Leaders and Instructional Coaches develop teachers through weekly, or bi-weekly, lesson observation and feedback cycles.

Teacher practice at WHEELS is embedded within these school structures and distributed leadership roles that positively impact instructional quality. Teachers, in other words, develop their crafts as educators in community with other teachers, and within consistent school structures (observation and feedback cycles are weekly and departments meet weekly as well). And, to go back to the theme of chapter 3, these mechanisms, again, are also mechanisms of
informal social control operating to keep teachers consistent and coordinated behind effective practices and mindsets about effective teaching and learning.

There is not much question these days that teacher quality is the most important within school variable influencing student achievement. My work contextualizes the concept of teacher quality and places it within a collective/communal and organizational framework, it is a collective teacher centered theory of school context, and represents the core of what is central to the school’s success, the coordination, cohesion, empowerment, and expertise of WHEELS’ teacher community and the organizational structures that support them in developing and being effective day in and day out.

Implications for Sociological Theory: Organizational Embeddedness and Schools

How do teachers come to get and stay on the same page over time in executing effective pedagogical techniques and carrying out school policies helpful to creating a positive learning environment, and how are they successfully empowered to do so? How do teachers build relationships with students and connect them with the school as a place of support and care, and with the classroom as a place where academic success is normalized and academic confidence grows? How do teachers and teacher-leaders support, develop, and reflect upon each other’s instructional skill sets? What role do school structures and teacher leadership roles play in these processes? And, how does teacher collective efficacy pull all of this together and keep it tight throughout the year so that teachers are set up to have relational and academic success with their students? I answered these questions in chapters 3, 4, and 5, and in doing so, described the nature of the work of teachers and students, and the relationships between them, as embedded within, and therefore shaped by, the organizational particularities of WHEELS’ middle school.
Following from Small’s (2009) organizational embeddedness perspective originating out of his study of how childcare centers “broker”, to use his term, social capital connections between individuals frequenting the centers, I argue that the work of teachers is a collective enterprise and one that cannot be effectively detached from its organizational context. Organizations matter, school context matters. Yet, adding to this perspective, I also recognize the importance of instructional quality and teacher professional expertise and craft. A safe, cohesive school culture does not necessarily lead to student learning; a happy, or comfortable, school is not necessarily a school where learning happens best. Teacher quality is very important, and at WHEELS it is supported by coaching structures and the department structure that develop teacher practice within the domains of planning and instruction. Coupling this instructional work with the work of the teams in building strong grade level communities of engaged students results in minimal disruptions to the learning environment of classrooms, the maximizing of time and student focus on academic tasks, and more net-positive and academically focused teacher-student interactions, creating the sense in students’ eyes that school is a place they are recognized and connected to, are successful in, and enjoy.

Within this organizational embeddedness perspective of the work of teachers, we can then reflect upon sociological theories about relational trust, collective efficacy, and social capital from an interesting direction, one that recognizes school context in a way that can be helpful to practitioners working in schools. For example, as stated previously, my work in chapter 3 answered *how* relational trust is built and sustained by certain school structures at WHEELS. Coupling trust with collective efficacy theory highlighted the work that school structures and teacher-leader roles do over the school year in supporting teachers in engaging in collective endeavors that results in stronger teacher-student relationships and academic growth in
classes. In essence, then, I answered a question of how relational trust is built and sustained, and then also how it then reinforces teacher coordination. Chapter 4 did a similar thing, answering the question of how teachers actually collectively build relationships with students, and thereby, forge strong levels of engagement in classes, particularly through specific socio-relational and instructional pedagogical techniques applied across teacher practice, frequent communication, as well as school structures such as community meetings involving strategic messaging around celebrating academic success and community. And, chapter 5 discussed how certain school structures run by empowered teacher-leaders, and shared practices around effective instructional techniques, operate to support peers (other teachers) in developing their crafts as educators.

Taken together, I believe that these chapters have outlined major *how* and *why* questions within these larger sociological conversations around social inequality and schooling, and how to construct schools to be welcoming and effective sites of “buffering” and actual “counter-stratification” (Stanton Salazar 2001) to the forces of social inequality by creating zones of care and academic growth, as embodied in WHEELS’ middle school, and forged by the collective work that its teachers do each day.

School leaders are thirsty for specific answers to issues they see on the ground in their schools. For example, a professional development session on the importance of relational trust will be much more helpful if it discusses also how school leaders operating in strong schools actually build and sustain such trust at a granular level—what detailed policies, practices and school structures create trust, and what pitfalls to avoid. There are practitioner books that do this type of work (for two examples used at WHEELS see Bambrick Santoyo, 2012; and Marshall 2009), but we need to link up the practitioner world with the work of educational researchers
engaged in equally important work on the sociology and social psychology underlying the everyday work of teachers, students and school leaders.

**Implications for Education Policy**

Regarding the field of education and education policy, over the past few years the educational landscape has become increasingly politicized and polemic. Clear sides have been drawn. Columbia University education professor Diane Ravitch (2010, 2013) represents one side of the debate and argues regularly on her blog that public education is under attack from market driven forces of privatization, manifesting themselves in misguided and dangerous policies such as expanding charters, eroding the power of teacher unions, rating teachers using value-added test score measures, closing failing schools, and imposing teacher merit-pay incentive structures. Former Washington DC education Chancellor Michelle Rhee could be said to represent the other pole, and favors just those sorts of policies that Ravitch calls out as unjust. From Rhee’s point of view, there is a crisis in the teaching profession regarding teacher quality, and quantitatively measuring student outcomes using standardized testing and value added measures of teacher effectiveness, rewarding teachers whose students make growth on tests, and evaluating and then firing teachers whose students do not make sufficient progress, will combine to purge the teaching ranks of incompetence. From this position, anything that gets in the way of this professional cleansing of “poor” teachers, including teacher unions, is akin to supporting an unacceptable status quo.

In general agreement with Mehta (2013), Darling-Hammond (2010) and Sahlberg (2011), I challenge this dichotomous construction of the policy conversations swirling on the blogs and opinion pages today, and offer an alternative perspective, influenced by their arguments about the centrality of teacher quality, and rooted in my work and research at
WHEELS over the past seven years. Rather than see the conversation as a typical left versus right argument (or labor versus capital, if you will), I see WHEELS as serving as an example of what can happen when teachers are carefully selected around identified mindsets and shared beliefs, developed around identified effective instructional strategies and techniques, and supported and empowered within strategic and responsive school structures. This view of education policy understands the complexity and depth of the teaching and school leadership professions. It addresses issues of quality teacher and principal selection into the profession, practitioner skill set and knowledge-base development (including the identification, acceptance and dissemination of effective techniques and strategies), effective training and retention strategies, and the construction of schools (and districts) that embed teachers within supportive and empowering professional infrastructures. In other words, it emphasizes the building up of the teaching and school leader professions and placing this at the center of school reform moving forward.

By contrast, reforms advocated by Rhee, and those for that matter encompassed by No Child Left Behind for example, focus more on peripheral issues that may indirectly influence teacher and principal quality, such as “back-end” (Mehta 2013) teacher value added measures of teacher accountability, vouchers and other forms of “choice” measures, or the implementation of punitive standardized testing policies. Also by contrast, Ravitch, in her attempts to defend public education does not place enough emphasis on the fact that the teaching profession does indeed need to be built up, and that improving teacher and principal quality is central to improving schools, particularly for low income kids who do not live within webs of socio-economic
privilege, and therefore rely on schools to work well as they climb the American opportunity structure.\textsuperscript{19}

In rejecting the pro-business vs. pro-labor dichotomous construction of the debates around present day educational initiatives, and instead by focusing on building up the teacher and principal professions and the organizational structures of schools so they are supportive of teacher expertise, collaboration, development, and empowerment, WHEELS’ middle school serves as an example of what can be possible moving forward, for all of the reasons I have previously mentioned. WHEELS is proof that a public non-charter, non-selective, neighborhood school can work, and work just as well, or in most cases even better than, better funded charter schools that can select and deselect their students and teachers without the NYCDOE regulations unionized schools are bound to\textsuperscript{20}. While the teachers’ unions do need to reform, the problem isn’t with the concept of a teachers’ union, as Rhee and former NYC schools chancellor, Joel Klein, and others in their camp make it seem. WHEELS teachers are unionized, and WHEELS works. Good charter schools and good non-charter schools share some of the same characteristics, and WHEELS has borrowed effective practices, policies, and school structures from both types of schools. The point is that it is about, at the end of the day, what happens in a school to support and develop teachers in being as effective and intentional as possible in the instruction, assessment, engagement and support of their students. Schools that have figured out ways to do this, regardless of their type, are more successful than those that have not.

\textsuperscript{19} Mehta (2013) argued for this approach, and called this policy dichotomy “thick” education policy, policies that build up the teaching profession, as opposed to “thin” education policy, policies that direct their attention to more peripheral (outside of classroom) accountability and choice measures.

\textsuperscript{20} Baker and colleagues’ 2011 and 2012 reports on charter school funding and spending found that some charter networks in New York City spend thousands more per pupil than New York City district public schools do.
This leads to an understanding that teacher quality is partially a collective and organizational property, influenced by the mindsets, quality and coordination of the other teachers around a given teacher as well as the organizational health and context of each school’s learning environment (including principal quality). Take an excellent teacher in an excellent school and embed him/her within a dysfunctional school, and s/he, while still being very good at the craft and masters of technique, could likely see a decrease in his/her effectiveness because of the organizational chaos around him/her—kids coming in late to class, more behavioral disruptions/students more oppositional in class, less coordination between teachers, inconsistencies in school policy implementation, shorter class periods (less time with kids), more students, lack of materials and resources, etc.

What this means for educational policy regarding measuring teacher quality, for example, is that such organizational factors should be taken in to account when we think about teacher effectiveness. Linda Darling Hammond (2010) has made similar points to argue for more holistic, robust, and methodologically varied teacher evaluation systems. Other scholars studying the teaching profession have as well. For example, writing on the importance of teacher professional communities Louis, Marks and Kruse (1996) wrote:

“Our analysis suggests that many national, state, and local policies designed to increase teacher job performance may be insufficient, at least, by themselves. To give just one example, the current movements of “systematic reform” and “teacher professionalization” emphasize the upgrading of individual teacher skills and knowledge and clearer systems of external accountability through more standardized curriculum and testing. Our study does not contest the importance of these factors (and affirms the importance of professional development), but it points to the need to include, in addition, emphasis on the local development of schools as healthy, professionally sustaining environments in which teachers are encouraged to do their best job.” (787)
Conclusion

In conclusion, this study described how the students in WHEELS’ middle school succeed. It provides a potential example for improving academic achievement in similar schools by focusing on building strong, empowered school-based teacher professional communities, coordinated around shared beliefs and effective pedagogical techniques and policies, and embedded within supportive and responsive school structures. WHEELS exemplifies what can be done in public middle schools under certain conditions. Identifying excellent schools serving low-income students, researching the structures, policies and practices at work within them that support high levels of student engagement and achievement, and then responsively replicating what works, are some of the foundational steps in the building of better public schools for all students from the ground up.
References


