Exacerbating Inequality: Public Schooling in the Era of Neoliberal Standardization

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EXACERBATING INEQUALITY:
PUBLIC SCHOOLING IN THE ERA OF NEOLIBERAL STANDARDIZATION

by

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

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT
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By
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This work is inspired by Jean Anyon’s (1981) landmark ethnographic study, “Social Class and School Knowledge” in which she detailed the differential and class-based constructions of knowledge across five elementary schools. While this research study in no way aims to be a revision of Anyon’s work, it uses her findings to set a foundational premise that curriculum and instruction often work to contribute to the reproduction of social class. Further, this research builds on these findings to examine and analyze social class reproduction in the current neoliberal policy context of standards-based reform. A key policy shift since Anyon’s research is that public school “outsiders”—policymakers, universities, and for-profit companies together are responsible for curricular and assessment design, leaving school “insiders”—the teachers—significantly absent from key decision-making processes. These reforms have re-imagined a corporate vision of public education in the name of civil rights. After spending six months researching across two schools—one high-poverty and steeped in this standardized reform framework, and the other middle-class and staunchly against it—this researcher concluded that students attending high-poverty schools were more likely to face an impoverished, narrow curriculum, in support of Anyon’s findings from over thirty years ago. Social class and educational quality continue to be bound. This illustrates the failure of standardization to meet its central promise of creating a more equitable school system. This work traces
some of the co-opting of key terms in the movement for standardization—namely accountability, meritocracy, and equity, and the fallacies behind their usage in the current context of high-stakes, top-down policy. Four major findings emerged during this research. First, standardized testing is an inequitable system of assessment, which ignores the role of context—social class, language, and cultural capital in a child’s experience and the impact these have on one’s overall educational success. Second, standardized tests don’t contribute to teacher knowledge about their students. Despite their uselessness for educators, they continue to play a high-stakes role in the lives of children. Third, the imposition of standardization creates an apparatus of assessment and curriculum that is mechanical, skills-based, and often meaningless for students and teachers. This is in contrast with a school freed from standardization, where the curriculum and assessments are authentic, teacher-created, and meaningful. Last, standardization pushes a very narrow set of values in schools and in society, forcing attention away from the humanity of education. There are critical implications for teachers, students, and our democracy as a whole. Teachers are in the process of a complete de-professionalization, while students are labeled and categorized, disciplined or rewarded, based on a dangerously limited set of assumptions. A key underpinning of the standards-based reform movement is that the creation and testing of standards will increase equity, and the intention of this work is to challenge that common-sense notion. Furthermore, the language and actions behind and within this movement threaten the very fabric of our democracy. These two school contexts paint nearly opposite portraits of what we, as a society, value. In conclusion, social class remains an important determiner of the quality of education a child will receive, and therefore of the chances that one’s social class will be reproduced. Rather
than mitigating inequality, standardization exacerbates it. It is dangerous to leave
questions of education to policymakers and corporate interests. We must, as a community
of educators with boots on the ground, determine what schools will value— and how to
best demonstrate those values through our teaching and learning.
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A DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Joan Panetti. Mom, you instilled in me a deep appreciation for education, and you showed me by example what it means to be a tremendous teacher. I love and cherish you. Thank you.

For my boys, Joaquin & Mateo. You make me want to me the best version of myself everyday. I love you with all my heart.

And to my wife, my love, Caridad Caro, a fierce educator of courage and commitment. Your strength lifts me up. Without you, this work would never have been possible. Thank you for your constant support over these years, for being an exceptional parent to our two boys, for taking such good care of them when I needed to work on this thing, and for always believing in me, even when I was filled with self-doubt. I love you, always.
Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.

—*Let America Be America Again* (1935), Langston Hughes
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Personal Entry Into This Work

I began my career as a classroom teacher in a high-poverty school in the South Bronx in 2005. I eventually moved to another low-income school with greater resources in East Harlem, and then moved once more to an elite private school in Westchester County, New York. I have seen and experienced first-hand the ways in which social class mediates the unequal distribution of policy and its consequences. Before entering the Ph.D. program in Urban Education at the Graduate Center, I clearly recognized this inequality, but I lacked a deep level of analytic understanding. That said, I entered this program distinctly interested in the impact of policy on practice, and on the role of policy in creating equitable or inequitable schools. Since then, my focus on inequity has and developed more fully, and I have gained much greater structural awareness. In my first year, I had the great fortune of taking a course with Jean Anyon during the last year of her life. In a twist of what some would call fate, I had read her book *Ghetto Schooling* in college, and it was one of the texts that inspired me to enter the field of public education. In Anyon’s course, we read her seminal article “Social Class and School Knowledge”, which would later become the foundational text for this work.

Because of my reading and teaching experiences, I knew then that education was not implemented equally among all socioeconomic contexts. Since the publication of this article, however, the educational policy landscape in the United States has shifted dramatically. Neoliberalism has penetrated the educational landscape in much deeper ways than perhaps even Anyon could have anticipated thirty years ago. Anyon was writing “Social Class and School Knowledge” just before the publication of “A Nation at
Risk,” and years before the federal government would intervene dramatically in educational policy through No Child Left Behind, the Common Core Standards, Race to the Top, and the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Neoliberal policy and swelling economic and social inequality ushered in a new era in urban education. Thus, I wanted to approach inequity among schools as Anyon so brilliantly did, but through a policy lens. The policies that are the focus of this work are standardized testing and standardized curriculum.

Today, in public schools across the country, teachers contend with educational policies of standardized testing and curriculum that are framed in at least three fundamental ways: as neutral and objective forms of assessment; as increasing the accountability of our educational system; and, partly as a result of this enhanced accountability, as creating equity and opportunity for greater numbers of students, particularly those who are non-white or low-income. As a teacher myself, I found that this framing did not match the reality I knew. I wanted to investigate this further.

For this research, I began with a few basic ideas, including: What do teachers think of standardized testing and curriculum? How do these policies play out in different social class contexts? Does social class matter? Because my own teaching had been comparative among different social class contexts and I had experienced significant distinctions from one school to the next with regards to the student body and the curricular and pedagogical realities within the school, I wanted to research further and determine whether these important differences existed in other parts of New York City. I was never looking for generalities, but perhaps there were enough commonalities to make a case.
Dissertation Research: An Overview

Goals & Contributions

I spent six months researching the impacts of standardized testing and standardized curriculum across two contrasting social class settings. I sought to understand how these two policies wove together to impact teaching and learning in elementary schools, and to understand how teachers made sense of these policies. When Common Core Standards were first developed and rolled out in 2008-2009, they were immediately tied to new standardized tests. Because of this relationship, curricula were developed in order to prepare students for the tests. For this reason, it felt inauthentic to examine testing as disconnected from curriculum or vice versa. These two policies intertwined to create a curricular and pedagogical apparatus designed to control teaching and learning in public schools.

The problem is not simply the use of standards or standardized tests in education; in fact, there is evidence to support the implementation of standards for teachers as well as students, and there are examples of tests that are meaningful and helpful as well. Rather, the issue is the totalitarian power that together, standardized testing and standardized curriculum have come to wield, particularly within public elementary schools. This apparatus of hegemony leverages crucial decisions with solely one metric; takes professionalism away from educators while placing greater power in the hands of corporate interests; fails to account for or to help alleviate the vast social and racial inequities that exist and actually exacerbates those inequalities; and, finally, supports capitalist and racist structures that view particular students as products to be developed or
discarded. Ultimately, this apparatus contributes to a two-tiered educational system that consistently fails low-income students of color while blaming teachers and schools.

Current high-stakes standardized testing and curriculum began to be framed as a cure for our educational ills with the publication of “A Nation at Risk” in 1983. It became entrenched in our public schools with the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002, the Common Core Learning Standards in 2008-2009, and Race to the Top in 2012. The Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, was signed into law on December 10th, 2015, by then-President Barack Obama. These are the benchmarks for this work.

This research will contribute to the field in a number of ways. First, this work documents the impact of policy on practice, and the role of policy in contributing to an unequal educational landscape for our children, with an emphasis on social class. As Linda Darling-Hammond (1995) wrote: “without acknowledgement that students experience very different educational realities, policies will continue to be based on the presumption that it is students, not their schools or classroom circumstances, that are the sources of unequal educational attainment” (p. 465). In unpacking the paramount role of policy in schools and classrooms, this research shifts the focus from individual failure to systemic injustice and economic inequality.

Second, this work employs what Michelle Fine and Lois Weis call “critical bifocality” (2012), defined:

…as a theory of method in which researchers try to make visible the sinewy linkages or circuits through which structural conditions are enacted in policy and reform institutions as well as the ways in which such conditions come to be woven into community relationships and metabolized by individuals (p. 174).

In attempting to uncover the ways in which these policies are “metabolized” by teachers, this work examines policy through their experiences and words, through the individuals
who are enacting and resisting these demands in classrooms today. Furthermore, research within education “must be placed within a historic and structural analysis of injustice [and]…peer behind the drapes that hide the strategic coproduction of privilege and disadvantage” (Fine & Weis, 2012, p. 175). I work to illuminate the purposeful planning of both standardized testing and the creation of standards, and the vested corporate interests in both. In taking up this critical and complex task, this work situates schools today within a broader, neoliberal political economy. Furthermore, it nests policy in a long history of racist standardization practices that have always benefited white students, thereby erasing and discounting black and brown bodies from the educational sphere.

This research therefore challenges the “neutrality” of policy; the unequal consequences of educational policy must be attended to. Put simply, education does not stand alone. A deeply important goal of this work is to create a rich tapestry that involves both our history and our present-day struggles and hopes to illuminate “circuits of privilege and dispossession” (Fine & Weis, 2012, p. 174) and the ways in which macro structures and individual lives intertwine.

Third, this research hopes to build on Jean Anyon’s deeply important work “Social Class and School Knowledge” (1981), an effort that has not yet been fully undertaken. It is an overdue quest. In 2011 Allan Luke, a scholar at Queensland University of Technology in Australia, published an article on this very subject urging a revisiting of Anyon’s work in our current policy context. He concluded: “The key policies of scripted, standardized pedagogy risk offering working-class, cultural and linguistic minority students precisely what Anyon presciently described: an enacted curriculum of basic skills, rule recognition and compliance” (Luke, 2011, p. 180). The
combination of unease among middle-class families fostering a growing, incessant push to maintain class status for one’s children (while further dispossessing low-income families) (Fine & Weis, 2012), the hegemonic high-stakes policies threatening greater stratification and competition among students, and the swelling tide of economic inequality and insecurity, make this a historic moment for studying the intersections of educational policy and social class on the ground.

Fourth, and also building on Anyon’s work, the voices of teachers will be central. While much of the research on policy is written by foundations, organizations, and politicians, this research will prioritize the experiences and narratives of voices on the ground—those enacting, resisting, and wrestling with these policies day to day. Teachers play a fundamental role in the ways in which policy and ideology are enacted and resisted on the ground; as the landscape has become more punitive, teachers have been placed in incredibly complicated positions, as they may face serious sanctions if their schools, or their own students, “fail.” Their voices, experiences, and beliefs tell a story about policy that is essential in order to painting a full picture of these large-scale, macro undertakings.

Last, this work aims to unmask and challenge widely held beliefs about major concepts and ideologies within education—namely, the concepts of neutrality, meritocracy, accountability, and equity. This work will focus on these key terms, and trace the way they have been co-opted by powerful neoliberal groups to invoke certain core beliefs while promoting harmful action. In many instances, these words have taken on meanings that are simply false. We have been placed into boxes and binaries, and this work seeks a way out.
Revisiting Jean Anyon’s “Social Class and School Knowledge”

In 1981 Jean Anyon published her important work, “Social Class and School Knowledge,” which this study uses as a foundational text. Anyon conducted case studies of five elementary schools in contrasting social class settings in New Jersey, finding that, despite some standardization in terms of the curriculum-in-use and topics covered, there were both small and much more profound distinctions in the teaching, curriculum, and conceptions of knowledge from one setting to another. The kinds of work students engaged in, and their ideas about knowledge and about themselves as a result of that work, largely differed. In her words, “social stratification of knowledge is still possible (Anyon, 1981, p. 4).” These differences have major implications for society. Anyon conducted qualitative research in two schools she deemed to be working-class, one middle-class, one she called affluent professional, and one executive elite (1981, p. 5). From her research, she chose a dominant theme to represent each environment. The theme in the working-class schools was *resistance*; in the middle-class school it was *possibility*; in the affluent professional school it was *narcissism*; and in the executive elite it was *excellence*. These themes are quite telling in terms of the distinctions in curriculum, knowledge construction, and expectations for students.

In each school, Anyon asked both school personnel and students what knowledge means and where it comes from. Responses varied significantly among the schools, and notions of knowledge corresponded with the students’ social class. In the working-class schools, students understood knowledge as something that comes from books or teachers; some referred to knowledge as “skills” and “worksheets” (p. 10). In the middle-class school students referred to knowledge as “remembering,” “smartness,” or “intelligence”
and mentioned going to museums or studying ancestors (p. 15). In the affluent professional school, students discussed knowledge as thinking, in direct contrast to the working-class schools where children never used that term (p. 20). Many more children in the affluent professional school than in the working-class schools agreed that you could make knowledge. Finally, in the executive elite school, students also discussed thinking and making knowledge, and suggested inventing something or experimenting (p. 29)—evidence of active learning.

In the two working-class schools, Anyon found that the work was generally procedural, mechanistic, and lacking in creativity. The texts that teachers chose contained less information than in the more elite schools, and they were generally less intellectually challenging and stimulating. Teachers used the words “simple” and “basic” to describe their work with students (p. 7). Tasks were more routine, rather than inquiry-based or student-centered. Content was fact-oriented; teachers often asked students for pieces of information. Despite this emphasis on facts, however, Anyon found that the social-studies knowledge in these schools was the least “honest” (p. 9). In her interviews with children in these schools, she found that a majority believed they were not smart enough to attend college. These students were never asked to “think,” and they largely believed that knowledge could be found in their teachers or perhaps in books. They, themselves, were not the bearers and developers of knowledge. In the affluent professional and professional elite schools, a sharp contrast emerged. The curriculum and teachers in these schools focused on individual discovery, creativity, and critical thinking, versus rote memorization of facts. Students were absolutely expected to develop new knowledge rather than rely on their teachers for it. Students experienced independence and
experimentation, unlike the students in the working-class schools who needed teacher affirmation of their answers. Students and teachers in these schools frequently discussed the importance of thinking, and they were able to be more critical of, for example, U.S. history. While students in the elite school were being groomed for leadership and were already viewed as leaders by their teachers, students in the working-class schools were highly controlled and viewed in terms of their deficits. Thus, an incredibly problematic picture of unequal schooling in the United States emerges in this piece. Anyon concluded that the social class context of a school was a major indicator of how curriculum would be utilized and how knowledge would be constructed.

In each environment, Anyon analyzed the ways in which the curriculum was reproductive. For working-class students, the chances of social change seemed slim, as the knowledge they were exposed to was largely mechanical and void of meaning or connection to their own lives and histories. Furthermore, their resistance to school “was destructive to themselves” (p. 33). In the middle-class school, Anyon found that both the commodification of knowledge and the belief in oneself were reproductive (p. 34). In the affluent professional school, children were taught their own history, (the history of those in power), thereby legitimizing that power and providing students with this cultural capital (p. 35). The same was true in the executive elite school.

Essentially, Anyon found that teacher expectations, curriculum usage, and conceptions of knowledge all varied depending on the school’s social class setting. Most distressing was Anyon’s finding that schools tended to reproduce the social class of the students, thus upending traditional and highly valued concepts of meritocracy and social mobility.
However, she made sure to point out that ideological hegemony is not secure (p. 38), and that social class stereotypes are by no means inevitable. She concludes, in part, that “schools [reproduce] the tensions and conflicts of the larger society” (p. 38). So, while reproduction plays a definite role in Anyon’s work as well as my own, it does not define people. The use of reproduction as a lens does not mean that people are powerless or lack agency.

This dissertation takes the stance that over thirty years after Anyon’s study, her work is still tremendously relevant. Times have changed of course, and standardized testing and curricular packages are now, in many cases, the norm. The relationship between testing and curricula determines what knowledge is, what knowledge is important, and who decides what knowledge will exist in schools. When Anyon was conducting her case study, textbooks played a fundamental role in these determinations, as did teachers. In our current context, testing and the test creators have assumed the dominant decision-making power; textbooks and curriculum follow suit, and teachers don’t have much autonomy at all. Perhaps the most significant piece of this puzzle is that not all children take standardized tests or experience standardized curricula. Some do, and some don’t. What are the connections between social class and students’ relationships to standardized testing and standardized curriculum? How does social class mediate a child’s educational experience and his or her relationship to knowledge as a result? This work takes up Anyon’s incredible undertaking and extends it to encompass the changes in today’s economics and policies.
At the heart of this work sits an analysis of equity, and a deep concern about the role of standardization in exacerbating already existing possibilities for students and families due to their social class, race, or both. Understandings of equity are complex, and multifaceted. Professor Anna Stetsenko has written recently that:

The notion of equality in education is embedded in no less than the perennial problems of how to define the aims of a just society, the mission of education in achieving such aims, and the contingency of these projects on understandings of human development and diversity. It is a social, political, ethical, and economic question at once, and it cannot be addressed outside considerations about the current dynamics, development, and contradictions in society (Stetsenko, 2017, p. 113).

But the term equity is contested. Equality is often spoken about without considering the fallacy of meritocracy. If equitable achievement is possible in our society merely through hard work, then why does inequitable achievement persist? This frames the conversation around the failures of individual students, teachers, and school, and fails to account for the racist and classist structures of which we are all, and of which schools are all, a part (i.e. Nash, 2004). However, as Stetsenko (2017) has written, it is risky to dismiss the discourse of equity completely, as it has historically been one that has stood for “social justice, fairness, and antiracism in moral, political, and economic terms” (2017, p. 115). She declares that, in fact, “it is important to revive discussions on what equality is” (p. 115). This renewed focus is warranted because “the U.S. educational system may be exacerbating [inequalities] in reversing previous gains through policies that disenfranchise populations of color and the poor” (Stetsenko, 2017, p. 115). This work aims to explore how notions of equity can be used to disrupt inequitable school policy
and practice. This can occur in at least two ways. First, I use the term equity to mean that schools and students have the same access to resources across this country. That is distinct from expecting schools or students to be the same. An important example is funding. Because public schools are heavily funded through property taxes, school budgeting continues to be inherently flawed and inequitable. To create equity, I would push for the federal government to give more money to schools in areas with lower property taxes. That is to say, in neighborhoods where parents cannot afford the same resources as wealthier families, the government should step in and create a more equitable playing field. The social class of one’s birth should not determine the quality of his education. That is reminiscent of the Caste system, and directly contradicts the ideals of equality upon which this country was founded. While these ideals were obviously not representative of all people (like black Americans and women), and continue to leave many out, they nonetheless should be pursued. The second way a focus on equity can disrupt inequity is by framing students as having equal and infinite potential at the start of life (Stetsenko, 2017). Historically, human intelligence and therefore chances for achievement have been viewed as fixed, and these ideas have been tied to race (e.g. Au, 2015). More recent scientific research has shed light on the brain’s flexibility, upending these traditional ideas of intelligence and capability. Our society, our schools, and our policymakers must learn more about the brain’s plasticity and account for this in our conceptions of students, teaching and learning, and assessments. This science could, for example, help inform new kinds of assessments that are not as fixed in their nature or in their results, but that reflect the progress, growth, and change students go through as they move through school. Working Against Equity
Public schools have long been viewed as central mechanisms in creating equality and generally solving longstanding social problems like poverty. In 1983, “A Nation at Risk” continued this tradition by purporting:

We do not believe that a public commitment to excellence and educational reform must be made at the expense of a strong public commitment to the equitable treatment of our diverse population. The twin goals of equity and high-quality schooling have profound and practical meaning for our economy and our society, and we cannot permit one to yield to the other… (p. 13).

Equity has been a stated goal of educational reform since the Brown v. Board Supreme Court ruling in 1954. Public education have been viewed as the mechanism through which any student, from any background, can achieve their dreams. NCLB was masterful in using this rhetoric of equity in order to gain bi-partisan as well as public support. Peter Taubman writes:

With a clarion call to finally address our nation’s racial inequalities in education, to shine a light on the “soft bigotry of low expectations” and to ensure that no child was left behind and that every child learned, the architects of NCLB…proclaimed NCLB as the way to hold schools, teachers, and students accountable (2009, p. 28).

This idea, that standards and standardized testing will increase equity is the central framing notion of the standard-based reform movement. As Thea Abu El-Haj (2006) writes: “it rests on the premise that educational inequality derives from the unequal academic treatment of students. This unequal educational treatment tracks, uncomfortably, along the lines of class, race, ethnicity, disability, and gender (p. 9).” This approach to educational reform, then, tackles a broad, societal problem through an incredibly narrow set of prescriptions. Unfortunately, the dependence on high-stakes standardized testing and the narrow curriculum required to prepare for these tests, which
were ostensibly intended to achieve greater equity, have been incredibly damaging, resulting in increased inequality on a macro and micro scale. Rather than diminishing inequality, standardization simply exacerbates it. Without transforming the larger landscape within which children live, all standardized tests and standardized curriculum accomplish is demonstrating the academic “gaps” between low-income and wealthy children and between white children and children of color. Further, the pedagogy and curriculum become increasingly standardized in low-income schools, as does the intense focus on test preparation, and this apparatus furthers the persistence of a fundamentally unequal two-tiered system of schooling. This work situates educational inequality within a broader social, economic and racial landscape and demands that efforts for greater equity do so as well. In addition, this work takes the view that difference is valuable, and that sameness is not equity. While the standards-based reform movement looks to sameness as a demonstration of fairness, this research highlights the deep importance of human difference and appreciation of and for those differences. Again, as Abu El-Haj notes: “Justice is served not by ignoring difference but by recognizing and focusing on it (2006, p. 10).”

Social Class

After the publication of “Social Class and School Knowledge,” a back-and-forth emerged between Anyon and Peter Ramsay, of the University of Waikato in New Zealand. What resulted is a fascinating dialogue of sorts, published in the journal *Curriculum Inquiry*. One of Ramsay’s major critiques was that we don’t know the extent to which social class was independent in determining the ways that teachers constructed, legitimated and transmitted knowledge. He raises the questions of ethnicity and language,
and the impact(s) these could have had, as examples. He further critiques Anyon for leaving out information about the teachers in the study. However his central critique is that Anyon’s work is “crude class reductionist” in its form (1985, p. 217) and that “class alone cannot be the sole explanatory variable, and nor is it independent of other variables” (p. 218). He quotes Henry Giroux, who wrote:

[The] complex and dialectical nature of ideology must be stressed in order to understand human agents as multilayered subjects; that is, as human beings who are more than merely class subjects, who exist as complex agents…In the most immediate sense, this would necessitate developing a view of critical pedagogy around a notion of how lived experience is forged in a dialectical tension between elements of domination and reproduction, on the one hand, and elements of critical social formation and resistance, on the other (Giroux, 1984, in Ramsay, p. 217-218).

Giroux, Ramsay, and others have argued that single variable analyses are problematic. I do not disagree. We do not live our lives as simple products of one category, and therefore more complex and nuanced lenses of research are able to capture a greater complexity of lived experiences. However, Ramsay suggested both “ideology” and “culture” as concepts on which to base future research, which he admits are “slippery” (p. 219). I would argue that these concepts are more problematic than social class as a basis for research, as they are wildly subjective. Furthermore, social class is an important and valid basis of comparative research, perhaps now more than ever.

I used social class as a basis of comparison for a number of reasons. First, inequality in the United States has widened in the past three decades, rendering one’s social class especially important in understanding lived experience. The gaps between rich and poor are more severe, and it is incumbent upon researchers to examine how these gaps “show up” in our real lives—in home, in school, in work. Today, racial and economic segregation and inequality are deepening, exacerbating distinctions in the
educational lives of children. Second, there is a wealth of research examining the relationship between school and social class (i.e. Willis, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1979), and much of it has been revealing. I believe in the history of this scholarship. Schools are contested sites, where the struggles in our larger society take shape, and this includes social class. Because we are a capitalist society in which money and social class carry terrific power, it is necessary to analyze and understand how schools shape and are shaped by these elements. Finally, social class is intimately connected with some of the key terms in this work, and thus these terms must be analyzed with social class in mind. The notion of accountability, for example, is used differently in schools serving different populations. Accountability does not look the same for low-income children as it does for affluent ones. A second example of this is the idea of meritocracy. This is often believed to be a fundamental aspect of American identity and culture—the notion that anyone can achieve great things despite their status at birth. The focus on social class here is meant to unmask this idea, to demonstrate that if educational policy and social class render schooling so different from one group to the next, then a meritocratic society is in fact impossible.

It is important to note, however, just as Anyon made clear in her work, that social class does not function alone, as a single variable, and furthermore that social class shouldn’t be oversimplified or regarded as inevitably reproductive. Additionally, social class is not used here to stand in for race or ethnicity. This research uses social class as the foundation of the comparison and analysis, but further comparative analyses would benefit from an intersectional approach, for example, utilizing Zeus Leonardo’s raceclass theory of education (2007). Race and language come up in this study as key issues that
intersect with social class, and that each play a deeply important role in the lives of schools. This work will analyze the role of these factors, but centralizes the social class of students.

Anyon defined social class as “a series of relationships to several aspects of the process in society by which goods, services and culture are produced” (1981, p. 4). She added that contributing factors were “one’s relationship to the system of ownership of physical and cultural capital, to the structure of authority at work and in society, and to the content and process of one’s own work activity” (p.4). For example, capitalists and affluent individuals have more decision-making power, autonomy, and often creativity than middle class or working-class people. This Marxist lens of social class is somewhat limited, and the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu extended it to encompass various forms of power. One’s income, for example, is often tied to educational credentials as well as social networks. Bourdieu generally wrote about four types of capital: economic capital (money and property), cultural capital (cultural goods and services), social capital (acquaintances and networks), and symbolic capital (legitimation) (Swartz, 1997). The notion of capital broadens an economically narrow view of social class to include the presence of power in its’ different forms. Bourdieu also wrote about habitus, which he defined as “dispositions that predispose [people] to make lifestyle choices characteristic of their class” (qtd. In Swartz, p. 163). We are predisposed, as a result of the social class of our upbringing, to act in ways and make choices that reflect our understanding of the resources we have (or don’t) and our chances of success (or failure). There is an internalization, therefore, of our social class and the boundaries or limits that it sets. He argued that: “Social class is not defined solely by a position in the relations of production,
but by the class habitus which is “normally” (i.e., within a high statistical probability) associated with that position” (qtd. in Swartz, p. 146). This work situates each school in a single social-class category using a standard measure of free-and-reduced price lunch, so that one school is considered “high-poverty” while the other is “middle-class.” But, the concepts of social class here are much broader and more complex. This study considers the cultural capital of the students in both schools, through a consideration of which forms of capital they bring to school or lack, based on their teachers’ perceptions. Teachers perceptions of their students cultural capital are important in informing their practice, and in determining the role that standardization should play in their classrooms.

Research Questions

Overarching Research Question:
• How do public elementary school teachers make sense of standardized testing and standardized curriculum in their classrooms, across contrasting social class settings?

Pedagogy, Curriculum, and Classroom Work
• How do teachers understand their work with students as being shaped by standardized testing and standardized curriculum across contrasting social class settings?
• How do teachers perceive the importance of standardized testing and standardized curriculum in shaping their own curriculum across contrasting social class settings?

Teacher Beliefs & Expectations
• How do teachers perceive the relationship among standardized testing, standardized curriculum, and equity?

Resistance
• Do teachers resist standardized testing and curriculum, and if so, how and why?
CHAPTER TWO: MAPPING THE BIG PICTURE

The Current Political Economic Context of Public Schooling

The lens of political economy is central to this work. This means examining the structural and macro contexts within which schools are situated, and in particular, addressing the ever-increasing racial and economic inequality within which educational policy takes place. Jean Anyon (1997) famously wrote that trying to fix schools without fixing the city in which they are embedded is like attempting to clean the air on one side of a screen door. Her body of work situates urban schooling, and the struggles for greater educational equity, within the context of social class struggle. In Radical Possibilities, she concluded by arguing that, in fact, “macroeconomic mandates [should] continually trump educational policy and school reform” (2014, p. 5, italics original). This work takes up and extends Anyon’s stand, providing a political economy analysis without which policy reform makes no sense and cannot succeed. This section will examine the ever-growing racial and economic inequality in the United States, fueled by neoliberal economic policies such as the regressive tax system, the disinvestment in low-income neighborhoods, and increased income inequality. These policies have had dramatic consequences that often fall along historically predictable lines of race and class.

Economic Inequality

In 2012, over half of the members of Congress were in the top 1% of the wealthiest Americans (Anyon, 2014), and these are the individuals vested with the power and privilege to make economic laws. One concern is that rather than making financial laws with the poor and middle-class in mind, these politicians may make laws that benefit their own financial interests. This section will focus on two major problems with our tax
system—individual taxation inequity and corporate taxation—and the ways in which these connect with schooling and educational policy.

During the Second World War, Congress dramatically increased the number of individuals who would pay income tax, and, during the post-war period, taxes on the wealthy were high. Anyon demonstrates that in 1948, the effective tax rate of the richest 1% of families was actually 76.9% and 85.5% in the 1950s (2014, p. 69). This makes sense, as expenditures always increase during wartime; however, it is important to note that the post-war era is consistently referred to as a time of great prosperity, when the middle-class began to flourish, college access increased, and housing became accessible for more Americans. Beginning with President Kennedy, taxes on the wealthiest Americans started to decline. During Ronald Reagan’s tenure, this decrease continued and resulted in dramatic tax cuts for the rich, from an effective tax rate of 70% all the way down to 20%. Currently, the wealthiest 1% of Americans pay about the same effective tax rate as middle-class Americans, or middle-class Americans pay an even higher effective tax rate. In 2011, Warren Buffet wrote in the New York Times that his secretary paid more in taxes than he did. An IRS report from 2011 confirmed that the effective tax rate of the 400 highest income taxpayers was only 18.1% lower than most middle-income earners in 2008 (Anyon, 2014). The major reasons for this regressive taxation are a combination of tax havens, multiple deductions that only benefit the rich, and long-term capital gains (Anyon, 2014; Hudson, 2012).

Though U.S. corporations have the highest tax rate in the world at 35%, they in fact rarely pay that. Anyon notes that “the share of the total U.S. federal tax burden paid by corporations declined from 40% of the total in the 1940s to 26.5% in 1950, and to
10.2% in 2000” (2014, p. 71). Corporations are responsible for less and less of the tax burden mainly as a result of globalization, as companies have moved operations and sales overseas. They also take advantage of offshore accounts and loopholes intended to hide income.

Why does this remarkably unjust economy continue as such? One answer is that economic power has turned into serious political power, embedding big banks and corporations into government decision-making that will, ultimately, defend and protect them based on their own interests. In his book “The Bubble and Beyond” (2012) economist Michael Hudson writes: “economists are the last people one should ask to explain today’s crisis” (2014, p. 185). He continues:

The refusal to recognize unproductive grabbing of unjustified income is subsidized by powerful interests that benefit by deterring economic reform, opposing public regulation and blocking progressive taxation of predatory income (p. 185).

This dangerous apparatus of economic and political power leaves the general population unclear about what is happening, and the financial lobbies, politicians, and even academic economists that support them all work toward creating a false ideology of equality through a free-market principal—that is, the economy will naturally self-regulate and everything will be okay.

Implications of the Political Economy: Neighborhood & Housing Disinvestment

The economy has very real consequences for Americans in their everyday lives. This analysis will focus specifically on housing and neighborhood disinvestment, jobs, and income. There is a long history of housing policy in the United States that has ghettoized low-income communities of color while pandering to whites and the suburbs. In *Ghetto Schooling*, for example, Anyon exposes a history of racist housing policies in
Newark beginning in the 1930s, such as banks refusing mortgage loans to African-American families, using loans to build in the suburbs rather than investing in cities, and also refusing loans to repair structures in the cities (1997, p. 62-63). Specifically, she cites the Federal Housing Act’s procedures over the span of four decades as fostering the decay of city neighborhoods, such as by subsidizing land in the suburbs, highway systems to the suburbs, and sewage systems there. In the building of expressways, multiple low-income communities throughout the United States were destroyed and never rebuilt. Many of these areas became cut off from other parts of the city and were left without mass transportation to get to and from work (Anyon, 1997). Thus, federal policy abetted “white flight” and the creation of the “black ghetto.” Pauline Lipman (2011) explains that a more recent phenomenon, gentrification, is “the appropriation of working-class and low-income neighborhoods and their ‘revitalization’ for a new middle-class clientele” and calls it “a pivotal urban strategy and a central agent in the production of spatial inequality, displacement, and homelessness” (p. 32). Real estate speculation works to push up property values and property taxes, leading to the displacement of homeowners, working-class renters, and those living in public housing. Typically, low-income neighborhoods with African-American, Hispanic, and other minority groups are the ones that are disinvested, and these are the individuals and families who are pushed out. These are acts of racist and capitalist reorganization of the urban landscape. Weber (2002) writes that the urban environment is “junked, abandoned, destroyed and selectively reconstructed” (in Lipman, 2011). To be clear, low-income communities of color have been historically contained and are now being forcefully pushed out of those neighborhoods to spaces of further marginalization. Who has a right to the city, and who
a city is built for, are crucial questions (Harvey, 2003). Disinvesting a neighborhood for decades and then marketing it to a new group of people is a distinctly purposeful neoliberal strategy to whiten a city and get rid of its poor. Low-income housing has long been an issue, but it grew far worse leading up to and during the 2008 recession. By some accounts, 1.2 million households were foreclosed on. Of course, homelessness and job losses have also been on the rise. Medical studies have linked mortgage delinquency to increased child abuse (Wood et al., 2012). A nexus of crisis emerges here, most critically afflicting people of color, individuals and families without a safety net, and children. The connection to schools runs deep.

*Jobs & Income*

A final piece of the political economy that is relevant to education is jobs and income. Anyon (2014) writes that in addition to creating massive unemployment and underemployment, the recession destroyed many of the good jobs—the ones with decent pay and benefits (p. 30). Since 2010, the jobs that have been created pay significantly less than the jobs that were lost during the recession. She writes, “the biggest job losses during the Recession were those paying between $19.05 and $31.40 an hour. The largest gains since 2010 were of jobs paying $9.03 to $12.91 an hour—low-wage work” (p. 30). Anyon uses the term “poverty zone wages” and defines this as “*wages up to 125% of the official poverty threshold* needed to support a family of four at the poverty level” (p. 31, italics original). She points out, distressingly, that despite the statistic that the poverty rate for families living with single mothers was 40.9% in 2012, if we recalculated the federal measurement for poverty, that statistic would be higher. For example, according to federal guidelines, a family of four with an income over $23,550 is not considered poor;
these measurements are unduly low and unfair. A family of four living on this budget could not survive in New York City. David Harvey (2005) concurs that the federal minimum wage had fallen to 30% below the poverty level by 1990. Today, average hourly compensation has only increased about 1% since 1980, while the top 10% have seen the biggest increase in earnings. In a recent opinion piece, Nicholas Kristof of the New York Times revealed that the Wall Street bonus pool in 2014 was about twice the total annual earnings of all Americans working full-time at minimum wage (Kristof, 2015, New York Times). The movement known as the “Fight for $15” began in 2012 when two hundred fast-food workers walked off the job to demand $15 per hour and union rights in New York City (fightfor15.org/about-us/). In his book Capital, Thomas Piketty writes that “inequality is not necessarily bad” (2013, p. 19). Still, he provides a thorough analysis of inequality in the United States and concludes in part that the top 10% own the vast majority of wealth in this country. He also discusses wage inequality and explains the steep hierarchy of wage differentiation—in euros per month, it stands at about 7,000 for the top 10%, 2,000 for the middle 40%, and only 1,000 for the bottom 50%. Furthermore, women are far overrepresented in this bottom 50% (p. 256). We must couple this with the increasing incarceration rate for African-American men, which has left more and more African-American women raising children alone. The United States is one of the most unequal countries in the world (Hudson, 2006; Piketty, 2013). Schools sit within this economic inequality and are directly impacted by it.

Schooling and the Economy

Schools and the students who attend them are nested in their economic surroundings. Indicating the critical importance of social class on educational
achievement, David Berliner (2013) explained that students in schools where less than 10% of children are poor—as measured by free and reduced lunch—score very high on standardized tests, and they continue to do so until the poverty rate of students gets above 50%. Importantly, almost 20%, or nine million students, attend high-poverty schools such as these. This implies a direct and critical correlation between poverty and achievement on standardized tests. Further, Berliner indicates that only 9% of current low-income students will obtain college degrees—despite their increasing necessity for success.

Critical for this study are three major ways in which the economy impacts schools. First, unequal housing influences who attends which schools, and leads to extremely segregated educational outcomes both by race and class. Second, housing also influences the resources of both the neighborhood schools and the families who attend those schools. Finally, the economy impacts the curriculum in schools. This work seeks to expand and clarify the connections between social class and the knowledge, curricula, and learning of students.

Housing policy directly impacts schooling, opportunities, and resources. In describing the “worth” of a student he names Alliyah, Jonathan Kozol explained that in Alliyah’s South Bronx neighborhood she was worth $8,000 per year in 1998; in a standard white suburb, if we could move her there, she would be worth $12,000 per year; and, finally, in a wealthy white suburb of New York City, she would be worth even more—a whopping $18,000 per year (2014, p. 45). These dollar amounts represent the per-pupil expenditures of a district. During Michael Bloomberg’s tenure as mayor of New York City, these expenditures increased across the board; however, dramatic differences from one socioeconomic context to the next remain. According to census data
released in 2015 schools in poorer districts of New York spent around $8,733 less per pupil than schools in wealthier districts. While there have been increases in per pupil expenditures from about $13,000 in 2004-2005, between poor and wealthy districts there continues to be a difference of student worth hovering around $20,000 (Lovett, 2015, *New York Daily News*). That is significant. Critically, this funding excludes the additional resources that individual families contribute both to schools and to their children’s education overall. This allows families with economic capital to cushion their children’s education by providing what the school might not. This also means that PTA budgets are vastly unequal, matching the geography of the residents. Importantly, only 9.1% of student spending comes from the federal government, while the rest comes from state governments and local sources (i.e., property taxes). Actually, according to a report from the United States Census Bureau (2015), 45.3% of per pupil spending derives from local sources. Interestingly, while New York State ranks among the highes per-pupil expenditures, it also ranks as one of the states receiving the least amount of federal per-pupil spending. So, where is all of the spending coming from? Much of it, in wealthy areas, from property taxes. Thus, there is a distinct correlation between housing and schooling, fueled by and intertwined with racism. Predominantly white schools tend to be wealthier and have much greater resources than schools filled with black and brown students. David Berliner (in Nichols, 2013) writes, “The political power of a neighborhood and local property tax rates have allowed for apartheid-lite systems of schooling to develop in our country” (p. 18). He notes that 48% of high-poverty schools actually receive *less* money than low-poverty schools, despite the obvious need for greater resources. In 2012, the New York Times published an article about the PTA at
wealthy public schools in New York City, and highlighted the Anderson School, a k-8 school on the Upper West Side, which raised $1,001,302 over the 2009-2010 school year through its’ PTA and an alumni group. The journalist and author of the article, Kyle Spencer, added that: “these schools are in some of the city’s wealthiest ZIP codes, most of them in Manhattan, and their students typically garner top scores on statewide exams” (para 9), connecting the dots between wealth and achievement on standardized tests.

Some argue that high-poverty schools receive Title I funding, but this money can’t compete with private donations. Yolanda Smith, a senior education analyst, is quoted as saying: “Title I money is restrictive. It is only supposed to be used for activities specifically related to student achievement. By contrast, PTA money can be used to buy almost anything” (2012, para 28). At the Anderson School, the money raised was used in part for Mac computers, trips to the Catskills, and enrichment teachers. Material conditions exist as a result of racist and class-based policies that have segregated students and forced low-income communities of color specifically to work and live in vastly underfunded and under-resourced areas and schools.

“This,” explained a school principal in the South Bronx to Jonathan Kozol, pointing to decay around a room in his school, “would not happen to white children” (2005, p. 41). There is a wealth of literature detailing the fact that schools are highly segregated by class and race in New York City and in the nation at large (e.g., Perez, 2011; Anyon, 1997 & 2014; Au, 2009; Lipman, 2011; Ravitch, 2014). New York City in particular is the most segregated city in the nation. The journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones wrote in the New York Times (2016) that: “Black and Latino children [in New York City] have become increasingly isolated, with 85 percent of black students and 75 percent
of Latino students attending “intensely” segregated schools—schools that are less than ten percent white” (para. 9). As a result of the racist housing policies explained earlier, which disinvested cities and supported the creation of white suburbs, schools in New York City are more racially segregated than they were in the 1960s. Further, schools that serve predominantly black and Hispanic children are consistently underfunded and under-resourced. An article appearing in *The Huffington Post* (in Klein, 2005), commemorating the sixty-first anniversary of Brown v. Board, found that, for example, in Nevada and many other states, high-minority school districts actually receive significantly less state and local funding per pupil than low-minority ones. This article also demonstrated that black students are far more likely to attend high-poverty schools than white students are, less likely to graduate from high school, and more likely to have less experienced teachers. As the director of an educational nonprofit explained to Kozol:

If you close your eyes to the changing racial composition of the schools and look only at budget actions and political events, you’re missing the assumptions that are underlying these decisions…the assumption is that these are parents who can be discounted. These are kids that we don’t value (2009, p. 43).

Students within segregated, high-poverty schools are some of the most vulnerable, or “at-risk,” due to increased health concerns like asthma and instability from homelessness, job insecurity, a lack of neighborhood safety, and other factors. Thus, the lack of resources in poor neighborhoods where residents are predominantly people of color is compounded by the increased need within these communities. Schools, quite frankly, cannot and should not be expected to solve these concerns *on their own* and be tasked with solving societal and educational equity. Yet this is precisely what educational policy currently demands of them, without an acknowledgement of structural oppression, or increased resources, or
Kozol makes a powerful case for increased and equalized school funding. He is not wrong. But the puzzle is much larger than questions of funding. In essence, Anyon and Hudson argue the same core point: we are being distracted by the rising tide of inequality, focusing our attention on other concerns. Education is one of these concerns. To be sure, it is well understood among education scholars that school effects (i.e., quality of teaching and curriculum) account for only about 20% of student variance on standardized tests, while outside factors (i.e., family income, medical care, and security) account for approximately 60% (Nichols, 2013). The “achievement gap” between students of color and whites is even more dramatic than between wealthy and poor whites because of a history of racist social, economic, and educational policy on top of existing economic inequality. This is not to say that there are not struggling schools in need of more funding, and it is certainly not to argue that schools don’t need change. But a bedrock principal of this work is that without undoing our economically unequal society, we cannot thoroughly improve our schools. It is no coincidence that the educational beginnings of this work—the publication of “A Nation at Risk” in 1983—coincide with the steep explosion of income inequality (Piketty, 2014).

An Exercise in Mapping: Three Case Studies of Neoliberal Educational Policy

Neoliberalism is a collection of policies, forms of governance, ideologies, and discourses that “promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor, and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere” (Lipman, 2011, p. 6), which began to take shape as a “national and global project” largely in the
1970s. According to David Harvey (2005), neoliberalism has “become hegemonic as a mode of discourse…incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (p. 3). Through the consistent and careful promotion of “private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey, 2005, p. 2), neoliberalism has functioned through a set of political economic practices and has defined the role of the state as preserving an institutional framework for such practices. Neoliberalism, from its inception in the 1970s, has been “a project to achieve the restoration of class power” (Harvey, 2005, p. 16) and in so doing has “entailed much creative destruction” (p. 3). Importantly, this project, expanding in the 1980s under President Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, had to be unleashed using democratic means—by gaining the consent of the public (Harvey, 2005). Just as we will see with hegemonic educational policy, economic policy rested on core ideological beliefs like “individual freedom,” traditional values, and morality in order to appeal to the masses. Some of these ideas made policies like welfare seem ludicrous—using “excessive state power to provide for special groups” (Harvey, 2005, p. 50). Pauline Lipman (2015) has pointed out that: “In the United States, neoliberalism is a deeply radicalized project. White supremacy has been central to…U.S. capitalism, just as capitalism has provided the material and institutional basis for the entrenchment of white supremacy in every institution” (p. 60-61). With our shared history of slavery, racism, and disinvestment in communities of color, it would be impossible and inauthentic to separate capitalism and economics from race and racism.

In the early 1980s, under the leadership of then-President Ronald Reagan, seeds were sown for three major structural transformations that would directly impact
education and educational policy for the next three decades. These included a rising tide of income inequality (as addressed in the previous section) and an obsession with standardization and test scores in education. This exercise in mapping, therefore, begins over thirty years ago with the publication of “A Nation at Risk” in 1983, when the “crisis” of education in the United States came into full view. The report is startling and dramatic; in its opening paragraph, it reads:

[T]he educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and as a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 13).

If another country had tried to impose our own educational system onto our nation, the authors continue, we would have considered it so grave it would be akin to “an act of war” (p. 13). Over two pages, the authors list indicators of this tremendous risk. There are thirteen bullet points in all; out of these, nine are directly about testing and test scores, and their relationship to the lack of, or decline in, student achievement. A clear language is born in this report, as the authors declare four charges that future educational policy would take up. First, the report situates education at the clear center of society; second, it conceives of an educational crisis in terms of “war” and threats; third, it equates achievement and learning with test scores; and finally, “A Nation at Risk” positions education as existing mainly to expand our competitiveness with other countries. Much of this language was a throwback to the age of social efficiency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Tyack, 1974). After nationwide attempts at progressive, desegregated, and child-centered education, policymakers felt a pressing need to turn back the clock.
The report made five major recommendations. This research will focus on the second recommendation, around standards and expectations. Within this recommendation, the report suggests: “Standardized tests of achievement…should be administered at major transition points from one level of schooling to another” (1983, p. 28). Importantly, the report continues: “The tests should be administered as part of a nationwide (but not Federal) system of state and local standardized tests” (p. 28, italics mine). “A Nation at Risk” helped lead to a national, and urgent, conversation about education; additionally, it introduced into the national consciousness the need for standards and standardized testing that is, today, common sense; and finally, it would ultimately pave the way for a neoliberal restructuring of educational policy (Lipman, 2011) using high-stakes testing as surveillance tools of white domination (e.g., Au, 2011). This report signals the beginning of political hegemony, in the Gramscian sense. Because the powerful cannot be sustained solely through force, persuasion and consent are necessary tools. “A Nation at Risk” played a crucial role in instilling its particular cultural and moral beliefs in the consciousness of the people in order to assure a permanent and stable hegemony. In the 1980s, we saw an emergence of a powerful ideology: accountability as tied to standardized testing; an equation with education and global, economic competition; a prioritization of, and faith in, business elites as the new education reformers; and, finally, a disparaging view of teachers and public schools as failures. These notions, fed through a very well-financed and powerful political apparatus, entered into the national consciousness and began to gain acceptance as truth. The complexities of structural racism and economic inequality are overlooked; numbers play an important, convincing role. After all, our test scores were low in comparison to
many other countries, and we can agree that reforming education should be a national priority. And so this report used that broad consensus to shift us in a new, fundamentally neoliberal direction.

In the United States, there are a plethora of examples to underscore the neoliberal takeover of education; this work will highlight three distinct but connected case studies: Texas, San Francisco, and New Orleans.

*Case Study #1: Texas*

In 1990, the State of Texas began engaging in a neoliberal experiment, in which the student and the school became defined by a single test score, and high-stakes decisions were made as a result of these scores and nothing else. During the academic year 1990-1991, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) was introduced into schools as a more academically challenging test, replacing a previous skills-oriented assessment. Importantly, this assessment was developed by National Computer Systems, which subcontracted some of the work to two other companies. Thus, three private companies stood to make generous amounts of money from testing in Texas (Haney, 2000). These tests very quickly became high-stakes, as performance was linked to increased funding for schools or, alternately, school closures. By 1994, research on Texas was praising steady and even dramatic improvement in tenth-grade test scores; the narrowing of the achievement gap among black, Hispanic, and white students; and a decrease in dropout rates. However, in 2000, Walt Haney of Boston College conducted an exhaustive study of what was by then known colloquially as the “Texas Miracle.” Haney also gave expert testimony in a trial that attempted to stop TAAS testing on the
basis of its invalid and discriminatory nature. The State of Texas won that trial. In that trial, as in his study, Haney highlights five major failures of TAAS.

First, he shows that this test had an adverse impact on black and Hispanic students. He writes:

A test that leads to failure for tens of thousands more minority than non-minority students, had they had equivalent passing rates, surely has practical adverse impact. Hence, the validity and educational necessity of such a test deserve close scrutiny (Haney, 2000, p. 26).

Haney demonstrates that the pass scores are both arbitrary and discriminatory. If the pass rates were lowered from 70%, he argues that this would increase pass rates on the test among black and Hispanic students significantly (Haney, 2000). Second, he argues, as many other education experts have before and after, that it is educationally unsound to use a single test score to determine high school graduation—a very high-stakes bargain to strike. Third, Haney discusses the doubtful validity of the TAAS scores, citing the fact that course pass rates and test scores overall do not match up. For example, in one year 50% of tenth-grade students who passed their math classes did not pass the math TAAS test. Fourth, Haney shows—in powerful and frightening graphs—that there were thousands of students unaccounted for in Texas’s statistics around student achievement. What Haney found was striking: students were being retained in vast numbers in ninth grade, in order to inflate test scores in tenth grade (Haney, 2000). In fact, black and Hispanic students are more likely to be retained than moved to the next grade. Retention, of course, is one of the strongest indicators of a future dropout. A large body of research has demonstrated the problematic nature of grade retention:

The negative consequences, as grade retention is currently practiced, are that retained students persist in low achievement levels and are more likely to drop out of school. Low performing students who have been retained in kindergarten or
primary grades lose ground both academically and socially relative to similar students who have been promoted (Holmes, 1989; Shepard & Smith, 1989).

Diane Ravitch has written about this mirage as well—and the fact that “African-American and Hispanic students…were held back repeatedly and quit school in discouragement” (2010, p. 96). Neild et al. (2008) found that ninth-grade achievement was a solid predictor of dropping out and that we would be wise to implement changes that help increase achievement in ninth grade. Their suggestions come in sharp contrast with the many examples that exist, Texas being only the first, of pushing students out of school in order to “raise” overall test scores in a school or district. As Heilig and Darling-Hammond (2008) reported in their extensive study, among the ninth graders who entered high school in 1997 in Texas, 26% were retained. At its peak, 30% were held back. Because one of the high-stakes tests, on which school funding and other crucial stakes were based, was given in tenth grade, one of the major gaming strategies became holding kids over in ninth. Further, of the total number of students retained during that school year—a whopping 3,489 students—only 209 ever became eligible to graduate by passing all three TAAS exit exams (p. 92). What happened to these students? Heilig and Darling-Hammond conclude that “most withdrawals appear to be dropouts” (p. 106). These authors make clear that Texas schools attempted to hide these numbers; even today, exactly what happened to thousands of these students is a mystery. School districts throughout Texas structured ways of knowing and exercising power that “officially sanctioned developmental truths of the child” (Ball, 2006, p. 53). This raises important questions about the notion of “accountability,” which is often used to refer to schools and students. In other words, the question is typically framed as: ‘how will we ensure that
schools are held accountable for student learning, and that students are held accountable for their own education? But the focus on accountability must shift towards a greater emphasis on policy. When a policy—such as high-stakes standardized testing—fails nearly 4,000 students in one state, who is held accountable for that? Who rights the wrongs done to those children?

This is a crucial example of Foucault’s power/knowledge relation operating to produce the child and then regulate him. The high-stakes relationship between test scores and consequences is a *dispositif*—“the coupling of a set of practices and a regime of truth” (Foucault, 2010a, p. 18). The practices are imposing standards from the outside, testing those standards, and classifying students according to those results. The regime of truth is the “knowledge” that this system is justified and fair, that students are in fact deserving of their classification, and that schools are making decisions in their best interests. Thus, when students do not succeed on tests, their schools find ways of pushing them out in order to improve their statistics. This may look, for example, like a counselor suggesting an alternative placement for a student, or it may entail disciplining a student so often that their frustration with school deepens and they ultimately leave. Dropping out of school (or, in this case, being pushed out) has been directly linked to incarceration. Western and Pettit (2010) point out that about 70% of state prisoners have no high school diploma. This is an extraordinarily high number, and points to the central role that education plays in a child’s future. The more that school is narrowed around testing, the smaller the measures of success become, increasing the number of students who are at risk. Despite the immorality of these actions in Texas, however, other U.S. cities would soon follow suit.
Case Study #2: San Diego

Just a few years after the “Texas Miracle,” from 1998-2005, Diane Ravitch writes that what happened in San Diego “was unprecedented in the history of school reform” (2010, p. 47). San Diego public schools were taken over by the mayor. Alan Berlin, a prosecutor with no experience in education, was elected by the school board as Superintendent in 1998 given “carte blanche” (p. 47) to overhaul the schools. Some important context here is that, in 1996, the union had won a salary increase for teachers. The business community fumed, and united to elect more business-minded members to the school board. This was the group who would then bring on Bersin. Ravitch (2010) wrote that Bersin immediately implemented a blueprint for school reform, claiming that school-based decisions were a “terrible idea” and that elected school boards were obstacles to reform (p. 65). Despite the fact that San Diego was perceived as a successful urban school system, Bersin was determined to make dramatic changes. He mandated a uniform way of teaching reading, known as balanced literacy, that had been done in a district in New York City. He also funneled money meant for Title I schools into the development of his blueprint, which was largely intended to overhaul the district without input from teachers, parents, community members, and other stakeholders. In 1999, fifteen administrators were told they were losing their jobs. They were escorted to their schools in handcuffs in order to retrieve personal belongings and told not to return (Ravitch, 2010, p. 50). Bersin replaced ninety percent of the district’s principals, and teacher resignations and retirements doubled. The administrators and teachers who were left were forced through fear to comply with decisions they wholeheartedly opposed. Teachers have called this period “totalitarian”; one explained, “[W]e were muzzled”
There were mixed reviews of Bersin’s achievements during his tenure. Some research indicated gains in test scores, particularly in elementary schools. But upon further investigation, Ravitch found clear evidence that while Bersin mandated particular teaching methods, to the resentment of many teachers, the curriculum for those years was deeply lacking. In fact, she wrote: “district officials had not been able to explain what the curriculum was” (p. 61). The message is that test scores, in some cases, increased, to the detriment of a rich curriculum. Additionally, the dropout rate increased by 23% during Bersin’s tenure (Ravitch, 2010, p. 60).

Again, considering the fact that by 2008, 37% of African-American men who had dropped out of high school were incarcerated (Western & Pettit, 2010), and that the dropout rates that resulted from high-stakes standardized testing in Texas and San Diego disproportionately impacted blacks and Hispanics (e.g., Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Ravitch, 2010), a circuit of intense dispossession here begins to take shape. High-stakes standardized testing that places a totalitarian emphasis on test scores puts schools in impossible positions. Gaming the system by holding children back or pushing them out, widespread practices in both of these examples, is a survival mechanism, but while it may leave the school intact, it leaves thousands of children dispossessed. Perhaps most distressing, no one was ever taken to task for failing these students. There is no real accountability at the local school board level, state level, or the federal level, when children do not succeed within the narrow parameters they have set.

Case Study #3: New Orleans

In 2005, the same year that Bersin retired from his role in San Diego, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and ushered in a neoliberal takeover of that city’s schools. Their
schools and prisons are now entirely privatized, and the city has one of the most unequal school systems and one of the highest incarceration rates in the nation. In August of 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans. Approximately 1,300 people died as a result of the hurricane and failed evacuation (Lipman, 2011). The Bush Administration imposed military control and doled out billions of dollars in no-bid contracts so that private corporations could reap the benefits of rebuilding the city. Low-income undamaged homes were seized, to be resold at market value despite community protests. In short, it was open season for a corporate, privatized takeover. Journalist Naomi Klein (2007) coined the phrase “disaster capitalism” to characterize the “orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events” (p. 6). Schools were a central part of this raid. In a 2010 interview in the Washington Post, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said this:

I think the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans was Hurricane Katrina. That education system was a disaster, and it took Hurricane Katrina to wake up the community to say that ‘we have to do better’ (2012).

Critically, it was not the community at all who took the lead in transforming the school system—it was outside, private organizations. As Pauline Lipman reports:

[T]he state of Louisiana took over 100 public schools and began a process of turning over millions of dollars of taxpayer money to private organizations to run them. The state fired all 4,500 public school teachers, broke the city’s powerful Black-led teachers’ union, and dismantled the school system’s administrative infrastructure…Prior to Katrina, there were only five charter schools in the city. Of the 55 schools opened in New Orleans in 2006-2007, 31 were public charter schools. Before Katrina hit…there were 63,000 students in New Orleans public schools; about 24,000 began classes there in the fall of 2008 (Lipman, 2011, p. 49).

The last five remaining public schools have since closed, making New Orleans the first all-charter district in the nation (Layton, 2014, Washington Post). While the ideas of
“choice” and freedom” are cornerstones of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005) and seem fundamental to a democracy, in reality the corporate reform movement is undoing democracy through the decimation of public schooling. Children in New Orleans, for the first time, are no longer guaranteed spots at their local school; instead, they must apply for school seats. They may get into a school that is a long distance away and logistically not feasible, or one that is unsafe for them to travel to. Thus, an already vulnerable population faces greater vulnerability. Furthermore, epitomizing another cornerstone of neoliberalism—free markets—the charter school movement has been led by private companies that make millions of dollars by investing in education. Schools and children have become a source of money for wealthy individuals, meaning that numerical outcomes have become especially important. As Lipman (2015) explains:

In the United States alone, K-12 education is a $650 billion economic sector. Markets in charter schools, education services, curriculum, online classes, teacher training operations, the testing industry, tutoring services, branded university satellites, and more are now hot investment opportunities. Speculation in charter school bonds and charter school real estate is the topic of business publications, investor webinars, and bond trader and hedge fund news (Lipman, 2015, p. 61).

A cornerstone of our democracy—public education—has turned into big business. The implications of this are far-reaching and frightening.

Finally, without unionization, teachers there have lost important protections from arbitrary decision-making. Teaching has been a critical route for black families to gain a foothold in the middle class. Still, they continue to make up only 7% of the profession nationwide (Jones, 2015). In New Orleans, however, before 2007 black teachers accounted for 73% of the teaching force. Between 2007-2013, after Katrina, that number dropped to 49% while the number of white teachers nearly doubled (Jones, 2015, p. 90).
In addition to the state’s school-closure model, over the last two decades Louisiana’s prison rate has doubled, with 1 in 86 adults serving time (Chang, 2012, the Times-Picayune).

As this article explains:

More money spent on locking up an ever-growing number of prisoners means less money for the very institutions that could help young people stay out of trouble, giving rise to a vicious cycle. Louisiana spends about $663 million a year to feed, house, secure and provide medical care to 40,000 inmates. Nearly a third of that money—$182 million—goes to for-profit prisons, whether run by sheriffs or private companies (2012, Times-Picayune).

These prisons funnel money away from schools, and they also funnel support services away from the most vulnerable residents. If education is one of the greatest preventions of incarceration, it would make sense to spend more on education than on incarceration. Furthermore, the process is clearly racist. About 5,000 black men from New Orleans are serving time, as opposed to only 400 white men from the same city. If we look closely at the political economy in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina, we find that African-American men are disproportionately unemployed and underpaid. In a radical publication called Dissident Voice, journalist Bill Quigley (2013) reported the following:

Nearly half of the African American men in the city are not working according to the GNOCDC. Since 2004, the city’s job base has declined 29 percent. Fifty three percent of African American men in the New Orleans area are employed now. African American households in the metro New Orleans area earned 50 percent less than white households (Quigley, Dissident Voice, para. 4).

Jobs have been consistently flowing out of the city and into the suburbs, and salaries for African-Americans have decreased while they have increased for whites. Here we see a nexus of dispossession—the collusion of public school closures, pushing out black teachers, anti-union sentiment, decreasing salaries, and increased incarceration. These all disproportionately impact low-income residents of color.
Standardized Testing, Racism, and the Fallacy of Meritocracy

The Racist Ideology Behind Standardized Testing

The origins of contemporary standardized testing can be traced to the I.Q. testing and eugenics movement of the early twentieth century (Au, 2015). In many cases, these cognitive tests led to racist conclusions, for example that African Americans were the least intelligent group of people. Eugenicists—who believe in fixed notions of intelligence and character based on things like gender, race, and social class—used these tests to “prove” the racial inferiority of particular (darker) groups. Soon, the intelligence tests that were initially used to measure the cognitive abilities of troops in the army were sent to schools. By the 1930’s many schools were using them to sort and classify students (Au, 2015).

The False Ideology of Meritocracy

High-stakes standardized testing is based on the false ideology of meritocracy—that is, the notion that with hard work, anyone can achieve their dreams, so personal success or failure is an individual’s fault. This ideal is beautiful in its simplicity. It is also a lie. It masks the structural realities of systemic racism and class-based oppression. A student born into poverty faces much more profound barriers to success than a student born into a middle-class or wealthy family. The student born into poverty is more likely to experience food and housing insecurity—and therefore greater stress and anxiety around whether her basic needs will be met. These factors and many others contribute to greater difficulty achieving school success. This student may be a very hard worker but may be hungry during a test and score lower than expected. In addition, we know that schools serving low-income populations generally have fewer high-quality resources than
their wealthier counterparts, so this student is more likely to have less experienced teachers and fewer educational resources (i.e., working technology, libraries, science labs). If this student is also a student of color, the barriers against her will increase as a result of structural racism. Thus, this student’s failure or success as demonstrated by her test scores is part of a web of interrelated issues—a puzzle far more complicated than whether she is hard-working or not. As Thea Abu El-Haj notes: “students are in some sense presumed to be free agents choosing success and failure, unencumbered by either the lives they live outside school, the specific relationships they form within the school walls, or the way school and society are structured (2006, p. 126).” When we believe that our school system is meritocratic and that a student’s achievement is his or her own doing without other factors—and we use these beliefs to make high-stakes decisions about young people—we silence and hide those inequitable realities, cutting student “achievement” off from their lived reality. As Knoester and Au (2017) write:

Thus the ideology of meritocracy undergirding the use of standardized tests effectively concealed structural inequalities associated with racism and white supremacy under the cover of the idea of “naturally” occurring individual aptitude (p. 8).

Again, as Abu El-Haj writes: “the idea that individuals choose success is embedded deeply in the ideology of U.S. schooling. Without interrogating the contexts in which choice and agency are made possible, this ideology often blames individuals for academic underachievement (2006, p. 127).” In this way, high-stakes standardized test score data can be used to demonstrate that low-income children of color are less intelligent than their wealthier and whiter counterparts while masquerading as a neutral form of assessment. As Wayne Au has written:
In this sense, Standardized tests operate as a tool of white supremacy simply because they make racist outcomes of the tests appear as a product of the way the world works objectively and naturally—they “scientifically” justify the existing racial order, and they do so within a false promise of measuring individuals equally (2015, p. 27).

Au continues to demonstrate how the SAT, one of the standardized tests nearly every High School student in this country takes, includes race-biased results in its’ selection of test questions. When questions are tested, and more African-Americans get the answers correct, those questions are discarded because they do not correlate with the general outcomes of the test overall. That is to say, when white students answer a test question correctly, it’s identified as a worthy question, but when they don’t, the question is thrown out. Thus, there is a reinforcing cycle of racial disparity.

Furthermore, if it were possible for everyone to be a “winner” on high-stakes standardized tests, they would no longer exist because their legitimacy would be called into question. This was precisely Governor Cuomo’s argument (2015) in advocating to tie teacher evaluations to student test scores: the percentage of teachers meeting the standards (96%) was “baloney” because it was too high. In other words, failure is part of the assumption underlying our system of assessment, both for students and teachers. If we don’t have failure, we can’t have true success. That means that we have a ubiquitous form of assessment with racist and class-based underpinnings, in which there must be a set of “losers,” that has the power to sort, classify, and discipline thousands of young people every single year.

*Standardized Testing in New York: A Brief Overview*

The length, quality, and high-stakes impact of standardized tests have all changed in significant ways over the past decade. This brief history is important to defining our
current context of testing and curriculum, as well as the resistance via the “opt-out” movement that has been growing in response. All of it comes from a website devoted to the opt-out movement: [www.optoutnyc.com](http://www.optoutnyc.com). In 2005, before they entered high school, students were tested only in grades four and eight. Tests were revealed in their entirety so the data could be used to improve instruction, and results were not factored into teacher evaluations. In 2006, the annual testing of students in grades three through eight began. The ELA test was 75 minutes long, and the math test was 85 minutes. A few years later, in 2010, a new teacher evaluation law required 20% of teachers’ performance reviews to come from student growth on state assessments, and another 20% from achievement in local measures (i.e., locally developed assessments)—so that 40% of a teacher’s evaluation would ultimately come from student test scores. In 2011, testing time increased, to 150 minutes for the ELA test in grades three, four, and five and 100-140 minutes for math. Teacher evaluations were released to the media that year for the first time, with a caveat that there could be a 33-35% margin of error. In 2012, the first year that New York City contracted with Pearson, test time was increased to its longest stretch of 270 minutes per test, for a grand total of nine hours. Additionally, tests were no longer released to parents or to teachers, even after the tests had been scored. For the first time, parents and educators could not see the test questions or how students answered them. They would see a score, but not the nuances and complexity behind that score. If a teacher’s students all got the wrong answer to a question, for example, the teacher couldn’t go back and analyze that question to investigate what happened (and how she could change her instruction). In this study’s findings, many teachers lambasted standardized tests as having little use for their practice, and this is part of the reason why.
In 2013, because of intense criticism, testing time was reduced, but this was also the year that Common Core tests were first introduced. In New York City, K-2 testing was rolled out in 36 elementary schools. In 2014, testing time was reduced again, to 210 minutes and 270 in fifth grade. That year, 557 principals signed a letter to parents that argued, in part, that testing had increased; tests were too long; the questions were ambiguous; children were having visceral reactions to the tests, such as vomiting and crying; children labeled as failures were being forced out of classrooms; and scores of low-income children had plummeted dramatically. In 2015, New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo proposed weighing 50% of a teacher’s evaluation on test scores, followed by a huge uproar of educators and families. Two hundred and twenty thousand students opted out that year in New York State. In addition, Pearson’s contract was not renewed. However, they’ve been replaced by Questar, a company with little experience. In 2016, the year of this research, time limits on the math and ELA tests were taken away. Each test was estimated to take a student about seven hours over three days.

Teacher Evaluation in New York

School-wide decisions around teaching and standards are not made in a vacuum, but rather within the political context of New York State and New York City. In January of 2015, New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo pushed for fifty percent of teacher evaluations to be based on their students’ test scores. He criticized the fact that 96% of teachers were rated effective, while so many student test scores continued to be below average. This connection between effective teaching and test scores frames teaching and teacher effectiveness in unfairly narrow terms. Because of tremendous backlash from parents and educators, including a sweeping opt-out movement on Long Island among
politically-active parents, Governor Cuomo walked back this idea. Ultimately, as reported in the *New York Times* (Taylor, 2015), a task force recommended a moratorium on using state test scores in teacher evaluations, and the Board of Regents for New York City agreed.

In 2016 a new system of teacher evaluation was created so that a teacher is evaluated in two categories—MOSULS (Measures of Student Learning) and MOTP’s (Measures of Teacher Practice). Every school develops a committee to determine with the MOSUL’s (Measures of Student Learning) will be. These are typically a combination of local (city) created assessments. The evaluations of MOTP’s—teacher practice—are determined through administrative observations; teachers can choose from two observation options or four if they are highly effective. If rated ineffective two years in a row on these measures, teachers can be fired. A task force has recommended a 4-year state moratorium on using test scores to evaluate teachers in grades 3-8 ([www.uft.org/teacher-eval-guide-2017](http://www.uft.org/teacher-eval-guide-2017)), which was approved by the Board of Regents and which Governor Cuomo, in a tremendous walking-back of his original position, purportedly supports.

The political back-and-forth around standards and standardized testing is not only exhausting; it is confusing for schools, educators, and families. School leaders, teachers, parents and children don’t know what to expect, from ratings to decisions governing school acceptance or student promotion. Furthermore, it zaps time, energy and scarce resources away from the focus on making our schools better places for our children and creating meaningful change. In a 2015 *New Yorker* article, staff writer Rebecca Mead described a portion of a letter that New York City Schools Chancellor Carmen Farina had
written to principals. In response to hearing about school trips decreasing, replaced by test prep, she wrote: “As educators, most of us know that the best preparation for the test is a rich, thoughtful, engaging curriculum that awakens curiosity in students, inspires them to ask questions, helps them explore complex problems, and encourages them to imagine possibilities (2015, para. 6).” Even Arne Duncan, the former Secretary of Education, whose department ties school funding to test results, has warned that “too much testing can rob school buildings of joy, and cause unnecessary stress” (Mead, 2015, para. 6).” While an over-emphasis on standardized testing seems clear, and this idea is supported by powerful people, it continues nonetheless. The new teacher evaluations have essentially replaced state test scores as a measure of effectiveness with city tests. The focus on standardization and narrow measures of student learning and teacher practice continue.

Conclusions

In this section, I have attempted a brief overview of the recent neoliberal restructuring of schools in the United States. This context is critical in order to understand the intense focus on standardized school reform. The three case studies described above make clear that the neoliberal takeover of education is purposeful, that corporate investors have much to gain, and that students and schools have a great deal to lose. Standardized testing is used as a tool of discipline and surveillance, as authorities outside of schools can identify (“see”) the teachers, schools, and students who are failures (Au, 2008). Sorting students by testing them is useful only if we can discipline the losers, the failures, the waste. Tests become a marker of who is worthy and who is not. The neoliberalization of schooling is clear. As Lipman writes:
[T]he neoliberal agenda is to bring education, along with other public sectors, in line with the goals of capital accumulation and managerial governance and administration…the neoliberal turn marks a sharp shift to “human capital development” as the primary goal [of education]. In this framework, education is a private good, an investment one makes in one’s child or oneself to “add value” to better compete in the labor market…schooling is to be dominated by the knowledge and skills privileged in the (stratified) economy, and teachers and schools are to be held accountable to standards and performance targets (2011, pp. 14-15).

The apparatus of standardized testing and curriculum work to control and contain.

Additionally, public voice overall is being corrupted, diminished, and destroyed. This is occurring most saliently with the attack on teachers’ unions and education professionals in general, and educators of color in particular (e.g., Jones, 2015), with regards to educational decision making. At this level, the impacts of neoliberalism include increased racial and socioeconomic segregation, increased inequity, and decreased democracy.

Neoliberal Policies: Restructuring Public Schooling 2002 to Present Day

Since 2002, three major federal educational policies have situated themselves within a neoliberal framework and transformed the educational landscape on a national level. These policies are known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top, and the Common Core Standards. More recently, under former President Barack Obama, NCLB was reshaped into the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Because this policy is so new and is only beginning to shape the work in schools, this dissertation will address it somewhat peripherally. However, it is already clear that standardized testing and scripted curriculum will continue to play a central role in public education. As a whole, these policies have embedded a hegemonic ideology into our national consciousness, defining the kinds of work that public schools do and what “teaching,” “learning,” and “knowledge” mean.
George Orfield et al. (2005) called No Child Left Behind (NCLB) “the most startling departure in federal educational policy in U.S. history” (2005, introduction). This was largely due to the new, far-reaching role the federal government would play in public education. NCLB was considered a bipartisan success when it was passed. Democratic senator Ted Kennedy co-sponsored the bill. As shown in the 2001 senate roll call, the bill passed 91-8, while in the House only eight representatives voted against the measure, six of those being Republicans. NCLB reauthorized the landmark ESEA that President Lyndon Johnson signed into law in 1965, in particular to address issues of inequality and a lack of access to educational resources for minority students. As others have noted, the name of this legislation comes from the Children’s Defense Fund, Leave No Child Behind (e.g., Leonardo, 2006). Thus, equity was promised as a centerpiece of that law, and would be central, too, in the terminology and staging of NCLB. NCLB was masterful in using its rhetoric of equity in order to gain bi-partisan as well as public support. However, as Tom Loveless of the Brookings Institution points out (2006), NCLB marked a major theoretical departure from the ESEA, which ran on the premise that more money meant a better education. NCLB reversed this idea, claiming that money wouldn’t bring outcomes; outcomes would bring money. A failure to demonstrate positive outcomes, therefore, would result in the diminishment of resources in schools. Thus, resources were now viewed as incentives to school improvement.

The centerpiece of the law, and its major mechanism for purportedly increasing equality, is high-stakes standardized testing (referred to as “accountability”). NCLB mandated that students in every state be tested every year in math and English language
arts, between grades three and eight. In this way, student “achievement,” understood only in terms of test scores, could be measured, compared, and used to further support or punish schools. These tests were high-stakes particularly because of the dramatic consequences they had for schools and students. Each state was given autonomy to create its own benchmarks for three levels of achievement: basic, proficient, and advanced. However, NCLB required that all students reach “proficiency” and developed specific procedures for students who met proficiency and those who did not. Schools were also saddled with meeting Annual Yearly Progress (AYP)—essentially, increasing test scores by a set amount each year. Even in the first year of implementation, when schools were labeled “in need of improvement,” parents were notified and given the option of transferring their child to another school, and parents were ostensibly offered additional resources for their children (Orfield et al., 2005, p. xxx).

The Inequitable Impacts of NCLB

Under NCLB, the sanctions for schools, teachers, and administrators caused the largest uproar; support of or opposition to this piece of legislation ranged dramatically. Schools that were not proficient for four years in a row were most often closed or restructured. Linda Darling-Hammond wrote that the closing or restructuring of “failing” schools mistakes measuring schools for fixing them (2004). Others have argued that NCLB has had racist, detrimental results. As David Stovall (2006) notes, the schools that are placed on watch lists are predominantly attended by students of color. Lipman (2015) has detailed the adverse effects on achievement and attendance that tend to result from school closures. Students of color are disproportionately impacted by school closure, and most of them are not transferred to top performing schools. In addition to extensive
research on the academics effects of closing schools on children, Lipman also pays
attention to the human dimensions of policy. Because this is a central point of my work
as well, I would like to quote her at length:

School closings are an assault on children, families, and communities, a form of
displacement that breaks the web of sustaining human connections that coalesce
in the school. Yet, nowhere in the discourse about the efficacy of this policy is
this human dimension mentioned. Indeed, the process of closing schools is itself
dehumanizing to African American, Latino/a, and other parents who are excluded
from any real decision-making, whose knowledge is disregarded, and who are
treated like numbers on a spreadsheet. The decision is made elsewhere, by those
with little or no connection to or knowledge of the communities affected. It is this
dehumanization that most sharply reveals the racism at the center of a policy to
close schools purportedly to advance educational goals (Lipman, 2015, p. 64).

Policy designed without real community input will always be dangerously flawed. Here,
the ideology of “choice” refuses to acknowledge the limitations for low-income
families—specifically, that many families may not actually have access to better schools,
so their “choice” may in fact be one low-performing school over another. There is no
systemic effort to create better and accessible choices for these families. Furthermore,
policy decisions like the ones to shut down schools are often made with flagrant disregard
to the tremendous academic, and social/emotional impacts they will have on students and
families.

Interestingly, support for policy does not always mirror the impacts. Loveless
(2006) found that states with a larger population of African-Americans tended to
demonstrate greater support for NCLB. Furthermore, the NAACP joined the Bush
Administration in support of the bill when Connecticut sued. The call for higher
standards and greater accountability was one that the NAACP stood behind (Loveless,
2006). NCLB was the first educational law at the federal level to call for an examination
of achievement, and gaps in achievement, for minority students. This signaled a much-needed acknowledgement that achievement was not equally accessible for all students. The fact that there was political galvanization around equity felt exciting. Families were understandably tired of underachieving and under-resourced schools. But the mechanisms of this law would ultimately lead to the closure or restructuring of hundreds of schools, and force students to drop out, disproportionately affecting low-income students of color and their families. In Detroit, New York, and Chicago for example, more than 100 public schools have been closed (Lipman, 2015). In Chicago, 79% of students affected by school closure and restructuring were African American, while they only make up 40.5% of the students there (Lipman, p. 66). Furthermore, closing a schools fails to account for how it got that way, failing to hold accountable the powerful forces behind its’ disinvestment (Coates, 2014; Lipman, 2015).

Overall, Loveless found that geography, political affiliation, and income all impacted support of or opposition toward the law. In general, Republicans, residents in rural areas, those earning under $75,000 annually, and black and Hispanic populations demonstrated greater support for NCLB, while Democrats, urban residents, those earning more than $75,000 annually, and whites showed greater opposition (2006). Opposition steadily increased between 2001 and 2005, and Loveless found some support for the idea that as people gained more information about the law, their support for it actually declined. The law’s principles of equity, achievement, and accountability appealed to people, but the realities of the law did not. The same was largely found among teachers.

In their extensive study, educators Richard Murnane and John Papay of Harvard University (2010) found overwhelming support for the principles underlying NCLB
among teachers. Generally speaking, teachers applaud the pressure to develop rigorous content standards and curriculum, and to align tests with those standards. They support an increased focus on student achievement, identifying “skill deficiencies” of low-income children, and identifying which schools are making progress and which are not. The provision that students would be taught by “highly qualified” teachers also garnered teacher support. Hannaway and Hamilton (2008) found that many teachers were happy with an increased focus on math, as the amount of time devoted to math in elementary schools increased by 40%. However, while the ideas of student achievement and school accountability resonated with teachers across the country, the sanctions imposed by NCLB in an effort to accomplish these goals were concerning. In surveys and focus groups, teachers expressed their strong opposition to utilizing instructional time for test prep, thus setting up a dichotomy between instruction and test preparation—a dichotomy born out by the research for this dissertation as well. Teachers also lambasted rampant score inflation; the pressure to focus only on “bubble kids,” those closest to proficiency, at the expense of lower- and higher-achieving students; and a shrinking curriculum, as time for social studies, the arts, and other non-tested subjects shrunk and sometimes disappeared. Finally, teachers questioned the centerpieces of NCLB. Educators have been critical of the tests themselves, saying they do not reflect students’ actual learning. With regards to AYP, teachers have said that it does not demonstrate the success schools have had in improving student skills. Finally, teachers have criticized the idea of punishing schools by firing administrators or closing the schools. The provision to provide support services for families has also been called into question. Because many of the companies providing such services are for-profit, money for this is taken from Title I funding, and
families often do not have information about the services provided to them (Loveless, 2006).

Many of the central issues raised by NCLB continue to play out in public schools today, and solutions have not been found. Teachers, administrators, and families seem to agree that accountability is critical. Many seem to agree that standards and testing remain an important and fundamental aspect of schooling. However, the standards themselves, the quality of the tests, and the consequences of failing to meet benchmarks continue to ignite more questions than answers. At the heart of this controversy is intense disagreement about how to define these key concepts—accountability, achievement, and equity. ESSA is attempting to revisit and revise some of NCLB’s most concerning elements, acknowledging the failings of NCLB while keeping some of the law intact. It will take several years to begin to understand the real impacts of this new iteration.

*Every Student Succeeds Act*

In December of 2015, 13 years after the introduction of NCLB, President Barack Obama signed ESSA into law. By mid-May of 2017, 16 states and the District of Columbia had submitted plans for compliance, including New York. Standardized testing remains a core piece of this legislation, so in that sense this new law is not a great departure from NCLB. Students in grades 3 through 8 will continue to be tested in math, English language arts (ELA), and science. Important changes from the prior law include eliminating the controversial sanctions it had imposed, such as a mandate to restructure or close failing schools. Under ESSA, states must develop their own plans for struggling schools; a needs assessment will be required of schools with low test scores, followed by locally tailored solutions. This may signal a greater emphasis on helping schools rather than punishing them, as well as a stronger emphasis on local rather than federal control in
making school-based decisions. Under this new iteration of NCLB, states were tasked with determining a bulk of the criteria for their school evaluations. School quality indicators were allowed to account for nearly 50% of their overall score, but, interestingly, the majority of states with submitted plans didn’t allow for that much. Maryland is a current exception, allowing for school quality factors to account for 35% of their scores. Moreover, the range of school quality indicators chosen by states seems to be fairly narrow; only Illinois, New Mexico, and Maryland have selected school climate as one, and only Tennessee has chosen to include discipline practices. Because discipline tends to be more punitive in schools with large populations of students of color, this statistic can reveal important information about equity or inequity, and could be perceived as a significant omission. An interesting point here is that states stuck to more traditional rubrics for assessing their schools, even when given the chance to be more well-rounded. They continued, in large part, to focus mostly on test scores as important indications of a school’s, and a student’s, achievement.

Impact on New York State

In May of 2017, the New York State Board of Regents and the New York State Department of Education drafted a plan to comply with ESSA. This drafting process was somewhat transparent, with town-hall discussions scheduled, and various opportunities for residents to weigh in with their feedback. Complaints about NCLB were loud and clear, and some elements of this draft clearly take into consideration the pitfalls of this former law.

On the very first page of New York State’s education page, where this draft is first introduced, is the word “equity” (www.p12.nysed.gov), front and center. The bill is
described as building on a Civil Rights legacy. New York State is attempting to position equity as the centerpiece of this new law in a number of ways, including: examining and addressing resource inequities in low-performing schools; limiting teacher transfers to low-performing schools to those teachers rated highly effective or effective; publishing annual per pupil expenditures in order to highlight instances where funds should be reallocated; and publishing state reports on district-wide access to effective teachers. Rather than NCLB’s strict focus on outcomes, New York’s ESSA plan seems driven in large part by issues of resources and access, two significant and constant concerns for struggling schools in particular.

With regards to testing, New York is examining whether it will be able to reduce the length of state testing. They are also applying for the Federal Innovative Assessment Pilot, under which tests would be performance-oriented. Science and social studies will be tested along with math and ELA. It is clear that testing will increase, and that its’ connection to ideas of achievement continues to hold sway. Because 20% of New York City families have opted out of state testing, the provision dictating sanctioning schools with an opt-out rate of greater than 95% could pose a concern. In one of the schools in this study, in fact, 98% of students have opted out. In the draft, the state explains that it will require schools with low participation rates to develop a plan for increasing those rates, while recognizing the rights of parents and students. What this currently means in practice is unclear. However, there is a clear conflict among federal authority, state mandates, and the rights of individual students or families to determine what is best for their child.
Race to the Top

In 2009, under President Barack Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, the Department of Education established the $4 billion grant known as Race to the Top (RTTT). This was the largest competitive grant ever administered by the Department of Education and must be contextualized within a neoliberal ideology, one continuing a strong push for a greater federal role in education and increased accountability, mechanized through standardized testing, for schools and states. The financial context is critical as well, since it highlights the neoliberal strategy of RTTT. Significantly, this policy initiative was introduced one year after the beginning of this country’s economic recession and was proposed as part of the larger American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

Over two phases of RTTT, 47 states applied. Many in the education community have derided this timing, arguing that states were forced into applying and therefore into creating fundamental changes that many disagreed with, as a result of losing significant funding during the recession. Educators Nicholas Michelli and Penelope Earley wrote in 2011, “The economic downturn in 2008 that affected many state budgets pushed nearly every state to apply for funding through Race to the Top and also led to hurried efforts to change policy” (p. 10). The implementation of RTTT, then, is reminiscent of Naomi Klein’s “disaster capitalism” (de Sousa, 2010), coming on the heels of financial disaster and promising help.

RTTT rests on three critical neoliberal themes. First is the theme of competition, which we saw in New York City through the implementation of the Progress Report, and which has been fundamental to NCLB’s mandate for AYP. In her critique of RTTT,
Monica de Sousa (2010) called this a paradigm shift from equity to competition, creating a “mad scramble for dollars” (p. 639), and notes that all 50 states applied for Phase I. The second neoliberal theme is the notion of rewards and punishments, measured narrowly through high-stakes standardized testing. This includes measuring teacher effectiveness based on student test scores, and:

[seeks to] obviate the complexity and expense associated with educational inputs through a narrow approach to educational reform in the manner that it defines the problem of struggling schools: primarily by reference to students’ performance on standardized assessments (de Sousa, 2010, p. 654).

The third theme, then, is individual meritocracy—the deeply sentimental and peculiarly American ideal that you get what you earn. Schools that don’t perform well on tests, which tend to be in low-income communities of color, are at fault. What is unacknowledged is that students and teachers in the lowest performing schools have been asked to work in incredibly challenging circumstances, such as concentrated poverty and insufficient resources. When asked about these concerns, Arne Duncan said, “[W]hile broader societal problems...certainly make the jobs of schools serving disadvantaged students more challenging, they should not be used to excuse the lack of achievement in high-need schools” (qtd. in de Sousa, p. 656). Duncan’s comments fall perfectly into the purview of neoliberalism; challenges that are structural and foundational are viewed only as excuses, and no attempts to fix these challenges exist. Rather, the individual bears the blame. President Obama has clearly embraced this “equal opportunity” model rather than fighting for improved material conditions for low-income students of color, imploring students to show up to school no matter what and to work hard. De Sousa writes brilliantly that:

The paradigm of equal opportunity, advanced in the President’s address, ultimately shifts attention away from the federal government and encourages
individual students to internalize their own responsibility for success or failure. Sadly, this discourse is focused most intensely on children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and students living in inner cities... The myth encourages individuals to believe that the success or failure they experience in life is primarily, if not solely, attributable to their own merit and motivation (2010, p. 682).

This work extends the belief that children in this country do not have equal opportunities. Rather, there are vast and deep inequalities among children and the opportunities they have for growth, development, and education. While policymakers state that standardized tests create greater equity, this dissertation aims to show that this is not the case.

*The Common Core State Standards*

In today’s educational climate, curriculum becomes standardized in four different ways. The first, and probably the most extreme, is when districts, states, or schools adopt scripted curricular packages. The second is when standardized tests are imposed on schools, and those schools in turn standardize curriculum to meet the expectations of those tests. The third way, which has existed for decades, is simply when districts or states have standards that schools are expected to adopt, and these in turn contribute to curricular control. Finally, the most recent curricular standardization is happening as a result of the Common Core. This research will focus on standardized curriculum as a result of the Common Core Standards and as a result of standardized tests.

While the current New York City Schools Chancellor Carmen Farina has made clear that, in her view, the Common Core Standards “are not a curriculum” (2016, NPR), these standards are attached to a much broader apparatus. In 2013, the ELA and math tests in New York State were redesigned to match the Common Core Standards for the first time. As a result of this marriage, schools adopted test-prep and curricular packages, and there were calls for the tests to significantly impact teacher evaluations. While these
have been temporarily shut down, we can assume this issue will be back on the table in three years. All of this has meant that these standards have far-reaching consequences for students, teachers, administrators, and parents.

The Common Core Standards were developed in a joint effort by a non-profit organization called Achieve, Inc., and the Governors Association, both largely funded by the Gates Foundation (Ravitch, 2013; Picciano & Spring, 2013). The Obama Administration and many other politicians felt that the mandate of AYP under NCLB was difficult to measure without national standards—how could we know if students and schools were improving if each state had differing standards of proficiency? These varied standards were considered an obstacle to comparison, competition, and decision making. Furthermore, many of the state standards were questioned by these organizations and criticized for a lack of rigor. On the website for Achieve, Inc., this is explained:

Too many students across the country meet state standards, pass state tests and complete state-required courses only to be placed into remedial courses once they enroll in college or find they are unqualified for training programs and skilled employment in the modern workplace. They may be Proficient, but they are obviously not prepared (retrieved from http://achieve.org/OutofManyOne).

In 2001, Achieve, Inc., partnering with groups including The Education Trust, The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, and the National Alliance of Business, began the American Diploma Project to “help states prepare all students for success” (retrieved from http://achieve.org/OutofManyOne). They released a report in 2004 that found that all students needed the same level of knowledge in math and English Language Arts. The methods and research underpinning this report are unclear, and the “scientific” and research-based underpinnings of the Common Core Standards have been significantly challenged (i.e., Ravitch, 2013). Despite claims by the Secretary of Education at the time,
Arne Duncan, that educators participated in the design process, it has become apparent that that was not the case. Only one teacher was brought into the process, and no principals or parents helped with the development or review of these standards (Murphy, 2017). The standards were largely designed and reviewed by employees of Achieve, Inc., and staff from testing companies, nonprofits, and think tanks. Finally, over the course of the 2008-2009 school year, the official Common Core Standards were developed, and some states began rolling them out immediately.

Under Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s RTTT initiative, states would receive points for adopting the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). President Obama and Secretary Duncan have argued that CCSS adoption has been entirely voluntarily; however, schools suffering under severe budget cuts after the 2008 recession, which could only access necessary resources through RTTT and therefore the Common Core, may not have felt the same way. As Diane Ravitch wrote in a 2013 blog post:

Federal law prohibits the U.S. Department of Education from prescribing any curriculum, but in this case the Department figured out a clever way to evade the letter of the law. Forty-six states and the District of Columbia signed on, not because the Common Core standards were better than their own, but because they wanted a share of the federal cash (Ravitch, 2013).

Currently, 46 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core Standards “without any field test” (Ravitch, 2013). Many educators—teachers and administrators alike—have complained about the lack of preparation and resources for implementing the Common Core.

In September of 2010, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan gave a speech to a forum hosted by Achieve, Inc. called “Beyond the Bubble Test: The Next Generation of Assessments.” He promised that these new standardized tests, aligned with the Common Core, would be a game changer. Scores were expected to drop quite a bit. He concluded
that speech by thanking the attendants for their work on the Common Core, and promising that we were on our way towards schools finally becoming the great equalizers, once again signaling the connection between standardized testing and equity.

Two groups—The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and the Partnership for Assessment Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)—were given $360 million in federal funds to create the new tests (Washington Post, 2015). Pearson Education designed the final tests, which were first given in Kentucky and New York.

According to public and intellectual opinion, the tests were not an improvement. Darling-Hammond (2016), for example, demonstrated that while the Common Core tests were more sophisticated than a traditional multiple-choice test, they were not as sophisticated as student-designed projects the researcher has studied. They fell short in categories such as student analysis, revision, and presenting work through multiple modalities—areas of strength in the student-designed projects. In a blog post written by Diane Ravitch (2013), she shared Darling-Hammond’s reaction to the development and roll-out of the standards. Here, Darling-Hammond criticized the process and contrasted it with the “thoughtful” and “deliberate” curricular development of other countries.

Furthermore, many educators and parents challenged the quality of the test design and test questions. Carol Burris (2015), a former New York City principal, described teachers reactions to the new tests. One elementary educator had this to say:

These three days of ELA have been torture—I had only 23 students opt out and I had at least 3 times that number in tears. If we were permitted to talk about the content, it would be over so fast. Folks would be horrified at the vocabulary, the reading levels and the ambiguity of the questions. I was unable to answer at least 25 percent of them (Burris, in Strauss, 2015, The Washington Post).

Other teachers described their children in tears and remarking that they were stupid. One educator explained that it was hard to feel good about teaching when exposing her
students to this testing experience. Many educators, including Principal Burris above, have described the tests as far above grade-level and confusing. In the same article, Burris listed some of the vocabulary in an eight-grade passage, and the words included: “bowdlerized,” “orthodoxy,” and “litigious (Burris, in Strauss, 2015).” It was also found that one third-grade ELA passage actually had a grade level of 5.9. Elizabeth Phillips, a principal in Brooklyn, wrote in the New York Times that the tests were “worse than ever” and said “we felt as if we’d been had” (Murphy, 2017, p. 50). Educators reported back on some of the content and vocabulary that was expected, arguing that it was indeed developmentally inappropriate. During the first wave of testing, scores dropped precipitously.

A New York Times editorial from August 2013, the summer after the first Common Core-aligned tests were given, revealed that in New York City there had been a drastic drop in passing scores. Only 26% of students had passed the ELA, and only 30% of students had passed the math. This contrasted dramatically with the statistics from the previous school year, which were 47% and 60%, respectively (The Editorial Board, New York Times, 2013). The authors wrote that the decline was even “more pronounced in poorer areas” and that in nine different city schools, not one student passed the math test. The editors wrote that there were “striking gaps” along racial and ethnic lines, with only 15% of black students and 19% of Hispanics passing the math, as compared to 50% of whites and 61% of Asians. Supporters of the Common Core-aligned tests argue that they have value in part because they serve to increase equity. Chris Stewart, director of outreach and external affairs for Education Post, told The Atlantic that the test scores reveal “where the racial disparities are,” thus allowing us to close them, and explained
that: “Every single civil-rights lawsuit against the state around education has used test scores to prove its case (Robelen, 2016).” In that same article, an advocacy group called High Achievement New York equated testing with “higher standards and assessments [that] are closing achievement gaps for minority children (Robelen, 2016).” This is a fallacy. When 75% of black students fail a test in New York City, there is nothing equitable about it. Furthermore, there is currently no plan to use these scores as a jumping-off point to create more equity. The majority of students failed, and leaders promised that the following year, tests would be improved and the Common Core would be more familiar. That was, essentially, it. In this same article, Mary Cathryn Ricker, a member of the American Federation of Teachers, spoke to the variations in educational and assessment quality experienced by students across the city, saying that some kids get test prep while others have longer recess, field trips, and art and music. These two voices—Stewart and Ricker—are both advocating for greater equity, but through different channels. While Stewart views the Common Core tests as an important mechanism driving increased equity, Ricker understands that differing access to resources and variations in educational quality play a much more important role in creating equity for students than a standardized test ever could.

Because of the direct correlation to tests, the Common Core Standards have evolved into a standardized curriculum that teachers and schools feel obliged to follow. As one article by Peter Wood, the President of the National Association of Scholars, pointed out:

[The Common Core] is, in fact, very much a curriculum. The sneakiness in this case is again aimed at getting around legal barriers that prohibit federal efforts to establish curricula... perhaps the strongest proof that the “standards” are a curriculum in disguise comes at the next layer of sneakiness, the Common Core-
aligned tests... in the end, [teachers] have to prepare their students for the
tests...That’s because the teachers want their students to succeed, but it is also
because the teachers themselves will be rewarded or punished on the basis of how
well their students perform on the tests (Wood, 2015, *New York Post*).

As the above makes quite clear, when standards are tied to tests and those tests have
punitive consequences for schools, teachers, and students, educators will most likely
teach to the test. Furthermore, curricular packages have been developed with some
companies reaping millions, in order to fill this “need.” Houghton-Mifflin and Pearson
filled the curricular void and created ELA and math curriculum for every single grade, K-
8. States and districts began haphazardly and, in many cases, at the last minute, rolling
out curriculum packages to guide teachers toward the test. As educators Randy Bomer
and Beth Maloch wrote in a scathing article in the journal *Language Arts*:

> Indeed, the adoption of these standards has brought about the most sweeping
> nationalization of the K-12 curriculum in US history. In raw terms of what gets
taught in American schools, no *single national policy* event has ever had as much
> significance as the adoption of these standards (2011, p. 38).

In this article, Bomer & Maloch significantly question the “evidence” used in developing
the Common Core Standards, and the actual knowledge the creators of the standards have
of education and child development, specifically in areas of literacy development. In
reference to how much the Common Core creators know about how to teach literacy to
young children, the authors conclude grimly: “the point is, the people who wrote,
publicized, adopted and imposed the Common Core Standards have no idea (Bomer &
Maloch, 2011, p. 41).”

Concerns over hasty and unfair roll-out, the knowledge and research behind the
standards, test quality, and the nationalization of curriculum have all converged and led
to growing anti-Common Core sentiment as well as an opt-out movement, in which
families are opting their children out of the Common Core tests. Some bold educators are
encouraging these actions. The opt-out movement runs across the political spectrum. Some Tea Party and Republican activists believe the Common Core Standards are an intrusion into our lives by the federal government, and Democrats and liberals lambast the amount of high-stakes testing (students take about 113 standardized tests between pre-K and twelfth grade), questionable test quality, and the rapid and faulty roll-out. Five states run by conservative governors have repealed the standards or begun a process to review them (Henderson et al, 2015). In April of 2013, the Republican National Committee adopted a resolution calling the Common Core an “overreach” into children’s education (Lempres & Peck, n.d., p. 2). New York State has the largest percentage of students opting out of tests, about 20%. In New York City, that percentage is closer to 3%. Organizations like United Opt Out have rallied against the corporatizing of American education. Education Next has reported that opposition is increasing, while support steadily declines. They write, “In 2013, no less than 65% of the general public favored the standards, but that portion is now just 53% ...Meanwhile, the opposition has doubled from 13% to 26%” (Henderson et al, 2015). While educators and the general public tend to support the idea of standards, as it ties into notions of accountability and academic rigor, once the reality hits opinions often change. When there was a precipitous drop in test scores with the new Common Core tests, and politicians seemed casual about that, teachers and families in particular cried foul. What they had perceived as a fair system of ensuring academic success for their students had been proven, once again, to be a game. The opt-out movement across New York State surged.

During the semester of research for this dissertation, two professors at Columbia’s Teachers College, Oren Pizmony-Levy and Nancy Green Saraisky, created the first
national survey on opting out in order to better understand this phenomenon. They received completed surveys from 1,641 respondents across 47 states and contribute significant information to what we currently know about reactions and resistance to standardized testing nationwide. They found that the typical opt-out activist is a highly educated, white, married, politically liberal individual with an above-average salary and children in public schools (2016). A 2016 article on opting out in The Atlantic affirmed the likelihood that students opting out would come from affluent white families.

Interestingly, the opt-out data on the website: www.optoutnyc.com Contradicts the findings that opt-out families tend to be white and more financially secure. They explain that people of color have long resisted testing and demonstrate that the opt-out movement runs across lines of race and class.

Powerful Nexus of Funding & Corporatization of Public Education

In their book The Great American Educational-Industrial Complex, Anthony Picciano and Joel Spring write that the educational-industrial complex can be defined as “networks of ideological, technophile, and for-profit entities that seek to promote their beliefs, ideas, products, and services in furtherance of their own goals and objectives” (2013, p. 2). This complex is in fact made up of multiple networks that are all working toward the same twin goals of influencing educational policy and making a fortune in the process. These networks, the authors write, have a profound effect on group cohesion and shifting individual-think or individual behavior into something collective. In other words, these networks are central in the process of creating educational hegemony. One organization pushing for the Common Core, or one foundation creating tests in one state, for example, would not be enough to drive the widespread takeover of education that has
occurred through NCLB, RTTT, and now the Common Core. Furthermore, these networks include major private companies that have a vested stake in policy that will make them money. This section will reveal the numerous powerful networks that have contributed to and benefited from NCLB and the Common Core (as fueled by RTTT) in order to paint a picture of this hegemonic apparatus.

_No Child Left Behind_

When NCLB was passed in 2002, “the educational-industrial complex received a boost” (Picciano & Spring, 2013, p. 63). Picciano and Spring detail the three biggest ways this complex benefitted from NCLB: first, by supporting the development of charter schools and thus, for-profit management companies; second, by authorizing the spending of public money for for-profit supplementary educational services; and third, by focusing on testing. This work will focus on testing and the profits associated with it. Because NCLB mandated AYP from every state, new assessments were quickly needed to measure it. Pearson stepped in, creating and selling tests to multiple states and reaping major profits. In 2000, just before NCLB, Pearson spent $2.5 billion to acquire NCS, the largest American testing company. The CEO at the time, Marjorie Scardino, told _The Wall Street Journal_: “Now [we can] really…be king” (Reingold, 2015). According to one journalist at Fortune.com, this move transformed Pearson from a “sleepy textbook publisher” into a major player in the educational world (Reingold, 2015). That is to say, although Pearson has always been a large player, they have in recent years expanded even more dramatically and taken control of various realms of educational life. Analysts now report that Pearson controls about 60% of the North American textbook market; Diane Ravitch calls this the “Pearsonizing of the American mind” (Reingold, 2015).
Pearson has a vested interest in educational and economic policies that will continue to make it a wealthy global company. In a 2010 report, the company warned:

Our US educational solutions and assessment businesses may be adversely affected by changes in state and local educational funding resulting from either general economic conditions, changes in government educational funding, programs, policy decisions, legislation at both the federal and state level (Picciano & Spring, 2013, p. 76).

As a central part of the nexus that Picciano and Spring write about, Pearson lobbies for government policies that will ensure profits, and participates in multiple advisory boards and committees. It can be safely assumed that educational policy decisions are made with Pearson’s input—a for-profit company run largely by business interests (rather than educational experts) who have never been elected and who push for educational decisions that do not get voted on by the public. A POLITICO investigation found that Pearson was not penalized when they failed to deliver products, meet deadlines, or come forward if there were major problems during test implementation. So, while accountability for teachers, schools, and children has increased, it seems there isn’t much accountability for testing companies and the adults who manage them (Murphy, 2017, p. 14).

**Common Core**

In 1996, a National Educational Summit drew most governors and the leaders of major companies including Microsoft, AT&T, and IBM. This summit led to the creation of Achieve, Inc., whose purpose is “to help states raise academic standards, improve assessments, and strengthen accountability” (retrieved from: [http://www.achieve.org/summits](http://www.achieve.org/summits)). Why did so many for-profit companies attend an educational conference? Because within a neoliberal context, education had become a private market and a major source of profits for the lucky, wealthy, few. These
companies knew that their technologies, as one example, could be packaged and sold for educational purposes to the tune of millions. If we jump forward to 2008, we find that the Gates Foundation (created by Microsoft founder, Bill Gates), substantially funded Achieve as well as the National Governors Association (NGA) in a direct push for national standards. In 2009, both Achieve and NGA, as well as the Council of Chief State School Officers, worked together to create the Common Core State Standards. This is a crucial example of what Picciano and Spring call a new form of governance, in which “many government decisions are made not by elected representatives but within a network of private industries, flexians, and a personalized bureaucracy” (2013, p. 19).

The Gates Foundation directly influenced the development of the Common Core Standards through funding as well as the dissemination of key ideological points. When Picciano & Spring went to publish, for example, Gates had given the National PTA $2 million in order to mobilize parent support for the Common Core. While the decisions influenced by the Gates Foundation are not publicly controlled, they can lead to sweeping changes and even to new laws, such as those altering online instruction (Picciano & Spring, 2013). The Common Core Standards themselves are not law, but are really de facto law. Because of their connection to school funding and high-stakes tests, schools and students have been pushed into following this curriculum.

Further evidence of these vast and interconnected networks reveals that the NGA has “intellectual resources” including Microsoft, Houghton-Mifflin, McGraw-Hill, and Pearson. Thus, again, these companies stood to gain from the NGA’s creation of the CCSS, because they would be able to package and sell their goods to schools and families (blogush.edublogs.org). The lead writers of the math and ELA standards are connected to
some of these companies and have made a great deal of money. The lead writers of the math standards, for example, recently published a guide for developing math textbooks, and school districts are already declaring that they will not buy textbooks that have not followed this guide. These writers stand to make a tremendous profit from these textbooks alone. Additionally, the lead writers of the ELA standards are themselves involved in money-making networks. David Coleman worked for McGraw-Hill, which is currently making the only nationally available test for schools to test their progress toward the CCSS. Susan Pimintel has led training sessions for KIPP Fellows on leading charter schools, and she also worked with Education First, whose past clients include both Achieve and the Gates Foundation (blogush.edublogs.org).

While Achieve, the group most associated with the creation of the Common Core, claims to be independent, its involvement in vast networks suggests otherwise. On its website, they describe themselves in the following way:

Achieve is an independent, bipartisan, non-profit education reform organization based in Washington, DC that helps states raise academic standards and graduation requirements, improve assessments and strengthen accountability so all students graduate ready for college, work and citizenship (http://www.achieve.org/michael-cohen).

The current president of Achieve’s board of directors is Michael Cohen, who was the former director of educational policy at the NGA, as well as special assistant for educational policy under President Bill Clinton. Cohen has taken a lead in helping to develop the PARCC tests in New Jersey and the Common Core tests in New York. Two members of the board of directors—Mark Grier and Peter Sayre—have held major positions within Prudential Financial. Louis Gerstner was formerly the CEO of IBM and, before that, of Nabisco and American Express. Craig Barrett also sits on the board and
was chairman of Intel. Two governors, one Republican and one Democrat, are on the board as well. With so many connections to financial institutions and organizations such as the NGA, it seems unlikely that Achieve is entirely independent. What seems more likely is that Achieve is beholden to the economic interests of these companies.

_Pearson_

Pearson is probably the company that stands to gain the most from this testing and curricular apparatus. Pearson has the market cornered for Common Core-aligned tests; in 2014, they delivered nine million high-stakes tests in total (pearsonschool.com). In addition to the tests themselves, Pearson is the largest developer of Common Core-aligned curriculum. They also run conferences and training aimed specifically at the Common Core, which cost anywhere from $300 to $750 to attend. They have consultants for training school administrators in the Common Core and are also the biggest developer of Common Core-aligned textbooks. The company earns over $8 billion in annual global sales. Pearson’s current board members include connections to Fidelity, Merrill Lynch, and Unilever. Only one member has any kind of educational experience, and that is a former senior counselor to the provost and the president of Yale University. As Picciano and Spring (2013) make clear, the U.S. Department of Education was interested in promoting national standards to make the development and sale of software programs easier. It is much more challenging to develop state-by-state curricula or software. The U.S. DOE therefore knew that the Common Core would open up education even more to private investment, and Pearson made good on this scheme. Furthermore, as Michael Winerip revealed in his New York _Times_ article from 2011, Pearson has paid to send state education commissioners, many of whom have significant contracts with Pearson, to
meet with their international counterparts in places like London and Singapore. On these trips, they also meet with top executives from Pearson. The company has officially denied any ethical wrongdoing, although they did close their foundation this past year due to this and other questionable practices. The Pearson Charitable Foundation paid $7.7 million to the state of New York after authorities found that the organization broke the law by developing Common Core products for the for-profit Pearson company (washingtonpost.com). Paying the travel expenses for potential educational clients was a significant part of the charges as well. Foundation officials never denied or admitted the charges, but they agreed to pay the fines, and, one year later, the foundation has closed its doors. The closure was announced in November of 2014. The legal troubles regarding the Common Core have continued. In 2015, a Missouri judge ruled that the state’s membership in a federally-funded testing consortium intended to create a Common Core-aligned assessment was illegal (Strauss, 2015).

In her article about Pearson for Fortune.com, journalist Jennifer Reingold writes that the current obsession with high-stakes testing is “not Pearson’s fault, of course” (2015). She says that it is state and local governments that make the final decisions. But this analysis does not take into consideration the networks that Picciano and Spring make so clear. If Pearson employees sit on advisory boards and committees that help determine educational policy; if they pay for trips for educational commissioners during which time they convince them that Pearson’s services are exemplary; if they have a vested economic interest in the testing industry—then all we need to do is connect the dots. Pearson is, without a doubt, pushing the focus on high-stakes standardized testing and the Common Core because it reaps billions of dollars from these policy initiatives. From the
tests measuring AYP under NCLB to the Common Core, from curricular packages aligned with the Common Core to online courses aligned with the Common Core—Pearson has every reason to push this agenda.

It is true that state and local governments have to sign on; but what choice do they have? If school districts get much-needed funding through RTTT by adopting the Common Core, then they desperately need curricula, test-prep materials, and, of course, the tests themselves. Individual states, and certainly individual schools, seem to be pawns in a much larger and more frightening hegemonic game. Recently, the CEO of Pearson reported that the company expects its highest profits since 2012. The testing industry, including companies like Pearson, has no intention of slowing growth anytime soon. This industry’s impact on teaching and learning within schools must be analyzed in order to uncover the full reach of private corporations’ influence on public education today.

Conclusion

This section has detailed how corporate, neoliberal “reform” has taken over the public school landscape since 2002, through the central position of standardization in three major policy initiatives: NCLB, RTTT, and the Common Core. I have attempted to shed light on the structural racism that is inherent in practices of standardization and that has been prevalent in the disproportionate impacts of standardization on schools and communities. Further, I have demonstrated the powerful political and financial interests surrounding these policies, in order to raise questions about the purpose behind them and whether they are truly being carried out in the interests of children. The following section will review the literature on the impacts of standardization in greater depth.
Thematic Impacts of Standardization

In the research on standardized testing and curriculum, five major themes emerged, all under the umbrella of “control.” While standardized testing, curriculum, and accountability are typically framed as improving schools and student learning, many critics argue that they are concerned largely with controlling these environments. Peter Taubman writes that:

Certainly one reason [high-stakes testing has mounted] is that tests and the numerical data they provide offer a sense of control in what often appears, for a variety of reasons, as a turbulent, chaotic, and dangerous sphere—public schooling (2009, p. 32).

Structural control emerges in the literature as the first major theme, and the ways in which high-stakes testing and curriculum have together altered the structure of entire school systems and of individual schools. The second and third themes, arguably the most central, are pedagogical and curricular control. The fourth theme is the way in which high-stakes standardization positions both students and teachers. Last, and critical to this work, is the way in which testing and curriculum are situated as increasing equity while actively creating and increasing inequity.

Structural Control

It is critical to emphasize that prior to NCLB, each state had control over their educational system. There are examples of federal oversight throughout our history, as in the case of school desegregation. However, these have been considered extreme and were used only when there were no other means of handling a very clear crisis. Since the writing of the Constitution, education has been considered a local matter rather than a national one. There is a long history of trepidation, for example, around having a national
curriculum and too much government oversight of our schools. As Orfield et al. (2005) explain:

It was largely because of concern about a potential abuse of federal power that the United States lagged generations behind other nations in the development of a national system of education…Concerns about liberty and local autonomy far outweighed concerns about policy objective (p. 1).

However, between the publication of “A Nation at Risk” and today, momentum has been growing for a national system of education so the United States can better compete in a global economy. The argument has been made that the United States in fact “lagged” behind its global counterparts precisely because of our fears of a national system of education; NCLB perpetuated this argument. Local autonomy meant variety, which squelched our ability to compete. Structurally, then, NCLB altered how the entire country managed our school systems. Every state was forced to comply with the law. Again, Orfield et al write:

The United States has 50 different state systems of education that vary enormously in size, expertise, capacity, beliefs, and traditions…NCLB curtailed this autonomy. It created many new requirements that states must meet and assumed that state agencies have the capacity, skill, and desire to intervene very powerfully in local school districts (2005, p. 2).

With the passage of NCLB, the federal government gained significant control over our educational system. The reliance on high-stakes testing has absolutely produced an educational landscape that is fundamentally disciplined. As Achinstein and Ogawa make clear:

The current policy environment is characterized by these very conditions of technical control. Federal, state, and district policies are aligned to form a unitary environment; instructional policies mandate prescriptive instructional programs; assessment and sanctioning mechanisms are combined in school accountability systems (2006, p. 54).
At every level—federal, state, administrative, and instructional—high-stakes testing has contributed to a deeply standardized and mechanistic school system. McNeill (2000) refers to this as a “closed system,” one in which fear reigns and resistance is impossible.

Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (2006) draw similar conclusions about how NCLB views knowledge, writing that the “importance of local knowledge…[is] antithetical to the premises of NCLB” (pp. 675-676). Wayne Au (2009) has written:

Research consistently finds that systems of high-stakes standardized testing centralize authority at the top of federal, state, and district bureaucracies, and generally take control away from local decision makers (p. 144; e.g., Apple, 2000; Orfield, Kim, & Sunderman, 2005).

Structurally, NCLB imposed top-down mandates onto each and every state, shifting the responsibilities of the federal government and state governments; altering school management, teaching, and accountability across states; and forever transforming relationships among various key agencies (Orfield et al., 2005). RTTT and the CCSS have followed suit. This is structural change on a national scale.

A central mechanism for structural control has been fear. The highly punitive nature of standardized testing has led to deeply embedded structural changes. As one principal commented: “I think it is foolhardy for a teacher, school, or district to teach anything that isn’t on the test...I don’t have tenure as a principal” (qtd. in Desimone, 2013, p. 19). This reflects the pervasive sentiment that people’s livelihoods are on the line as a result of test scores, and therefore schools will surely comply. In her article describing the efforts of teachers to continue teaching toward social justice in our current political climate, Professor Bree Picower writes:
much of the neoliberal agenda that dictates local and school policy creates a state of fear for educators who wish to veer from this corporate-driven status quo of teaching as usual. This state of fear severely limits their ability to teach for social justice because of the constant monitoring and policing of their classrooms and curriculum. This state of fear refers both to the emotional state that individual educators find themselves in, as well as to the general environment of schools in which teachers and administrators find their jobs and autonomy threatened if they do not conform to the pressures of school accountability policies (2011, pp. 1112-1113).

Fear for one’s job, for the preservation of one’s school, and/or for one’s administration are real concerns within schools, contributing profoundly to overall compliance with high-stakes standardized testing. The fear of losing one’s job is palpable in the current climate of corporate reform, which has led to teacher firings on a massive scale, particularly in places such as Washington, D.C., and New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina (e.g., Jones, 2015; Klein 2007).

This fear would not exist if standardized testing did not have what Michel Foucault calls “disciplinary power” (1979). He writes that this power “imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility…it is the fact of being constantly seen, of being always able to be seen, that maintains the disciplined subject in his subjections” (1979, p. 178). Students, teachers, and administrators are seen through their test scores. Because these scores are mandated, reported, and have been tied to teacher evaluations, there is a powerful, watchful eye on the “success” or “failure” of each of these groups as narrowly defined by testing. Standardized test scores act as a gaze, imposing and judgmental, over everyone involved in public schools. This gaze is given further power because of the consequences attached to it. This is part of a distinct change from standardized testing as we have known it throughout the history of schooling, to high-stakes standardized testing. Au and Knoester (2017) write that “these tests become ‘high-
stakes’ once consequences like teacher performance and student graduation or promotion are attached to the results” (p. 5).

Under the overall theme of structural change, two major strands emerged. Because of standardized testing, the structures of time within schools were significantly altered—how much time teachers spend on certain subjects has been transformed. Second, how topics are ordered and scheduled has shifted. The tests have changed the structure of the school day. Valli et al. (2012) conducted a five-year study in fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms. As a result of standardized tests, these schools implemented new curriculums in reading and mathematics. They write, “[T]he curricular topics were arranged in an order and on a schedule that the teachers did not understand or agree with” (p. 22). This curricular re-structuring to fit test expectations is precisely the hegemonic apparatus this research takes issue with. One teacher complained that kids were simply supposed to move on, whether or not they had mastered the expected skills. Teachers have lost the autonomy to determine how to order the curriculum and how much time to spend on something based on their students’ needs. The tests and the curricula developed to prepare for the tests now determine these decisions. In his study of one social studies teacher, Jacob Neumann (2013) found that “this testing apparatus exerts considerable influence on Margaret’s teaching by compressing the instructional time she has available and limiting her range of instructional options when working with her students” (p. 13). Karen Dorgan, in her study of a public elementary school preparing its students to pass standardized tests, found that teachers felt they had to move too quickly through the curriculum and that, as a result, “the students were a little lost” (2004, p. 1209). She also
found that teachers felt the need to use instructional time to teach students how to fill out testing forms.

In sum, testing and the curriculum, largely determined by the tests, have imposed structural transformations onto our school system that have altered the way in which the federal government engages with education, the way in which states engage with education, and the actions and decisions of schools, administrators, and teachers. Much of this change has occurred as a result of the fear and deeply punitive structure of this apparatus of standardization.

Curricular Control

Control over curricular content and control over teaching methods are undeniably the two most prominent themes in the literature on standardized testing (e.g., Au, 2007). In terms of curriculum, the findings support four major assertions across the board: first and foremost, there is clear support for the fact that testing significantly narrows content; second, knowledge is decontextualized and fragmented; third, curriculum becomes simplified and less complex; and last, diverse perspectives become silenced. The reigning reality hovering above all of this is the fact that it is the tests themselves that have become the determinants of what knowledge counts.

In his qualitative metasynthesis (2007), Wayne Au analyzed 49 studies and found that in an “overwhelming number of qualitative studies, participants reported instances of the narrowing of curriculum, or curricular contraction to tested subjects” (p. 262). In fact, approximately 84% of these studies reported a narrowing of subject matter in response to testing. Dorgan (2004), too, found that the focus on test scores “caused teachers to eliminate the teaching of some content that they had included in the past” (p. 1221). In a
large study of 32 schools across five states, Laura Desimone found that “teachers were narrowing the curriculum to focus on the items covered in the test” (2013, p. 18). In one specific example, Diamond and Spillane (2004) found that because science is not a tested subject under NCLB, it simply wasn’t given much attention. As one teacher explained, “I begin teaching science and social studies after the test” (qtd. in Diamond & Spillane, 2004, p. 1156). Countless others have documented the decline in non-tested subjects and extracurricular activities, such as foreign languages, art, and music (e.g., Au, 2007).

Furthermore, because tests focus on a wide array of specific pieces of information, particularly when there are multiple-choice sections, teachers feel pressure to “cover” material so that they hit on all of these bits of information. In response to these tests, then, two crucial things happen to the curriculum: it becomes simplified, and knowledge becomes fragmented. In Neumann’s study of Margaret, an experienced social studies teacher, Margaret explained that “you have to condense it [large concepts] to the important points…they have to have that skeleton” (2013, p. 17). In reference to the Civil War, the author notes that Margaret spends five days on five years of war, teaching “boiled-down information” (p. 17). Valli et al. (2013), in their analysis of fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms after the implementation of NCLB, found that between 2002 (the year NCLB was first implemented) and 2005, there was a decline in every category of cognitively complex instruction (p. 17). Au (2009) writes that “knowledge learned for the test is transformed into a collection of facts, operations, or data mainly needed for rote memorization in preparation for tests” (p. 139). In 2014, the educational organization Great Minds began a “listening tour” in which they surveyed 1,001 third- through twelfth-grade teachers, finding a tremendous narrowing of the curriculum. Two-thirds
(66%) responded that subjects other than math and ELA were crowded out; this opinion was particularly high among elementary school teachers (81%). Generally, from these survey responses, it seemed that curricular narrowing was more dramatic in elementary schools (greatminds.net). A full 90% of the teachers said that when a subject was tested, it was taken more seriously in school curricula—implying that curricular decisions are deeply tied to the content of standardized tests.

When curriculum is narrowed to prepare for specific test content, diverse perspectives ultimately become silenced. The curriculum has long given rise to arguments over what kind of nation we are and whose stories are told. Herbert Kliebard has written that:

[R]arely is there universal agreement as to which resources of a culture are the most worthwhile…we find different interest groups competing for dominance over the curriculum and, at different times, achieving some measure of control depending on local as well as general social conditions (1995, p. 7).

Choices about what to include or leave out in the curriculum are not neutral, and there is a deeply important history around the curriculum wars that this paper does not have the space to fully address. This includes, briefly, the push to include more women and people of color in textbooks. These debates are heated and political in nature. However, in standardizing what children learn, education and business leaders aim to de-politicize curriculum. Conservatives today, like their counterparts during the social efficiency movement during the early twentieth century, aim to generalize curricular goals and skills across place, time, and experience, which ultimately means that many voices and experiences will be lost. Michael Apple (2006) sheds light on this concern when writing about the emerging historical discourse in which we are a “nation of immigrants.” He explains:
In this hegemonic discourse, everyone in the history of the nation was an immigrant...Although it is true that the United States is constituted by people from all over the world—and that is one of the things that makes it so culturally rich and vital—such a perspective constitutes an erasure of historical memory. For some groups came in chains...others suffered what can only be called bodily, linguistic, and cultural destruction (p. 41).

As curriculum is contracted in order to align with standardized tests, we see this “erasure of historical memory” occurring. The curriculum is often guided by the prominent point of view—the dominant, white, Western perspective. This connects to pedagogy as well, since, as Ladson-Billings (2001) has pointed out, there is a reliance on culturally neutral modes of pedagogy that do not address student identities and differences. A significant question this author has is—to what degree do policies around standardization contribute to a silencing of diversity? This silencing has been studied and is thought to contribute to an array of concerns, especially a lack of teachers of color and increased inequality in schools (e.g., Agee, 2004; Picower, 2011). In her analysis of one African-American teacher’s struggle to include multicultural curricula, Jane Agee (2004) found that, despite the teacher’s passion for multicultural content, the testing and accompanying pressures crept into her planning and silenced diverse voices. In one anecdote about a teacher named Tina, she writes:

> When I asked if she were doing [African-American] folktales in all her classes, she said she was not using them with the 11th-grade American Literature class because they needed to focus on the upcoming state graduation test…Tina also talked about how the mandated tests were pushing her to teach literature differently than she had planned (2004, p. 468).

Even when teachers express a commitment to including “diversity” and multiple voices and perspectives in their classrooms, they nonetheless often fall prey to the
standardization apparatus, leaving them out in order to get ready for the tests. Wayne Au (2015) writes that:

[B]ecause high-stakes tests force schools to adopt a standardized, non-multicultural curriculum that structurally enforces norms of whiteness, it ultimately silences the cultures and voices of children of Color, particularly if those voices, cultures, and experiences are not contained on the tests (p. 31).

Research has told us that students—particularly marginalized students or students of color—learn best when they are reflected in the curriculum and when they feel connected to school (e.g., Valenzuela, 1999). When standardized tests focus on whiteness as the norm, and teachers feel fear and pressure to comply and prepare their children specifically for that test, the content of the curriculum predictably becomes narrowed, excluding voices that are not white. Thus, instruction time and curriculum are situated as opposed to students’ lives, cultures, and experiences—the very things that have been proven to help keep students in school. This has extremely real, material, raced, and classed consequences in terms of where children from different economic and racial backgrounds end up.

Pedagogical Control

Teachers are very aware that high-stakes standardized testing is shifting their practice in profound ways. In a nationwide survey, Abrams and colleagues found that 76% of teachers in states with high-stakes testing reported that these tests contributed to unsound educational practices (Au, 2009, p. 142). The same teacher quoted above, Tina, speaks about the shift from a constructivist approach to pedagogy to a more teacher-centered one. This was a significant theme in the literature on pedagogical control; as a result of high-stakes testing, pedagogy has become much more teacher-centered. Again, here is a quote shedding light on Tina’s experience:
Tina also worried that her students would not do well on objective test items if she continued the kind of constructivist teaching that I had seen… She had started the year using a lot of personal response writing to assess her students… but found the proposed objective test incompatible with her approach. …“I believe in getting your own meaning from a poem…but there is going to have to be some kind of consensus about what this poem is about” (Agee, 2004, p. 767).

This teacher began her teaching career believing in constructing knowledge with her students, allowing various viewpoints, personal responses, and open-ended interpretations of text. However, the pressures of the tests, which her students needed to pass in order to graduate from high school, led her to shift her teaching practice dramatically to be less constructivist, less personal, and more in line with finding an answer. In her analysis of the impacts of standardized tests on one elementary school in Virginia, prior to NCLB, Karen Dorgan found a shift to teacher-centered pedagogy. She writes that as a result of the SOL’s, there was:

…a perceived need to change instruction to a more direct-instruction, textbook-centered approach. …their classroom practices appeared to be altered due to pressures to move quickly, pressure coming from a grade-level pacing guide to which teachers adhered (Dorgan, 2004, p. 1211).

Au (2007) found that in 32 out of the 49 qualitative studies he analyzed, teachers reported an increase in teacher-centered pedagogy. Bowdon and Desimone (2014) recently wrote about kindergarten, post-NCLB, and concluded that although students have made proficiency gains (using test scores as the measure), there is less play time and child-led exploration, and a greater emphasis on teacher-directed instruction and worksheets.

**Positioning of Teachers & Students**

High-stakes standardized testing and standardized curriculum have turned teachers into technical bureaucrats and students into one-size-fits-all widgets. Embedded in the overall themes of content and pedagogic control is the fact that educators have lost the
autonomy to determine what their students need and should be learning. Thus, teachers are largely positioned as playing a technical role, rather than an intellectual one (e.g., Au, 2009). The test determines both what and how to teach, and the curriculum is tailored to reflect that. Laura Desimone (2013) quotes one middle-school teacher who says:

   I don’t feel like I have much of a choice with the content and the standard course of study….As far as being able to vary what I want to teach, that is not an option… I just teach the standards course of study, which is from the state and is what we’re tested on (p. 27).

In reference to literacy policy in California, one teacher remarked:

   You don’t walk into classrooms and get a sense of, “There’s that teacher’s classroom.” Our classrooms all look the same…you have to have your desks arranged in an Open Court-suggested desk-arrangement…you follow [the program] exactly and don’t add in your creativity…I’m watching these teachers kind of shrivel (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006, pp. 39-40).

The teacher quoted above resisted the district-wide literacy policy and was fired from her district after two years, although by all accounts she was an excellent teacher with high expectations. After she was fired, she said: “I think had I kept my mouth shut and said less and said ‘yes’ more, I would be tenured now” (qtd. in Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006, p. 43). Through the powerful and pervasive sense of fear that exists, teachers have been forced to go along with policies even as they vehemently disagree with them. Through the disciplinary power exerted by high-stakes standardized testing and curriculum, both teachers and students are produced. Teachers and students become components that can be seen, on the one hand, and modified, on the other (Foucault, 2009). If teachers and students resist modification, they may be fired or pushed out; there is a wealth of evidence to support this.
Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (2006) analyzed NCLB as it relates to teachers and teaching. They write:

…we believe NCLB’s conceptions of teachers and teaching are flawed—linear, remarkably narrow, and based on a technical transmission model of teaching, learning, and teacher training that was rejected more than two decades ago (p. 669).

First, these researchers point out that NCLB focuses entirely too much on the teacher as the solution to all of our problems in schools. Contradictory to this, however, is the way in which this legislation then positions teachers as a problem—thus, NCLB is paradoxical in its treatment of teachers, by regarding them as both the hindrance and the help for reform. They write:

Even though NCLB rhetoric ostensibly elevates teachers and makes them the standard-bearers for high expectations for students, the discourse of teacher deficits, fueled by increased monitoring and surveillance of daily practice, has never been more prevalent (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 2006, p. 680).

Second, they highlight the many ways teaching is viewed, through this legislation, as a “fundamentally technical, instrumental, certain, and decontextualized activity” (2006, p. 681) in which:

Teachers are being compelled to reduce their practice to teaching a narrow set of skills that increasingly bypass the kinds of professional judgments and knowledge of students and communities that many regard as the distinguishing features of excellent practice (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 2006, p. 681).

Part of the reason it seems artificial to study standardized testing alone is because this policy is not implemented in isolation. Rather, testing is accompanied and supported by significant changes in curriculum and teaching that together shift the meaning of school, the profession of teaching, and the work of the student. Under the vision first of NCLB, and now through the implementation of the CCSS and accompanying tests, the school,
the teacher, and the student become drastically more technical. As Valli et al. (2013) write, “[T]he district’s notion of high-quality teaching came to be seen as rigid and standardized. Teachers missed the autonomy of enacting curriculum in ways they believed best met the needs and matched the backgrounds of their students” (p. 24). Like Tina, the teacher who attempted to both match her multicultural curriculum to her students’ identities and broaden students’ conceptions of the world through such a curriculum, the teachers in this study narrowed their understanding of teacher quality so that a high-quality teacher became conflated with whether or not their students passed the state tests.

Teachers of color, as previously described, have been disproportionately impacted by the oppressive effects of standardization. Because much of this “reform” movement has targeted large urban districts, there has been a disproportionate impact on black teachers. Brian Jones (2015) cites research demonstrating that in Chicago, 65% of teachers in schools targeted for closure were black; in Newark, black teachers were twice as likely to work in schools that faced punitive consequences, including closure; and finally, in New Orleans, the teaching force has whitened significantly (pp. 89-90). While all teachers are bound by the strains of these “reforms,” there is an important argument to be made that teachers of color may be particularly vulnerable. In a society in which people of color are generally less well-off economically and who often live in greater instability than whites, the teaching profession has helped bring many African-Americans into the middle-class. As that profession is fully threatened with the attack on teachers and their unions, the middle-class is threatened and so, too, specifically, is the economic stability of the black middle-class.
Finally, the positioning of teachers sheds important light on the use of the term “accountability.” Ravitch said it best when she wrote the following: “Teachers are being blamed for the ills of society. They are being blamed for the achievement gap. We can’t fire poverty; we can’t fire families; we can’t fire students; so we fire teachers” (qtd. in de Sousa, 2010, p. 669). Regarding accountability, it is crucial to point out that when the achievement gap between white students and students of color didn’t narrow, President Bush was not fired. No one on his education team was held accountable. Policymakers are some of the wealthiest individuals in this nation—they do not generally send their children to public schools, or, for that matter, into wars. But they make the laws about both. It is an injustice that accountability would fall entirely to schools, teachers, and students and not fall on the shoulders of those creating and imposing these policies. This separation between policymakers and policy enactment further denotes the racial and economic segregation of the United States and the neoliberal ideology that anything public is “bad” (and non-white) While anything private is “good” (and white) (i.e. Lipman, 2015). If politicians could lose their jobs and salaries when policies failed—as is the case with teachers—or if they were tasked with determining policy for all schools, their children’s schools included— we might see much more careful, and equitable, policy coming from Washington.

To be sure, teachers are not the only victims of high-stakes standardization. The people these tests impact most dramatically are, arguably, the students who take them. The overwhelming view of students within this paradigm of high-stakes testing is standardized. Students need to fit themselves into a very narrow category of person who can learn well in a teacher-centered space, memorize fractured bits of knowledge,
and recount information in a timed manner and in a particular format. The reality is, as teachers in study after study will explain, that every single student is different. The pace of learning is different, as are interests and pedagogies students respond to. Some students do well in teacher-centered classrooms; others need more hands-on and student-centered activities. The tests, though, do not allow for such variation in classroom curricula and pedagogy, as argued earlier. The result is a “one-size-fits-all” approach.

Dorgan (2004) writes that:

…it was this area of life in the classroom that I observed the greatest degree of frustration on the part of teachers. Their task was to prepare all students to take the same test at the same time in May…Having a one-size-fits-all curriculum left some teachers feeling that the gifted were unchallenged (p. 1214).

Within this system, there is no room for the beautiful variation among students that exists. The imposition of the test and the high-stakes aspect of the test leads teachers, for the most part, to teach to the test, rather than teaching all students, no matter what.

While many schools, teachers, and students have suffered as a result of standardization, there are three major ways in which it has disproportionately impacted low-income communities of color. This is through the punitive sanctions imposed by NCLB (and that are still possible in future policy initiatives); an impoverished pedagogy and curriculum; and finally, through inequitable teacher beliefs about their students.

Disproportionate Impacts of Standardization on Low-Income Communities of Color

Sanctions for Low-Income Communities of Color

On a macro level, it has been found that the sanctions associated with high-stakes testing, specifically through NCLB, impacted low-income schools and students of color far more than they impacted others. First, as the Schott Foundation for Public Education has shown (2013) in their image called ‘The Color of School Closures,’ the vast majority
of schools that end up on probation, and then are either reconstituted or closed, serve low-income students of color. In New York City, for example, 22 schools were closed in 2013; 81% of students in schools that were shut down were low-income. Of these, 53% were black, 41% were Latino, and only 2% were white. In Chicago during the same period, the numbers are even starker. Out of 44 schools that were closed, 94% of the students impacted were low-income, and 87% were black. It is fairly simple. When schools have populations of children who come in behind in their grade level, who may be English Language Learners, who may live in unstable conditions, or who have special needs, these children do not perform as well on tests. Schools in low-income communities are far more likely to have populations of students who have greater and more complex needs than other schools, and test scores are highly correlated with the income and education level of students’ families. Rather than creating equality for students, the tests simply reaffirm the gaps in equity and opportunity, which is why test scores in Scarsdale look so different from scores in East Harlem. Standardized testing reflects and reaffirms existing inequalities rather than fixing them.

In 2006, The Harvard Civil Rights Project set out to understand the impact of NCLB on student achievement. In particular, achievement in reading and math—the two subjects focused on by NCLB—were the center of author Jaekyung Lee’s study. The findings in this study were stark. Lee found that achievement in reading was flat, and achievement in math increased very slightly, at the exact same rate as before NCLB. Of critical importance, the racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps remain the same. Additionally, Lee criticizes NCLB for relying on state assessments to understand achievement; levels of proficiency are inflated as states alter their own “standards” and
individual thresholds for passing (Lee, 2006). With a sense of demoralization, Lee concludes that:

If we continue the current policy course, academic proficiency is unlikely to improve significantly, but it is possible that the state assessment will continue to give a false impression of progress, shortchanging our children and encouraging more investment into a failed test-driven accountability reform policy. This problem can be more serious for schools that serve predominantly disadvantaged minority students. NCLB has shortchanged those schools with under-funded mandates and an over reliance on sanctions rather than a focus on capacity building (2006, p. 11).

Importantly, Lee clearly suggests here that NCLB has exacerbated inequality when he writes that NCLB has “shortchanged those schools with under-funded mandates,” and we see the use of the term “sanctions.” This term is not being used kindly—it has a negative connotation. While the politicians who developed and defend NCLB use the term “sanctions” to imply greater equity—i.e., those teachers or schools that aren’t making things more equal will be sanctioned—here it is used to imply that sanctions in fact unfairly target our most vulnerable schools, which need the most support. Depending on how the term is used, it suggests a different bully, so to speak, and a different victim. The language of rewards and punishments under NCLB is unequally distributed. Certain kinds of schools and students are punished, while others are rewarded; again, this is a distinctly racialized and class-related process.

In their article “High-Stakes Accountability in Urban Elementary Schools: Challenging or Reproducing Inequality?” researchers John Diamond and James Spillane found that the level of fear within a school depended upon whether it was considered low- or high-performing. This is a significant finding. In low-performing schools, the authors found that incentives were organized around “the threat of reconstitution” (2004, p. 1157); in contrast, in high-performing schools, “the incentives are structured around
rewards more than sanctions” (p. 1157). Thus, the school’s position and status impact how administrators orient themselves toward accountability policies, and thus the “reforms” that occur within that school. They write that:

The need to respond to the immediate pressures of probation status…led to several superficial responses that were cosmetic…accountability policy…serves as a threat, a way for school leaders to get the attention of teachers…Being placed on probation is likely depressing. It labels the school as a failure (2004, pp. 1157-1158).

Because low-income schools are on probation with much greater frequency than middle-class schools, there is a much higher percentage of low-income schools and students that are labeled as failures. The psychological impact of that alone is enormous, both on teachers and on students. Hanson (2000) wrote that:

…the tests transform people by assigning them to various categories…and then they are treated, act, and come to think of themselves according to the expectations associated with those categories…(qtd. in Au, 2009, p. 149).

Additionally, this evidence points to the fact that in low-income schools, because of the immediate threat of closure (and often a lack of resources and multiple big issues to address as once), these schools are able to do only quick and simple “fixes,” which the authors note are only superficial. There are no chances, and there is no time, for real change. Finally, when all of the resources within a given school are solely dedicated to getting off a probation list, there are serious questions about what areas are not given attention as a result. Diamond and Spillane, in fact, find that because of the distinct focus of getting off probation, low-performing schools:

…targeted certain students, certain grade levels, and certain academic subjects whereas high-performing schools focused equally on mathematics, and language arts instruction, emphasized improvement for all grade levels, and worked to enhance the learning opportunities of all students (2004, p. 1165).
The fear of probation and school closure, then, structurally impacts the curriculum and pedagogy within schools, and this occurs unequally. This is a central point. If, in schools that are already struggling, only some kids and some subjects are given attention, then these schools are receiving a narrowed curriculum with fewer options, and many students are not receiving the extra help they so desperately need because that help won’t be enough for them to pass the test. On the other hand, schools that are not labeled as failures are given an array of curricular options and attention for all students. The majority of these schools have fewer students in poverty, fewer students of color, and fewer ELLs and special education students as well. Both structurally, on a macro level, and within individual schools at the micro level, standardization exacerbates an already highly unequal educational landscape.

*Impoverished Curriculum & Pedagogy*

On a micro level—that is, within individual schools—there is worrisome evidence that high-stakes testing impoverishes pedagogy and curriculum more significantly in low-income schools because of its high-stakes penalizing structure. In their study of kindergarten, Bowdon and Desimone (2014) found that in high-poverty schools, center-based instruction decreased more than in other contexts. Thus, poorer students had greater exposure to teacher-centered instruction, and this increased after the imposition of NCLB; further, decreased time in art and pretend play were more dramatic in high-poverty schools. Valli et al. (2012) concluded that AYP (annual yearly progress, measured under NCLB) “creates a high degree of mobility [among teachers] and a tendency to reject activities that do not directly and obviously serve that one goal” (p. 19). Diamond and Spillane (2004) found that the context of the school greatly impacted
the school’s response to accountability measures. Specifically, whether or not the school was on probation became a major factor in its response. Probationary schools were largely guided by the threat of closure or reconstitution. One strategy was focusing solely on students who were close to passing the test. Essentially, the ones who were going to pass it no matter what didn’t need attention, while the school couldn’t waste resources on the students who were far from passing. The researchers write that: “They [the school] leave behind [the lowest-performing students] and focus on [the higher-performing]. So many principals are under this pressure. It’s the name of the game” (Valli et al., 2004, p. 1167). They conclude:

…given limited time to improve and very few additional resources, it is not surprising that probation schools scramble to make changes and often do so in ways that violate the stated intention and spirit of the policies. …the implementation of accountability policy may work against increased educational equality (Valli et al., 2004, p. 1171).

Because of the correlation between probationary schools and socioeconomic context—that is, the vast majority of schools on probation are found in high-poverty areas—it is fair to conclude that schools serving our most vulnerable students from our poorest communities often work under threats and in fear of school closure and job loss, as well as with fewer resources, in trying to increase test gains for their students.

Teacher Beliefs & Inequality

Teacher beliefs are integral to effective teaching and student achievement (e.g., Diamond & Spillane, 2004; NCATE, 2010; Boyd et al., 2008) and also play a role in creating more, or less, equitable conditions for students. Jacob Neumann (2013) argues that teacher beliefs and knowledge are always situated within a professional landscape (i.e., the school); thus, there is a reflexive relationship between the teacher and the
context that must be considered. And yet, despite the importance of teacher beliefs and the ways in which they help determine high-stakes outcomes for students, even experienced teachers are often unaware of their own beliefs (Kagan, 1992). This dissertation concerns itself with teacher beliefs in two ways. First, teacher beliefs regarding students across race and class lines will be considered, and second, teacher beliefs about policy will be considered.

Teaching efficacy is a key component of this study, which analyzes the ways in which teacher beliefs and policies intermingle. Teaching efficacy “refers to a teacher’s belief that he or she can reach even difficult students to help them learn” (Clark et al., working paper presented at AERA 2015). This is one of the few personal characteristics strongly correlated with student achievement, as a distinct connection has been found between teachers who believe in themselves and their students, and academic success on the part of their students. Teacher efficacy has been “partially associated with level of teaching experience” (Clark et al., 2015) in that it increases with years of teaching. Because the least prepared teachers often teach the most vulnerable students, who are low-income and students of color (Boyd et al., 2007), we should not expect the majority of teachers in low-income schools to demonstrate a strong belief in themselves or in their students. Our most vulnerable kids are getting teachers who are the least prepared to teach and the least likely to believe in their success. Arthur Wise, in speaking about Teach for America in particular, named the “multiplier effect” of having inexperienced teachers year after year, writing that:

…there is almost universal agreement on the value of teacher experience, and research indicates a multiplier effect on students’ performance when they are taught by ineffective teachers over multiyear periods (2008, p. 54).
Low-income students of color are the most likely to have the least-prepared teachers, and this will happen to these students every single year, from kindergarten through the twelfth grade.

In fact, teacher efficacy is found to be lower among teachers in low-income schools with students of color. As these researchers explain:

Research indicates that preservice teachers tend to have a less positive attitude towards students in urban public schools and also of minority students, specifically African-American and Hispanic students. These will help set their expectations of students and their ability to see the challenges as manageable or not (Clark et al., 2015).

Overall, preservice teachers feel more confident about teaching white American students in suburban schools than teaching students of color in urban schools. Meanwhile, efficacy has also been found to “increase resilience in minority students” (Clark et al., 2015). Therefore, the students who need their teachers to believe in them the most often end up with teachers who do not.

According to Fives and Buehl (2011), teacher beliefs have three main purposes: to filter information, frame situations, and guide intentions and actions. So, for example, when a teacher is making a decision about the reading ability of a child, that teacher will filter through information regarding the student’s race and social class status. If beliefs about these aspects of the child are skewed (i.e., if the teacher holds racist views of his or her students), the teacher may chronically misdiagnose students (Ohlsson, 2009). When teachers believe, for example, that a struggle with academic achievement among African-American students is attributable to a lack of discipline at home, negligent parents, or low student interest (Pang & Sablan, 1998), what teachers believe is that student outcomes are predetermined and therefore beyond their control. These
teachers, in turn, demonstrate little motivation to reach these students (Diamond & Spillane, 2004). As these researchers argue:

…the student composition of schools and school micropolitical contexts (teachers’ beliefs about students’ capabilities and their sense of responsibility for student learning) are deeply coupled. …in predominantly low-income and African-American schools, teachers emphasize students’ deficits and have a reduced sense of responsibility for student learning. In contrast, when a larger proportion of students are middle-income, white, or Asian, students’ intellectual assets are emphasized and teachers feel more accountable… (p. 76).

This coupling has dire consequences for students of color in low-income schools. Because they result in measuring students through test scores, and these test scores are the decision-makers of students’ futures, this conflagration of factors can be unbelievably damaging.

In terms of pedagogy, Clark et al. (AERA working paper, 2015) found in their own research with 159 preservice elementary school teachers that “the higher their teacher efficacy, the less they endorsed an authoritarian approach.” This finding may help explain why we often see a conflation of factors in low-income classrooms: white teachers with little teaching experience and little knowledge of their students or the community in which they live; low teacher efficacy; classroom strategies that focus on control and management; and, finally, punitive discipline.

Indeed, in both “Social Class and School Knowledge” (1981) and Ghetto Schooling (1997), Jean Anyon found clear distinctions in pedagogy from one social class setting to another. As explained earlier regarding “Social Class and School Knowledge,” in the low-income schools she found clear emphasis on control, in striking contrast to the more elite schools, in which student independence was a clear theme. In Ghetto Schooling, she found the teachers to be largely hostile and even abusive toward students
in low-income environments. If we use current research to tease out the reasons for this, we may conclude that this was a result of differences in teacher efficacy from low-income to elite schools, as well as assumptions about students’ embedded reproduction along raced and classed lines. Anyon’s analysis in *Ghetto Schooling* reveals important connections between teacher attitudes toward their students and test scores, citing findings that “the attitude of the student to the tester was the most important aspect in determining how students did on those standardized tests” (1997, p. 33). Significantly, the attitude of the tester has been found to be more important than the content covered on the test, which of course is consistently how achievement is measured. Thus, when we speak about “the achievement gap,” student and teacher relationships may play a much larger role than we currently acknowledge, and race and class may both work to shape the nature of these relationships in fundamental ways.

**Conclusion:**

In sum, students of color in high-poverty schools are more likely to be educated in schools that are far more standardized than affluent ones. This is because they have higher numbers of students with greater needs and who suffer from lower achievement scores. As a result, they face highly punitive consequences that promote a culture of fear and often compliance, while administrators and teachers feel immense pressure to rely on a scripted curriculum and teacher-centered pedagogy, with less access to creativity, play, and critical thinking. Furthermore, these low-income students are more likely to have teachers who do not believe in them throughout their K-12 educational careers. Knoester and Au (2017) summarize these findings when they write that:

…within the high-stakes testing environment, low-income children of color are effectively experiencing a type of segregated, test-based curriculum with more rote
memorization, more teacher centered instruction, less recess, less art, less music, less science, and less social studies than the type of curriculum that white, more affluent students receive in their high-performing schools (p. 8).

Overall, then, the research is clear. With the proliferation of high-stakes standardized testing, so often coupled with a standardized curriculum to match, a modern form of educational segregation has developed. Test results split schools into high- or low-performing, and these lines typically fall within the expected race and class distinctions so that high-performing equates with white and affluent, and low-performing equates with low-income students of color. This is done under the guise of meritocracy and neutrality. In turn, these schools experience either increased standardization or greater freedom depending on their designation. The quality of the curriculum, resources, and teaching tend to be more or less standardized depending on the social class and racial make-up of the school’s population. The cycle perpetuates itself.
CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK & METHODOLOGY

Personal Relationship to Theory

First, a word about theory and my own personal history with it. I entered doctoral work first and foremost as a teacher. In this role, I certainly felt resistant to theory and even somewhat anti-theory. The truth was, theory did not seem to help me on my first day of teaching when I was called a “white bitch,” or when my sophomore advisee became pregnant, or when I pleaded with a family member not to kick her daughter out of the house, which she did anyway. And theory had not really helped me in all of the joyous moments, either—like when my students fell in love with Shakespeare’s Macbeth and wrote their own, unbelievably powerful soliloquies (and learned what a soliloquy is!) or when they worked with teaching artists from the Studio Museum in Harlem to portray revolutionary change in Latin American countries. Theory, as far as I could tell, was absent from all of these moments and from my life as an educator in general. In the chaos and beauty of our daily school lives, it felt like practice was all that truly mattered. What were we going to do and how?? The practical demands of teaching outweighed anything else.

In my short time as a young scholar, I have alternately avoided and wrestled with theory. Ultimately, it was reading various academics and educators and their own experiences of coming into theory that began to change my mind. Eve Tuck (2009) has written that “reading and writing theory can be a project of stomach-quivering anxiety and trepidation” and added that “for many years I was so resistant to theory I even thought of myself as being anti-theory, in what I now understand was an attempt to reject a conversation that I was sure would reject me” (qtd. in Anyon, p. 131). This was an ah-
ha moment for me. I was, in part, intimidated by theory. I was also convinced that it was both irrelevant and a scholarly pursuit aimed mostly towards promoting one’s own intelligence. The personal and profound experiences of scholars illuminated the complexities I was feeling about theory and assured me that my insecurities were not unfounded.

I understand now that theory is not an “add-on.” I am not going to tack on some fancy names to my dissertation in order to sound intelligent, or “gesturally feature” an idea (Anyon, 2009). Instead, I hope to weave theory and experience together here in order to deepen and strengthen each. Theory is a bit like a wrapped gift. One’s experience is the gift wrapping—it’s interesting, it’s pretty, or maybe it’s awful; perhaps it is neat and tidy or, like my own gift wrapping, messy and off-center. But if you don’t open that up and see what’s inside, the whole thing doesn’t fully make sense. In the 1980s movie Splash, Darryl Hannah’s character, the mermaid, believes that the wrapped present is the gift. She says how beautiful it is; she doesn’t understand. The gift (or the experience, as it were) remains simplistic and lacks meaning. But when she takes off the bow and opens the paper, she has her own ah-ha moment: the gift, she sees, is for her. It is not an anonymous or random object. It has meaning now. Theory and experience need to come into conversation with each other in order to build new spaces of reflection and understanding. In Tuck’s words:

Writing and negotiating theory by attending to the felt sense…with an attention not to the objects but to the space between them, a curiosity in regards to scale, a spread towards new and forgotten words and images. Theorizing through the felt sense involves moving and pausing and seeing what resonates (qtd. in Anyon, 2009, p. 133).
We do not theorize to prove our position. Theory can support us in our instincts or in our experiences, of course, but we also theorize to “pause,” as Tuck explains, or to rethink, reflect, revisit. Foucault (1991) wrote: “When I write I do it above all to change myself and not to think the same thing as before” (p. 27). Here, he was referring to the process of writing, but I would extend that to theorizing as well. Theorizing can change us; it can shift the ground under our feet. Don’t we want that? If I thought the same things now as I did when I started doctoral work—wouldn’t that be a shame? And in large part, as shocking as this is for me—it is actually theory that has changed, and truly deepened, my thinking. Theory, as Stephen Ball (2013) has written about Foucault, has made me “uneasy” and “unsettled” (p. 3) in a beautiful way. “The challenge,” he explained, is to be disconcerted by theory, “to be made to think in new spaces and to consider new possibilities for thought” (p. 5).

I have come to see, also, that good theory comes out of experience. In returning to my days as a high school teacher and my initial disdain for theory, I found Michael Dumas, who wrote “that the roots of my love for theory were planted not in the academy but in the kitchen and at the barber shop and in the back seat of the church van” (2009, p. 104). Theory is not separate from experience, and experience should not be separate from theory. My student—angry, troubled, far too old for her fifteen years—who called me a “white bitch” that day was, in fact, theorizing. She was theorizing out of her own experience, which had most likely taught her that white teachers did not give a damn about her or her life. I am ashamed to admit that she left school, and I never followed up with her—and so, it seems, her theorizing wasn’t all wrong. In the end, I did nothing to help her. And her theorizing led her to that conclusion before I realized it myself.
Without knowing it at the time, I, too, was theorizing—about my students and their needs, about teaching and curriculum. Theory and practice were interwoven, but I lacked the capacity to see that tapestry.

Finally, the theories I have found most powerful and important are the ones that Jean Anyon would call “useful” (1994). She writes:

By “useful,” I intend that such a theory would make usable recommendations to those who work for a more humanitarian, more equitable society, and, consequently, this theory will have a progressive effect on society itself…philosophy cannot be torn from its political context (Anyon, 1994, p. 117).

Anyon extended this idea in her book *Theory and Education* (2009) when she wrote:

…Critical social theory can be a powerful tool with which to make links between educational “inside” and “outside,” between past, present, and future, and between research design and larger social meanings…theory can point to the larger political and social meanings of what occurs in educational institutions and systems. As well, theory can embolden youth and community participants from whom theoretical engagement in general has been held (p. 3).

She notes the “deeply difficult and intellectually labor-intensive” (p. 9) work of developing one’s theoretical frame, and beautifully calls this a “personal universe of ideas.” This phrasing was transformative for me; theory did not need to be impersonal and frightening. Theory could be mine, to make sense of the world and to explore it more fully.

What follows, then, is a beginning to my personal universe of ideas.

*A Brief Overview of Theoretical Framings*

The three theoretical concepts critical to this dissertation are political economy, power, and reproduction. The theorists who shed light on the connections among these are Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu. Weaving these theories together
allows for a deeper and more complex interrogation and understanding of how these ideas actually work in school and society today.

**Marxism & Economic Inequality**

The oppression and privilege inherent in opposing social class categories, and the impacts on lived experiences and in particular one’s schooling, are central ideas in this work; thus Marxism is an important theoretical starting point. Marxism is a radical critique of industrial capitalism as an oppressive and unjust system that inevitably creates unequal class distinctions and exploits workers (at the bottom) for the profits of the capitalists (on the top). This lens views history as a struggle rooted in material existence and control over production (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006; Anyon, 1981). This economic organization determines and reproduces the educational system within it. Underpinning this system is ideology that justifies its existence. In schools, the ideologies of equity and meritocracy prevail—maintaining capitalism and fundamental class inequalities while manipulating people to believe that the system is fair. This work uses a Marxist theoretical approach by situating public schooling and policy within an unequal, capitalist system. I will argue that schools tend to reproduce this system (e.g., Bowles & Gintis, 1976) through policy, although this reproduction is not linear or consistent. However, this work extends Marxist theory and takes up the view that social class is only one piece of a larger puzzle.

**Bourdieu & Cultural Capital**

For the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, one’s relationship to the mode of production, or economic security, is central, but he extended Marx’s conception to include non-economic forms of culture as power. According to Bourdieu, there is in fact
a political economy of culture. Bourdieu wrote about four types of capital: economic capital (money and property), cultural capital (cultural goods and services), social capital (acquaintances and networks), and symbolic capital (legitimation) (Swartz, 1997).

Bourdieu saw a much broader view of labor than Marx (religious, familial, social, etc…) and how each of these carries its’ own kinds of power. He was interested in how we accumulate and convert this power to maintain or enhance our social positions (Swartz, 1997, p. 75). This study will analyze cultural capital through multiple lenses. The first is understanding the various kinds of capital students bring with them; the second is how schools and teachers interpret this capital, and inform their own practice in part through these conclusions; and the third is how students and families interpret their own capital to inform their decisions about school and school policies. Thus, social class as a rigid economic prescription does not do justice to the complexities of the relationships between and among communities, school, and educational policy. Furthermore, capital is central to analyzing the success of students in school, or lack thereof. The ways in which students and families possess and make use of various forms of capital to navigate standardized testing, for example, or the ways in which their capital may not be rewarded by the institution of school, become deeply important.

The second key notion of Bourdieu’s work that will be analyzed here is *habitus*. While the markers of cultural capital are broad (for example, a person in the middle-class would hold a college degree), habitus is individual and particular (whether one’s degree is from an Ivy League or a city college, for example, or whether one listens to classical or country music). Habitus gets to the nitty gritty of class distinction and the various small and profound ways we group ourselves. Habitus can be defined colloquially as all of the
“stuff” each individual carries that distinguishes one from the other, but that also
“functions to distinguish social classes from each other” (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006, p. 69). One definition (Bourdieu, 1990), defines Habitus as:

A system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them (Bourdieu, qtd. in Swartz, 1997, p. 101).

Habitus encompasses our dispositions and our practices, i.e., the kinds of music we listen to, the cars we drive, the brands of clothes we wear, and so on. These matter in part because “class inequalities and the dominance of one class over another occur covertly…symbolic power is harnessed to maintain class distinctions and the appearance of their naturalness” (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006, p. 69-70). Habitus also involves the ways in which we think about ourselves and our aspirations. Because our habitus impacts our aspirations (will we fail if we try X?...) it impacts our actions (yes, we will fail, so we won’t try X…), thereby contributing to the reproduction of our social standing. Habitus involves not only how we think of ourselves, but how others perceive us. Bourdieu has written that social class is a matter of reality as well as perception. We see the role of habitus and cultural capital in Jean Anyon’s “Social Class and School Knowledge,” in the ways in which teachers responded to these (or, in their eyes, the lack of these) in their students, and reflected the perceptions of cultural capital and habitus through their choices around curriculum and pedagogy. We see it in this study as well, though in less linear ways. For example, the teachers in the “Standardized School” lamented the students’ lack of cultural capital, but did not blame them, and instead worked hard to help move their students up the social ladder rather than, like the teachers
in Anyon’s study, accept their position and attribute a naturalness to it. However, the students’ own cultural capital, broadly speaking, acted more as a barrier to success on standardized tests rather than as a bridge. So the disconnect between school and home becomes a real concern.

Reproduction was a key concern for Bourdieu and is a critical notion here. This dissertation will employ Bourdieu’s understanding of symbolic forms and processes as being essential in the reproduction of power. Standardized testing is one example of a symbolic process that contributes to the potential reproduction of students’ social standing. When we label students with a test score that wields tremendous symbolic and educational power, this serves to create and reinforce distinctions and hierarchies among students. Their symbolic access to these hierarchies in the first place results at least in part from their cultural capital (i.e., English language ability, their parents’ knowledge of the New York City public school system, etc.)—thus reinforcing and reproducing the status quo. While this is certainly overly deterministic, the distinctions among schools and students shed light on the circuits of reproduction in deeply important ways.

Foucault: Discursive Formations & Power

Finally, Michel Foucault concerned himself (in part) with the way in which discursive formations came to be seen as natural and self-evident (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006). We see this historically and currently within educational policy. Beginning with the social efficiency movement and the way in which race and ability became bound as natural, to the present time in which test scores tend to track along lines of race and class, an educational discourse assigning a naturalness to inequality has permeated the landscape. Foucault’s conception of the power/knowledge dynamic will
also be crucial in analyzing the ways in which policies come to play such a powerful role. He wrote that power produces reality (qtd. in Ball, 2013, p. 7), and this research is concerned with the ways in which the apparatus of standardized testing and standardized curriculum wields power over the lives of students and teachers, and produces an educational reality for both groups.

Resistance

Critical to each of these theories is resistance. Foucault believed that power was discursive and that power relations could be changed (Ball, 2013). Bourdieu similarly criticized any method of theorizing that did not take agency into account. Marx was hopeful that the proletariat would rise against the capitalists and that, ultimately, capitalism itself would fail. Resistance, therefore, takes a central position in theorizing throughout this work. People have agency. They do not simply react obediently to powerful mandates. There is a host of journalistic and scholarly research shedding light on resistance in public schools, including resistance as gaming the system, which has involved changing student test scores. In this study, there were small acts of resistance and much larger ones. Policy mandates are real and demonstrate economic, political, and social power; yet there is no policy without both consent and struggle, and historically as well as today we see this tension playing out on multiple fronts.

Research Design: An Overview

Comparative Case Study

This study was conceived as a comparative case study, and the comparative piece is deeply central to the purpose of this work. While I did conduct research in three separate schools, I determined after the research phase that one school wasn’t relevant. In
this third school, there were also complications around my placement. This occurred because the principal set me up in a sixth grade ICT, ELA classroom. The teachers in this class were struggling in significant ways. The general education teacher was new, and clearly challenged by the work. The other problem was that, while the principal and I emailed about research, she never communicated this to these teachers. So, when I showed up on the first day, assuming the teachers were expecting me, they had absolutely no idea who I was. In addition, they were very resistant to my presence, and even angry that I was there. I did email the general education teacher to both apologize and explain my study to her directly, but she never responded. I decided not to try and continue researching in their class, both because I didn’t want them to be uncomfortable, and because I knew this classroom environment was not strong, and would therefore not be appropriate for this work. Instead, I ended up conducting research in the same school, in a sixth-grade social studies classroom with an experienced, caring teacher. However, because social studies isn’t tested, this research ultimately felt irrelevant. I hope to use it in the future. This was a frustrating and unfortunate turn of events, but it speaks to the complexity of this work.

This research project was a six-month, qualitative case study across two public elementary schools in contrasting social class settings. A case study is an empirical inquiry investigating a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context (Yin, 2014). The “case” in this study is the teachers’ perceptions of standardized testing and curriculum in relation to their work with students across social class. This work is “an opportunity to shed empirical light about some theoretical concepts or principles...[to] form a working hypothesis...to generalize [rather than] contribute to
abstract theory building” (Yin, 2014, pp. 40-41). In other words, this study builds new understanding in an under-researched area—that is, the nexus of standardized testing, standardized curriculum, and social class.

Studying one school site would not be enough to accomplish this task, as I sensed, through my personal and professional experiences, that engagement with standardized testing and curriculum were not simplistic and objective experiences. Rather, the role that testing and curriculum both play in schools in deeply intertwined with the contexts of the school and the students. I set out to unmask the “neutrality” of testing and curriculum. Of course, using Jean Anyon’s “Social Class and School Knowledge” as a foundational text also meant that I needed to build in a comparative lens, as she did. I was so moved and “schooled” by the differences that Anyon painted among these five research sites, and it is only now that I am beginning to understand the incredible amount of work—both intellectual and logistical—that fieldwork so complex must have taken. I was quite overwhelmed by the work involved in my own (smaller) study, which I will discuss at some length.

Teacher Voice

In researching educational policy for three years before beginning this research, I found myself constantly reading (often boring) documents written by foundations (the Gates Foundation, for example), or institutions (such as Brookings and Thomas Fordham). Other documents were published by universities or policy institutes. In addition to being incredibly dry, I noticed that the voices of teachers and students were almost entirely absent. Sometimes, teachers were mentioned. Teachers were talked about—what they needed, what would help them improve, etc. Occasionally, there were
some teacher quotes. But generally speaking, the real, day-to-day, complex experiences of teachers contending with standardized testing and/or standardized curriculum just were not there. Furthermore, the experiences I and my colleagues shared—anxiety over testing, being given policy mandates without having any input, having Common Core Standards thrown at us with no preparation—were not coming up in most of the literature I was reading. In sum, there was a disconnect between the academic work I was reading and the voices and experiences of myself and other teachers. I became committed, early on, to the idea of creating a policy study with teacher voices at the center. While I absolutely wished to include students, I was intimidated by the requirement of approval from the Internal Review Board (IRB) for the Department of Education; I was told that adding students would make it harder to get approval. So, I scrapped the idea.

Using teachers as a unit of analysis felt incredibly important. Building on an important methodology among critical race theory researchers, this work uses narrative and counterstorytelling as a central means of interrogating policy, juxtaposed with the wording and pronouncements of the policies themselves. Voice and personal experience are central within critical race theory as well as within Foucault’s conceptions of history and power, where truth is viewed as error, and the spaces of deep importance are those of ambiguity, fragmentation, and struggle. In Critical Race Theory (CRT), counternarratives “counteract the stories of the dominant group” (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006, p. 35). In this work, the voices of teachers counteract the dominant and oft-heard mantras of politicians, lobbyists, and policymakers. Here, voice is a method. Personal and community experiences, stories, and narratives all challenge a solely quantitative approach to
documenting inequity or oppression (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006, p. 35). Policy directly, and unforgivingly, impacts the daily work of teachers.

One example of when this began to really interest me was in my second or third year of teaching, when we were informed that our students would have to take, and pass, the ELA Math Regents. We were informed of this in the fall, and the students would be expected to take the tests that spring. The school where I was teaching had previously been exempt from the Regents, so knowledge about the tests or preparation for them was not part of my “teacher toolkit.” To put it more simply, I had no idea what to do. The teachers, and the school, were caught off guard. In addition, we were working with a disadvantaged population of students—chronically overage and under-credited, with a majority of either special education or English Language Learners. In other words, our student population was exactly those students who had not been successful on the Regents in New York City. Perhaps this was why our students were allowed to pass with a 55 (which would later change to 65, keeping up with the standard in the rest of the city). None of this seemed to matter, though. Our students now needed these two exams or they would not be able to receive their high school diplomas. In that first year, a handful of students were unable to walk at graduation.

I knew instinctively that there was more at play here. I knew that test scores were intertwined with the lives of students, teachers, and schools. These were not the objective numbers they claimed to be. And I knew, too, how new policies could dramatically shift your work, your life, with the roll of the dice. My life as a teacher became more fused with anxiety than ever before. I also had the distinct feeling that I was not in control, and that I was trying to prepare my students as best I could—without really knowing what
they might face. It was a terrible feeling. I resented the fact that outside forces—the Department of Education, private organizations, politicians at the state and federal levels—could infringe so much on my life and work as a teacher. At no point, ever, did I view the introduction of testing as helpful. Rather, this new addition stoked fear, took time and energy away from the teaching and learning most of us felt mattered, and gave the school a colder, less “family”-like feeling. Now, the students had a little less trust in us. We couldn’t protect them like we’d said we would. So, I wanted to conduct research that would shed light on the experiences and emotions of teachers, who do the work that policy requires—most of the time without their consent.

The Realities of Research

In my proposal, I described this fieldwork as a mixed-methods, comparative case study. It did not end up that way. My goals and my outcomes did not end up matching, and I will reflect on that here as I did throughout my research. My proposal called for the inclusion of a teacher survey, because I wanted a quantitative component and felt that a survey would lend a broader understanding of the teachers throughout the school, followed by one or two focus groups with the survey respondents. However, at both schools, there were no responses to the survey I sent out or the notes about a focus group (which I sent out anyway, thinking it would still, even without the surveys, be a terrific source of data collection). The distinction between daydreaming about this research and actually doing it became wider than expected. When I did not receive responses from the teachers to the survey, I sent it again via email. But I did not want to push too hard. I knew their lack of response wasn’t because they were rude or uncaring; rather, they were incredibly busy individuals. In retrospect, I should have pursued this further, perhaps by
handing out hard copies of the survey at a professional development meeting for example. But I was overwhelmed myself, and the logistics of staying at either school in the late afternoons were complicated, as I needed to pick up my children and get them home.

The logistics of spending enough time in each classroom and in each school were a constant struggle. I was unprepared for just how stressful the logistics of this project would be. The other reality was that I was caring for a five-year-old and an infant. I was not sleeping through the night, and, after an interrupted night of sleep, I was typically awakened at 5:00 a.m. by the baby. By the time I arrived at school sites around 8:30, I had been up for almost four hours. I was exhausted. This feels important to share as part of the methodology, because it sheds light on some of the realities of this kind of work, and the challenges of being a working mother. Financially, we were lucky that my spouse’s salary and help from my mother allowed me to do unpaid labor three days a week while also paying a small fortune for childcare. This was truly a luxury. I would otherwise not have been able to complete this research. As a result of my own fatigue and the logistical struggles of this work, I didn’t push as hard as I should have when things didn’t go as planned. When teachers did not respond to my survey, I didn’t push. I let it go. This was also because of my own researcher identity, as an “insider/outsider.” When I began, I was not aware of just how sensitive I would be to the needs of the participant teachers and to my own feelings of intrusiveness. I was keenly aware of how much I “bothered” my participants.
“Insider/Outsider”

I knew from my own experience what it was like to have guests come into your classroom. Even when these individuals came with the intent of helping, they could be distracting and intrusive. Students would stop their work to ask them questions or ask me about them. They didn’t know their way around, so I would have to answer questions about where things were or what we were doing. These small aggravations could derail entire lessons with particularly talkative or energetic students. And so, upon entering my two school sites, I was keenly, perhaps hyper, aware of my own intrusion. I did not want to be a burden to the teachers. This meant that there were times when I had questions but didn’t ask them because it was clear to me that the teachers were tired, or hungry, perhaps on their way to get some lunch. At one school site, the time that I was the most able to talk with teachers was during their lunch, which was really short (about twenty-five minutes). While this was our best opportunity to discuss the research, it was also their only break in a long day. I didn’t want to force them to talk to me for the whole time after talking with kids all morning. I knew they needed some quiet. I also wanted to talk about fun topics to build a rapport, not just discuss work all day long with them. I was determined to build relationships with the teachers as much as possible, and this meant, at times, foregoing my list of questions and just hanging out. Some days, as I headed home on the train, I teared up in frustration at how little I had accomplished that day, feeling like I had wasted important time. But I understood that fostering these relationships was a meaningful pursuit, and that the quality of my research would suffer without a rapport. It wouldn’t happen in a day. I had to dedicate significant amounts of time to create
connections and trust between myself and my participant teachers, while spending just one day a week in each school.

Trust was also a murkier matter than I had anticipated. I am a sociable, friendly person. But typically, I am not in a position to judge others and the work they do. While I insisted in both my research design and my communications with schools that this work would not involve criticisms of teachers, I realized in the beginning that perhaps there would be some critiques of teacher work. In any effort to comprehend how policy decisions are made on the ground and the impacts they have, the work of teachers is incredibly important and also open for critique. Teachers, after all, do make choices about how they interact with policy. So, while trying to gain the trust of teachers, I also understood that this work might involve a perceived deceit. I wrestled a lot with the position of becoming chummy with teachers whose work I may openly criticize in the future. Criticizing teachers feels particularly awful in light of the current political context, in which teachers face constant scrutiny from all sides. I stand strongly in support of public school teachers and have no interest in adding to the clamor against them. With all of that said, we all need to hold each other accountable, and I am coming to view myself as part of an educator community in which we hold each other up, in part through critique. Especially so that educators increase their own power, we must communicate openly and honestly and use our disagreements or criticisms to empower and fuel change. It is my hope, however, that any criticisms are understood in context, and that their full complexity is clear. As discussed in the introduction, the method of critical bifocality was employed to investigate the relationships between and among macro structures and the lived experiences inside schools across contrasting social class settings. This critical
method analyzes “lived experiences in the context of history, structure, and institutions and across the power lines of privilege and marginalization” (Fine & Weis, 2012, p. 174). As these authors write, many educational stories are partial and incomplete, and “distort the project and problem of educational injustice” (p. 195). They conclude that:

...theoretically separating structure from lives, global from local, and privilege from marginalization is no longer sufficient. The interlocking circuits of dispossession and privilege are theoretically, politically, and methodologically critical if we are to understand current inequities and reimagine education for the collective good (Fine & Weis, 2012, p. 195).

As educators, we must be open to contemplate how we function within these circuits of dispossession and perhaps contribute to current inequities. We cannot re-imagine education if we are dishonest.

Research Bias

Before launching into my own research, I had a few years to wrestle with my obvious bias against the standardization of schooling. I became an adjunct lecturer at Hunter College and worked closely with student teachers as they navigated the politics and realities of teaching for the first time. Some of these students appreciated the curricular packages they were handed because they felt guided and supported by them. Others believed that standardized testing played a crucial role in understanding student learning, growth, and how to move them forward. These opinions complicated my own vision and gave me the space and discourse to openly consider other points of view. By the time my research began, I understood that I could encounter a wide range of views on standardized testing and curriculum, and that my work would entail uncovering and unpacking these views rather than attempting to change them. Additionally, my work at Hunter allowed me to see many classrooms in which students and teachers contended
with standardized testing and curriculum, but which were still meaningful and positive spaces. In other words, I saw that the existence of these elements did not necessarily translate into a terrible school experience for teachers or students. Like any part of schooling, this was not going to be black and white. I knew I might find teachers in support of standardized testing, or curriculum from standardized packages, mixed in with excellent teaching, joyful students, and meaningful work. I understood that I would have to be very cautious about not allowing my biases to shape my analysis of these schools and the hard work of the teachers.

However, as C. Wright Mills and others have written, scholars should “not split their work from their lives” (1959, p.195). In fact, doing so would cut off “a major source of insights, hypotheses, and validity checks” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 38). My biases as a teacher with a particular set of views could also act as a strength for me in this work. One way my researcher identity helped me was by giving me some access to the teachers. The fact that I had teaching experience, I believe, helped the teachers to trust my work and my intentions. I was not a random, outside observer. Rather, I had some understanding of their work and would, perhaps, be fair in my own judgments as a result. Additionally, I could empathize with the teachers—with the stress, fatigue, frustration, joy, and sadness that each experienced throughout our semester together. When, inevitably, I observed a moment in which a teacher wasn’t at her best or a lesson in which a teacher wasn’t her strongest, I reached into my own history as a teacher and drew on that empathy. I knew firsthand how challenging the work is, and that gave me enormous insights into the lives of my participants.
Research Goals

Maxwell (2005) differentiates among three categories of goals: personal, practical, and scholarly (p. 16). My personal goals have been alluded to already. As a former classroom teacher, I felt personally affronted by the distant and heavy-handed way in which educational policy was determined and the dominant role it then came to play in my own classroom. I wanted to uncover whether other educators had this same kind of antagonistic relationship to policy, and/or how they understood the two policies I felt weighed heavily—standardized testing and curriculum. It also became a personal challenge to contribute to the discourse around policy as a teacher. I was determined to finally prioritize the voices of teachers.

One practical goal holds deep importance for me in this work: contributing to the discourse toward creating policies that are helpful and meaningful for educators. Because my relationship to policy was often negative when I was in the classroom, I felt determined to contribute to a better kind of policy—policy that teachers would appreciate, and that would contribute to their work, rather than hinder it. If I could figure out some of the problems with current policies as teachers view them, then perhaps we could problem-solve some solutions.

In addition, this work involves two central scholarly goals. The first is understanding the meaning(s) around standardized testing and curriculum for the participant teachers. How do these teachers make sense of standardized testing and standardized curriculum? The second, intimately connected to the first, is unpacking the ways in which each context influences the actions and beliefs of the teachers. As will be
explored further, the school contexts are incredibly different, and so are the ways in which each environment plays a role in the teachers’ lives.

Finally, as Allan Luke encourages (2010), I wanted to bring to life the existing quantitative data demonstrating persistent patterns of educational inequality. In revisiting Anyon’s “Social Class and School Knowledge,” Luke writes that it remains a “model” for instantiating quantitative data, and:

Part of the current push towards narrowly defined “evidence-based” policy entails a writing off of qualitative ethnographic and discourse-analytic work as “soft” and non-generalisable. This is a mischievous and convenient amnesia (2010, p. 168).

It is my deeply held view as a former classroom teacher that the nuance and ecology of schools and classrooms must be observed and analyzed in order to create an authentic picture of policy and its intended and unintended effects. Large-scale, quantitative work has value, but it cannot address the localized and complex ways in which individuals and policy coincide and the impacts of this on teachers and schools.

Research Questions

Overarching: How do public elementary school teachers make sense of standardized testing and standardized curriculum in their classrooms, across contrasting social class settings?

Pedagogy, Curriculum, and Classroom Work

- How do teachers perceive the relationship between their pedagogical methods and standardized testing and curriculum across contrasting social class settings?
- How do teachers understand their work with students as being shaped by standardized testing and standardized curriculum across contrasting social class settings?

Teacher Beliefs & Expectations

- How do teachers perceive the relationship among standardized testing, standardized curriculum, and equity?
Resistance

- Do teachers resist standardized testing and curriculum, and if so, how and why?

Gaining Access

I waited a full year for CUNY’s IRB approval, an incredibly frustrating experience. I felt very strongly that I was wasting precious time. I submitted my proposal online, and every couple of weeks, I would receive one bit of feedback. After resubmitting, I would get another small note to change something else. After months of this, I finally gained the courage to complain, and the process became more streamlined and sped up. Once I had CUNY’s approval, In November of 2016, I submitted my proposal to the New York City Department of Education, and it was approved in December. I was stunned. This meant, however, that if I wanted to begin my research that school year (and I desperately didn’t want to wait until September), I would have to act fast.

Selecting & Naming Schools

I jumped into the work of connecting to schools. Because both my spouse and I are educators, we thankfully have many public school connections. We utilized these to open doors. In my proposal, I had submitted a form letter for principals, which is what I sent to reach out. I emailed a school principal with whom I worked because of my supervisory role through Hunter College. He was open to this idea, so I emailed the entire staff, but I had no responses. I didn’t want to push. Through my spouse’s work, she was able to connect me to two school principals, and these ultimately became the two schools in the study. I emailed each of them, and when they responded positively to the idea, I visited each to meet in person. I sat down with each principal to explain the scope and purpose of
the study. I brought my IRB letter of approval. At one school, the principal took me on a
tour of the school and introduced me to the third-grade teachers briefly, because they
were in class. The principal and teachers determined ahead of time that I would research
in these two classrooms. I couldn’t believe that my study was actually coming to life. I
felt incredible gratitude toward the principal and the teachers for welcoming me and was
eager to get started. At the other school, I met with the principal who then invited me to
return for a professional development with teachers in order to present my idea to them in
person. I was nervous. I stood up in the meeting, introduced myself and the purpose of
the study, and handed out fliers that I had also submitted for IRB approval. The
difference in process here was that the principal of the second school left the decision-
making up to the teachers. This hinted at an important distinction between the two school
cultures. After the meeting, one teacher approached me and asked if I would be interested
in kindergarten. I gave her an emphatic “Yes!” A few days later, I received an email from
a second teacher. A few weeks after that, the principal informed me that two third-grade
teachers were interested as well. Once again, I felt stunned and ecstatic that my proposal,
written alone in libraries and at kitchen tables, was bubbling to life.

To be honest, some of my fieldwork decisions were fueled more by anxiety, fear,
and excitement rather than the purity of my research design. I jumped into these two
school sites because time was running out and because they were both willing to invite
me in. One school was the perfect fit for the original intent of this study. It is a strong
school that is test-oriented. It was important that I was not in a “failing” school, because
the purpose was not to critique an individual school or the teachers there, but to critique
policy. The other school, however, did not fit the original research design. I planned on
researching in two or three schools where standardized testing and curriculum are utilized. In the beginning, I was concerned about the this school’s lack of either. However, as it turned out, I was able to paint an incredible contrast. The distinctions between these schools make it tricky to tease out which differences stemmed from policy and which did not. I struggled with this as I analyzed my data. But ultimately, I felt that two divergent visions of schooling emerged, and this analysis can lend itself to concrete debates and discussions about the role of policy in effecting school culture and the work of educators and students.

School Context

* A Comparative Lens

There is a great history of comparative scholarship (e.g. Anyon, 1981; Abu El-Haj, 2006; Perez, 2011) which serves to illuminate critical distinctions, possibilities, and inequities among or between different research sites. In her dissertation, Madeleine Perez (2011) compares the high-school admissions process for two groups of New York City eighth grade students along somewhat predictable lines of race and class. She details the variety of social, economic, and structural mechanisms that serve to reinforce *choice* for the more elite students while reproducing the limitations for the poorer students of color. She concludes in part that choice and equity are false notions in an unequal society where some have recognized resources and others do not. Thea Abu El-Haj’s work (2006) compares two schools in New York City, (one private and one public) separated along similar lines of race and class, and she researches as the staff in each context work towards different projects meant to increase justice and equity. Both of these beautiful works resist simplification and instead highlight the nuanced and incredibly complex
work in schools. The comparative lens in each sets up a “tale of two cities,” and the ways in which the outcomes for each group are reflective of access to structural, familial, social, and economic resources. Both studies, in other words, bring structural inequity to the fore as they aim to understand the day-to-day workings of key institutions. They also evoke clear tensions around the meanings of equity and justice, and the work entailed in achieving these dreams. In developing a comparative case study approach, I hoped to build on the work of Perez and Abu El-Haj, and illuminate the struggles for equity as attached to current educational reforms within specific social class contexts. I chose two schools that are comparable in fundamental ways, but which offer a dramatically disparate view of public schooling and the possibilities for educational equity.

The first site is a high-poverty school with a large population of English Language Learners. It is a school that implements both New York City and New York State standardized tests, and that utilizes standardized curriculum packages. I call this school “The Standardized School” because of its’ impressive wealth of resources. It felt important to choose a name that signified a positive approach to the school. Many people associate high-poverty schools with certain images, including run-down buildings; uncaring teachers; overcrowding. This school, by contrast, has its’ own building; the teachers are relatively experienced and care about the students; the classrooms have many materials, and do not feel overcrowded. The second school consists of a population of students that is more middle-class and whiter than the Standardized School. I named this school “The Progressive School” because of its’ clear vision of progressive education. Progressive education insists that children’s development must be understood to plan teaching and learning. Rote learning and memorization are frowned upon from a
progressive standpoint, replaced with active learning and inquiry. Doing, exploring, and playing are all important components of progressive education. Furthermore, the emotional lives of children, their interests and their passions, are all central to their learning.

In selecting these two schools, it was important that there be comparability. The Standardized School and the Progressive School sit in the same borough of New York City, about thirteen miles apart. They are both k-5 elementary schools, with the Standardized School continuing to grow and add one grade each year. Moreover, each school is well-run; the administration in each context has a good reputation among parents and staff. At the Progressive School, the same woman has been Principal for seventeen years, over double the city average, and is clearly beloved as evident through my conversations with teachers. Ninety-eight percent of teachers view her as “effective (insideschools.org).” Additionally, ninety percent of the teachers say they would recommend the school (and one of the teachers in the study sends both her children to the school). At the Standardized School, the current Principal opened the school and has been there since, for a total of four years as of this writing. According to www.insideschools.org, ninety-four percent of the teachers believe the Principal is “effective.” In conversations with the teachers there, which will be addressed later in more detail, it did become clear that there were issues of trust and some distance between them. However, neither administration was struggling. Ninety-three percent of teachers at the Standardized School said in their school climate survey that they would recommend the school. This was very important, because in my research design I was insistent upon working in two schools that operated with a reasonable degree of success, so that I could
focus my observations on the impacts of policy or the lack thereof, rather than on the
dysfunction of a school environment. Another similarity between the two environments
was the resources available to the students. While both schools are technically over
capacity, neither felt overcrowded or chaotic. The classrooms in each school were large
and spacious. The Standardized School offered a dual-language program which families
could opt-in to. They also offered gym, music, art, and library. The Progressive School
had a richer variety of resources including a garden and robotics, but the point is that
students in each context were offered an enriched experience, beyond simple basics.
Another way to say this is that it felt as though student access to equity was comparable.
Despite the overall similarities between the two environments, though, distinctions
emerged (some small, and some much more significant) that are important to highlight,
as they would inform the data collection, analysis, and the findings of this study.

The size of the two schools differs. At the time of research, the Standardized
School serviced students through third grade, and at the time of this writing, they had
added fourth. The Progressive School is significantly larger, with a student population of
about 700, while the Standardized School’s student population hovers around 351
(inside-schools.org). The Standardized School is still very new, while the Progressive
School has existed for over twenty years. This is an important distinction, as the history
of the Progressive School has allowed it to build a reputation, while the Standardized
School is only beginning to build their own. The history of the Progressive School—both
its’ opening by families and the fact that it opened before the current neoliberal
standardization was in full swing—has afforded the school some freedom to resist that
standardization and to maintain its’ original, progressive vision. This contrasts with the
Standardized School which opened in the context of the Common Core, and No Child Left Behind (which would soon be revised as ESSA). This history thus contributes to the distinctions between the two school cultures. Importantly, both schools have a school culture that is professional, responsible, and caring. In other words, neither school faces an eroded or negative school culture, which is again deeply important for the purposes of this study. The Progressive School, through its’ history of political activism and resistance to policy, maintains a very high number of families who opt-out of tests, and a holistic, progressive vision of teaching and learning guided by inquiry and performance-based assessments. Embedded into this vision is teacher autonomy and professionalism. Teachers absolutely feel respected, and are both treated and act as intellectual and creative thinkers and decision-makers. Ninety percent of the teachers have three or more years of experience; the teachers in this research all have significantly more than that.

The teacher turnover at the school is very low. The Standardized School, operating with the pressures of standardization and with a population of students who need significant support, maintains a test-oriented school culture. Part of this involves ensuring that teachers are obedient to the requirements of test preparation and to the standardized curricula. Thus, rather than acting as autonomous intellectuals, teachers at the Standardized School act more as obedient workers. They don’t enjoy the creative processes of curriculum design or pedagogical decision-making; rather, their work tends to be much more mechanistic, following the protocols and curricula that have already been put in place. The culture is therefore less creative and free, and more rigid. There is a sense that administrators don’t listen to the needs or interests of teachers in the way they would like, setting up a distance between teachers and administrators not felt at the
Progressive School. A paramount feature of the culture at the Standardized School is fear. There was a sense of fear around how much children could do, and how well they would perform, while I was there.

The most fundamental distinctions between these schools arise from the social class of the families and the linguistic context of the students. Eighty-eight percent of students at the Standardized School require free or reduced-price lunch, which is a critical indicator of poverty. At the Progressive School this number is much smaller, hovering around twenty-eight percent. Furthermore, while the PTA at the Standardized School has fundraised about $7,000, the PTA at the Progressive School has about $250,000 at its’ disposal. This dramatic difference in fundraising exposes a vast inequity between these two schools: the ability of the parent community to raise money for their children’s education. On the school’s PTA site, members ask in red bold print that families who are able give $1,500 for one enrolled child and $2,500 for two. A second great inequity is exposed through the linguistic make-up of the student bodies in each school. At the Standardized School, 46%, or close to half, of the students, are labeled English Language Learners. This means that there could be many more students who struggle with English but who do not have this label yet, especially because the school is still young. At the Progressive School, this number is 3%, a very low percentage for a city as linguistically diverse as New York.

These two schools in and of themselves demonstrate the existence of a two-tiered system in New York City. While both have solid reputations, the financial and linguistic resources at one, and the lack of those resources at another, indicate that racial/ethnic, and socio-economic segregation in New York City are alive and well (e.g. Perez, 2011).
Two schools, thirteen miles apart, contend with dramatically disparate student populations and needs, with vastly different amounts of money at their disposal. Mapped onto this segregation, moreover, is the role of policy. While one set of children enjoy greater familial privilege, they also attend a school in which they enjoy an enriched education, free from the narrow constraints of standardization. The other group of children, however, contend with the stresses of poverty, language acquisition, and standardization. In comparing these two sites, I wanted to shed light on the ways in which economic and social capital serve to reinforce the constraints and freedoms of each group of students. The economic, social, and political factors that maintain and enforce this segregation, and which contribute to a distinct educational experience, are complicated, nuanced, and important to examine. Parent and teacher conceptions of cultural capital, and the way those influence their decision-making, become especially significant. It became clear through conversations with teachers at the Standardized School, for example, that families supported standardized testing and viewed it as a fundamental gateway towards success; therefore, an opt-out movement at that school might face tremendous resistance. This view is intimately embedded in the socio-economic and linguistic context of these families. Teachers, to a degree, echoed these sentiments in support of the families efforts to secure a foothold for their children. At the Progressive School, where many of the families were white and middle class or wealthy, standardized testing was rarely viewed as an important tool for their children’s future, as these families had access to so many other tools. Teachers there viewed standardization as an impediment to their students lives, echoing concerns of parents. This distinction in how standardization is framed by families is fundamental to this work.
Beginning Research

On my first day at the Standardized School, I left the house early and traveled for an hour and a half. I had planned the trip ahead of time but was still nervous about trains running on time and finding my way. I wanted to make a good first impression. The school’s neighborhood was totally unfamiliar to me. I entered the school, chatted with the security agent as she checked my ID and signed me in, and went up to the third floor. Class was just in session, so I entered as quietly and seamlessly as possible. The students were seated on the carpet in the meeting area, and they all turned around. The teachers didn’t miss a beat, explaining that I was visiting to learn about their school. They asked what I would like to be called. I answered “Ms. B,” aware that teachers here did not use their first names, and the teachers told the kids to say “Good morning.” They all called out in unison, “Good morning, Ms. B!” My research had officially begun! I sat in the back of the circle at a desk, stunned and thrilled to begin this work that I had written about for over a year. I nearly forgot to open my iPad and take notes. Once I did, I was unsure what to take notes about. The classroom observation protocol (see appendix A) that I had created in advance turned out to be really helpful in this regard—it guided me when I was completely unsure of what I should be doing. Again, the realities of research complicated the proposal and plans that I had made ahead of time.

My first day at the Progressive School was similar. I had another long commute and signed in with the security guard. I struggled to find my way, anxious that something horrible would happen and derail the schedule. My first stop was the kindergarten classroom, where we all went to the rug for morning meeting. Children wanted to know who I was—they were more talkative and less filtered than the third graders at the
Standardized School. I introduced myself as “Jodie” because I knew this was a first-name school. I told them I was there to learn all about the work they were doing in school. On my second visit, one student sat in my lap for morning meeting. On other days, students held my hand; I moved students’ feet so they weren’t kicking another person; I had quiet side conversations with restless students about their interests. The talkative and open nature of young children lent a very casual vibe to my time in this room. I felt very comfortable in the kindergarten space because my own son was the exact same age.

There were challenges to researching in a space with young children, whose sense of boundaries was often limited. I tried to follow the teachers’ examples and go with the flow as much as possible, with a keen awareness of whether I was disruptive and distracting or helpful. Because of the children’s young age, I often found myself pulled into play/work or conversations, and I felt that was important to helping me become part of the classroom community to some degree. However, these activities took me away from note taking, and I found myself frequently running to my iPad and vigorously typing as much as I could about the previous thirty minutes. I also found myself constantly engaging in play as well as educational analysis in the same moments, which was challenging. For example, one day I was building in the block area with two boys while considering whether there was a lot of free play because of the lack of testing, or whether it would exist here even if standardized testing did as well. At the Standardized School, things were quieter and more orderly, and it was easier to focus on note taking. But the teacher in me still decided to work with students more often than not, raising internal questions about my role and complicating my ability to observe everything.
The school context is a complicated matter. The neighborhood is not luxurious; the school sits on a busy avenue, and within walking distance are McDonald’s, Burger King, a few bodegas, and a tire shop. But the neighborhood and the school are in the midst of gentrification. Evidence of this lies in the new coffee shop two blocks away, opened by one of the school’s parents, with latte and wine selections displayed on a chalkboard and an outdoor garden in the back. The third-grade class, however, was the young school’s first class, and teachers do not describe these students as part of the gentrified group. According to them, there are major differences in social class between the new crop of kindergarten students and the third graders.

The working-class nature of the third-grade student body revealed itself during one of the first days of my research. During the lesson, the teacher asked for students to share their parents’ jobs. The list included the following:

- delivery
- taxi driver
- cleaning houses
- corrections officer
- looking for job
- restaurant
- pharmacy
- selling purses and watches
- construction
- factory, making bow-ties (fieldwork notes, 2/8/17)

There is variety in these jobs, but overall at least some demonstrate low-income work, with insecurity attached (i.e., selling purses and watches), rather than professional and gainful employment. In an early conversation with Lindsay, one of the third-grade teachers, she informed me that the children living above the poverty level were all in the pre-K and kindergarten. Ninety-nine percent of the third graders, she explained, received
free or reduced-price lunch, one of the key markers of poverty in New York City schools. The official statistic for free and reduced lunch for this school as a whole is 88% (www.insideschools.org). This statistic places the school in the category of “high-poverty.” Going forward, though, as both the neighborhood and the school gentrify, this statistic will likely decrease. The school is small, with just under 400 students. The vast majority of students, around 75%, are Hispanic. The second-largest group in the school is Asian, at around 21%. Only 3% of the students are white, and the rest are described as black and “other.” Forty-six percent of students are English Language Learners, meaning that nearly half of the student body is in the process of becoming proficient in English. A report of the PTA minutes from a July 2017 meeting revealed that budget to hover around $10,000. This citation is confidential in order to protect the school’s identity. This, coupled with the high rate of poverty, creates a particularly challenging context for teachers striving to be successful within the confines of high-stakes standardized testing and standardized curricula.

Despite the large number of students living in poverty, during my first visit I was deeply impressed by the richness of the resources. The school has its own building, which, in a city like New York, where co-location has become common, is a luxury. The building, furthermore, is sparkling clean, in pristine condition, and bright and sunny, lending a welcoming and friendly feeling to the space. Each classroom has a bright and cheery feel, with large windows and colorful work hanging up. I made note of this as I walked around my first week. There is a clear sense of organization to the school as well. Nothing seems out of place; there is no chaos; children and teachers alike are generally focused, maintaining order and moving from one activity to the next without much
interruption. The school has the feel of a well-oiled machine. This orderliness translated into the overall school culture. There was a clear demarcation between students and teachers, with adults having complete authority. There was a traditional focus on control of student bodies and voices, so often found in high-poverty environments. Children walked in silent, organized lines whenever they moved around the building. Adults frequently had serious faces on, and could be found criticizing a child’s movements.

Classrooms have large libraries of books, materials, and contemporary furniture for the kids. Each room has a smartboard and a carpeted meeting area. High-poverty schools are often associated with a dearth of resources, unqualified teachers, and constant struggles interrupting the day-to-day life. This school does not fit that mold. Furthermore, the three teachers in this study were experienced educators—not the brand-new, inexperienced teachers so often expected in high-poverty environments. Gwen was in her fourth year of teaching; Sara was in her twelfth year of teaching but her first at the school; and Lindsay, who had been at the school since it opened, had taught for a total of nine years.

Interestingly, both Gwen and Sara would leave the school at the end of the year.

The Progressive School

This K-5 school is nestled in between lovely, tree-lined streets of brownstones—the quintessential Brooklyn postcard—and a highway. This location is perhaps a perfect metaphor for the school itself. Privilege plays an important role in the community and work of the school, but it is not an elite setting. The Progressive School has close to 700 students, with about 43% white, 19% black, and 23% Hispanic (www.insideschools.org). Only 5.6% are Asian, and a very small minority, 3%, are labeled as English Language Learners. Twenty-eight percent of students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. This
is in sharp contrast to the Standardized School, where a whopping 88% of students qualify for free and reduced lunch, and 46%, almost half the student body, are English Language Learners. So, while there is definite diversity here, this community does not contend with the same stresses as the Standardized School. The Progressive School is decidedly more middle-class, as opposed to high-poverty, and has a much higher population of white students.

The Progressive School was founded by parents in the late 1980s as an alternative to the other district schools. From its inception, therefore, the school has enjoyed an alternative status and a clear vision—something that other public schools don’t always benefit from. According to the principal, key tenets of the school’s vision involve bringing different kinds of children together; learning by doing; using an inquiry approach (asking and investigating questions); and parent involvement (field notes, 11/4/17). Over the years, the school has changed location and is now situated in a well-maintained, large brick building that it shares with a 6-12 partner school. There is plenty of space, though the principal made clear that “we are not a small school” (field notes, 11/4/17). The culture of the school felt much different from the Standardized School right away. Children were more mobile, both in the classroom and in the hallways. Their bodies and voices were less controlled. Teachers were less authoritarian and serious with the kids, and more playful. The resources here are fairly abundant. There is a large, clean gymnasium, and students have gym once a week (in addition to a daily thirty-minute recess). There is a spacious, inviting library which children enjoy once each week, as well as art and Spanish. Children in the early grades have music every week for the duration of the school year, while in fourth and fifth grades, they have it for half the year.
There is only one music teacher for the entire school. In the fifth grade, children take robotics with a specialist, and they also get to choose and attend an elective every week. Choices in the fall of 2017 included dance, “the 90s club,” and robotics. Science is integrated and co-taught with the main classroom teachers, but there is a wonderful science room full of glass jars filled with various materials (buttons, wood, Q-tips, marbles, plants) where students will go when science is messy or more involved than the regular classroom can handle. There is also an up-to-date computer lab with rows of large Mac desktops. Finally, there is a cafeteria, a health room, a kids’ kitchen, an outdoor asphalt yard, a playground, an outdoor school garden, and plans for a new dance studio and a green roof.

In conversations with the principal—a petite powerhouse of a woman—she made clear that the Parent/Teacher Association (PTA) raised a significant amount of money for the school each year and funded some of the resources listed above, such as the science teacher. Their fundraising goal for the 2017-2018 school year is $360,000 (field notes 11/4/17). Another important funding source is grants, which are written largely by knowledgeable staff members, many of whom have been at the school for two decades. The principal described parents as “advocates” and allowed for the fact that this is not the case at all schools. Many parents are well connected and know how to access resources the school needs. In one example, a father who bikes to the school decided that there weren’t enough bike racks outside. Thanks to his connection with someone in the Department of Transportation, more bike racks will be installed soon. Between the active principal, the informed and passionate staff members, and the connected parents, this school has multiple ways of receiving funding and resources. Here we see Bourdieu’s
symbolic capital at work. While we may not know this father’s economic capital, we do know that he was able to use his important networks to secure resources for this school.

During my semester here, I worked in three classrooms across three grades—kindergarten, third, and fifth—so I was able to capture a broad picture of the school. I researched in a kindergarten ICT class with two teachers, Zoe and Simon; a third-grade ICT class with two teachers, Louisa and Travis; and a fifth-grade general education class with one teacher, Marian. Zoe had been teaching for sixteen years, Louisa for twenty, and Marian for twenty-two; each teacher I spoke with at this school was an experienced educator. There is one ICT class in each grade, the implementation of which was a school-wide response to the needs of students with Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs). Researching in three classes with five teachers presented logistical challenges, as it was difficult for one researcher to spend enough time in each room. I quickly understood the need for research assistants and constantly wished I could spend more time in each place. I interviewed Zoe and Louisa each once, and Marian twice. I had multiple informal conversations throughout the semester with all of the teachers. Due to scheduling conflicts and a lack of time, I never interviewed Travis or Simon in person. I emailed with Travis and we spoke on the phone, but Simon and I were never able to connect and speak one-on-one.

The Progressive School has a clear vision of holistic education, one that runs contrary to the culture of standardized tests. As a result, the teachers and administration have engaged in intense parent education, and the school has a 95% opt-out rate among its families. Only a handful of students sit for standardized tests. Teachers do not engage in test prep. Before the Common Core tests were implemented, this was not the case. The
students all took the state ELA and math tests. When the tests shifted and the proficiency rating for New York City declined dramatically, one parent opted her child out. The following year, a few families followed suit. The year after that, according to the principal, it became a movement (field notes, 11/4/17). I was aware of this context when I embarked on this semester of research, and I was therefore constantly looking for ways that the lack of standardization seemed to impact the school community.

Data Sources & Data Collection

Participant Overview

I worked with eight teachers in total across five classrooms. In the Standardized School, I conducted research in two third-grade classrooms. I researched in one general education classroom with one teacher, Gwen, and in an Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) setting, with a larger population of students with Individualized Education Plans (IEP’s), who require special education services, with one general education and one special education teacher. The two teachers in the ICT room are Sara and Lindsay. Therefore, in the Standardized School, I worked with three teachers in total. I conducted weekly classroom observations, interviewed the teachers on multiple occasions, and had frequent informal conversations about the issues in this study. I also examined and analyzed the curriculum-in-use. Time was often cut short, so interviews and conversations would end abruptly one week and be taken up the next. Interviews that had been planned as one thirty-minute session were frequently cut up into two or three shorter sessions that would take place at lunch. The research design planned for three formal interviews, but in reality these turned into seven or eight interview meetings in total.
At the Progressive School, I worked with five teachers across three classrooms: two third-grade teachers, Louisa and Travis, in the same ICT room, one fifth-grade teacher, Marian, in a general education room, and two kindergarten teachers named Zoe and Simon in an ICT setting. While logistically complex, this gave me a broader spectrum of the school. Because I was able to research in a third-grade classroom, I had a direct contrast to the Standardized School, which would prove incredibly important. I conducted interviews with all of the teachers and also had many informal conversations, particularly around lunchtime. I examined the curriculum-in-use and conducted weekly classroom observations. There were some weeks when I was able to observe in only some of the classrooms, depending on the logistical scheduling of that day.

**Data Participation Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Site</th>
<th>Participant Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Standardized School</td>
<td>Classroom A: 3rd Grade General Education- Gwen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classroom B- 3rd Grade ICT- Lindsay &amp; Sara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Progressive School</td>
<td>Classroom A- Kindergarten ICT- Zoe &amp; Simon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classroom B-3rd Grade ICT- Louisa &amp; Travis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classroom C- 5th Grade Gen. Ed- Marian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participant Observation**

My main source of data collection was participant observation. In total, I spent approximately 60 days researching in schools over six months. I arranged to spend one day in each school every week. This meant that my scope of each school was limited—I saw each school only on one particular day, rather than seeing the distinctions between Mondays and Wednesdays, for example. However, because of the length of the research, I had the sense that by the end I had gained an authentic view of each classroom. While in each room, I audio recorded observations using an app on my iPad and took copious notes, using a consistent observation protocol. As explained above, I did not sit silently
and observe from afar. I tried, in each room, to sit and take notes for at least a few minutes each time I was there. But much of the time I became involved in the workings of the room; as a teacher, it was difficult for me to sit back, for example, when I saw that a student needed help. Students also reached out to me right away in the kindergarten classroom, and more frequently in the older grades as their familiarity with me increased. I also simply wanted to spend time with the kids, to get to know them, and to engage them in the work they were doing so that I could both help and familiarize myself with their curriculum. All of the teachers in the study were open to me working with students. Still, I tried to be careful about inserting myself too much. I did not want to overstep. Furthermore, I always tried to take the lead of the teacher(s). If it was clear that students should be working independently, then I took a step back and observed. If teachers were circulating to help, I often did the same. I listened to the ways in which teachers interacted with their students and mimicked their questions or word choices. When students asked me if they could go to the office, bathroom, or to get water, I referred them back to the teacher(s) in charge, attempting to make it clear that while I was an adult, I was not a decision-maker in the room. In short, I was aware of my positionality as a visitor in another teacher’s space and felt a heightened awareness of the need to be respectful and deferential to the classroom teachers.

Each day, I took notes following an observation protocol (see Appendix A) I had developed and submitted for IRB approval. I took notes about the space: what the room looked like, what work was hanging up, and the daily schedule. I also took notes about the classroom set-up: whether desks were in rows or groups, or if kids were in the meeting area, for example. I also maintained notes on the chronological order of the
class. Finally, I wrote down key moments of dialogue (some days there weren’t any), which tended to connect to testing or curriculum, and a reflection about the day in general.

On some days, I chose not to audio record, as the volume in the classroom was too great, or perhaps kids were scattered working in various areas, and it seemed impossible to make a meaningful recording with any distinct conversations. On other days, I decided not to record for the opposite reason—the room was in total silence, as the kids were taking an assessment. This happened only at the Standardized School. At the Progressive School, the classrooms were never silent. This fact is indicative of larger curricular and philosophical differences between the schools.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In addition to participant observation, the interviews were the second most valuable source of data. I had planned on interviewing each teacher twice. The reality was a bit messier because of time and other logistical constraints. At the Standardized School, lunchtime became our interview time, but this was a short period of about 25 minutes, and there were three teachers. I was typically asking somewhat sensitive and complex questions, which took time to build to and subsequently time to consider. Furthermore, one teacher tended to dominate these discussions, making it challenging for me to pull teeth and bring in the two others. I conducted both planned interviews with these teachers, but over multiple weeks. Additionally, we had many informal conversations about the school, the students, and issues related to the study. I would estimate that I spent about six hours in total talking in a focused way with the teachers in the Standardized School.
At the Progressive School, logistics were also complicated. I was able to interview Marian twice, in long stretches. Each interview lasted over an hour. The two of us also engaged in many informal conversations of anywhere from five to thirty minutes throughout the semester. I interviewed Zoe and Louisa only once each, though, and combined the questions in the two interview protocols. I also had to revise the questions I was asking, as this was not a test-oriented school, so many pre-planned questions became irrelevant. I emailed follow-up questions to Zoe and Louisa, and emailed interview questions Simon. Simon and I also spoke on the phone. Because of logistical constraints, Travis and I never spoke one-on-one.

Document Analysis

For both schools, I collected documentation that was relevant to the purpose of this study. Because I was concerned with the role of standardized testing, which is intimately linked with the ratings a school receives, I read the school’s report cards from the past three years. I consulted insideschools.org, which collects statistical information on New York City public schools, and read the current information, which includes school size and student body population. Because of the curricular focus of this study, I spent many hours reviewing the curricula in each school. At the Standardized School, this was a simpler task. I read through and familiarized myself with the Teachers College Reading & Writing Curriculum, which the third-grade classes used in full. At the Progressive School, I collected hard and electronic copies of curriculum maps. The school has a Google Doc where it compiles these documents. In both schools, I attended one curriculum planning meeting, during which I audio recorded and took notes.
Data Analysis

In beginning the analytical process, I listened to each interview and read all of my notes and transcripts. I did not employ a transcription service, but rather did this on my own. I felt that I needed to hear teachers voices, inflections, pauses and breaths to gain a full picture of each conversation. I printed all of my data for each school, as I felt the need to see it on paper, move it around, and mark it up with a pen. I may be old-fashioned, but working on actual paper seems to help me think. I began making notes and “developing tentative ideas about categories and relationships” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 96).

Next, I began coding. The aim here was to categorize my data into broader themes and issues. I categorized the data into what Jospeh Maxwell (2005) refers to as “substantive categories.” He writes that these “implicitly make some sort of claim about the topic being studied…[and they are] primarily descriptive, in a broad sense that includes description of participants’ concepts and beliefs” (p. 97). After categorizing the data from each school, I put the data side by side and worked to find relationships that connected these statements, observations, and ideas into a more coherent whole. Finally, I felt that I was ready to group pieces of connecting data into findings. Because the school sites were so distinct from each other, I kept the topic fairly general for each set of findings (i.e., the impact of standardized testing) to allow for two very different sets of interpretations around that topic.

In sifting through my data, the most obvious places where I began marking and highlighting were directly about standardized testing or standardized curriculum. So, an interview or conversation in which a teacher said something specific to one of these topics would be immediately marked. There were many of these moments, though, and I
quickly realized that I needed to sift through this vast topic and create sub-categories. Once I stumbled on the same phenomenon more than once, I would code it as a theme and give it a color. My themes became: linguistics (green); protocols/mechanics (yellow); social class context (orange); skills-oriented or thematic curriculum/ (light pink); and, finally, test quality & fairness (dark pink). I then copied and pasted each quote or moment connected to each theme, so that all the data for each theme sat side by side, and I could read over it for both schools in a comparative way. I would later add another theme, knowledge and values (purple) which would come out as I sifted through and analyzed the data in front of me.

I was surprised by how much I wished for other voices in this work. I assumed that I would have such a rich tapestry of ideas from the teachers involved, and somehow I wouldn’t need other perspectives. But there were so many moments as I read over my data that I wished for contributions from parents and students, in particular, to better understand a teacher’s perspective on a given topic. For example, I wonder what parents would say at both schools about the fairness of standardized tests. I can imagine that the findings would be more nuanced with that information. I was also surprised by how laborious, and sometimes frighteningly overwhelming, this process could be. I thought the research itself would be the hardest stage. While there are many difficulties around doing research, and certainly the logistical details proved complicated in this study, the actual process of poring over the data and making sense of it was much harder than anticipated. I had believed, somewhat egotistically, that once I had all of the interviews, conversations, and observations at my disposal, I would be ready to write. This was not the case. Reading through the data was fun and exciting. It was thrilling to finally have
the data to analyze! But connecting dots, thematically coding, and analyzing that data was incredibly hard work. I often felt unsure of how valid my analysis was, or whether two pieces of data really connected in the way I read them. I frequently found myself in tears, alone in a library, wondering whether I would ever be able to “make sense” of it all. In retrospect, this could have made a helpful class assignment: to take some real data from someone else’s research, and to analyze it using different strategies. Essentially, to practice this process.

Finally, a mistake that I made was to distinctly separate the research process from the writing one. I did this, in part, because I felt as though I wouldn’t be able to begin writing until all of the research was complete. I also did this because, as I’ve said before, with two young children and teaching, I couldn’t take on much more. However, I fear that insights were lost in waiting to begin the analytical and writing stages. The next time I engage in a research project I would definitely begin at least transcribing and coding data while still researching. I found, as I went through this process, that I had follow-up questions for teachers. We emailed back and forth, but it was not the same as being able to see them the following week in the classroom and to have an actual conversation. I feel that, had I begun the data analysis while researching, the analysis overall would be stronger.

In conclusion, this journey was a foray into the complicated and exciting world of research. There were many hiccups along the way, and things that I would definitely do differently if given the chance. But this experience helped me to grapple with my role as a researcher, and to understand the deep importance of designing a research study well. Overall, I developed a love of designing research and enacting it with real people, in real
situations, as opposed to document research. The human element is complex and fascinating.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

Four major findings emerge from this study. First, the teachers significantly questioned the fairness of standardized testing, and largely concluded they were not an equitable form of assessment. Questions of appropriateness emerged around three distinct areas: the level of the tests in relation to the cognitive levels of young children; the role of poverty and the students’ lack of cultural capital as recognized and rewarded by standardized tests; and the fact that many of the students at the Standardized School were English Language Learners and therefore had not achieved fluency in the language of the test by the time they were expected to take it. The second major finding was around the uses and impacts of standardized testing. Here, teachers noted that standardized testing only impacts some students—again, raising important questions of equity. Moreover, teachers reported that test scores did not contribute to their knowledge of students, therefore they do not provide a helpful service for teachers. Despite these reservations, there was tacit acceptance of standardized testing at the Standardized School largely because of its’ high-stakes nature in the lives of their students. One of the teachers felt more confident that standardized testing is important, and this teacher will be analyzed as an outlier in this group of teachers. The third set of findings is around assessment and curriculum, which are intimately connected as one determines the other. At the Standardized School, standardized testing requires a standardized curriculum to match, while at the Standardized School the lack of testing opens up curriculum to the teachers discretion. In addition to the power of standardization at one school and the lack thereof at the other, the teachers in this study held differing views of curriculum which impacted
their work with students. At the Progressive School, teachers viewed schooling and curriculum through a distinctly broad lens, allowing for students to help create the curriculum and focusing on the joy of learning, for example, while at the Standardized School conceptions of schooling and curriculum felt more narrow and constrained. As a result of differing conceptions of school and the presence or lack of standardization, the curricula, student/teacher interactions, and student schedules, took distinct forms in each location. The fourth and final set of findings is around knowledge, values, and implications both for teachers and students. The focus on standardization pulls attention from the students themselves, and from the humanity of school, and this has very real affects on how teachers and students are viewed and treated. Resistance occurred in small moments at the Standardized School, while the Progressive School itself stands as a beacon of resistance to standardization, with that being an important part of its’ vision for education. Overall, building on Anyon’s work, this research demonstrates the salience of social class in a child’s educational experience, and suggests that low-income children who have less access to capital are more likely to encounter a limited educational experience as a result of the increased attention on standardization, while middle-class and wealthier children, with access to greater amounts of economic, social, and cultural capital, will enjoy a more holistic educational experience that is unburdened by standardization. Finally, the data around social class and linguistic competence suggest that conceptions of cultural capital vary depending on one’s broader life context. Furthermore, despite the various forms of capital students bring with them to school, this research emphasized that only particular forms of capital are recognized and rewarded by schools in a test-based context, while schools that are free from the constraints of testing
may be more likely to acknowledge and celebrate multiple forms of capital. All of these impacts call into question the common-sense notion that standardized testing increases equity. In fact, they reveal that the nexus of standardized testing and standardized curriculum actually increases inequity among students, and that the social and economic contexts of students and schools are central, as Jean Anyon argued, to students’ lived experiences in school and their successes and failures there.

The Fairness of the Test

Language, Cognition, and Social Class

On the first day of official test prep, Gwen calls the children to the rug to work on an ELA task together. As they struggle, she says kindly: “I can’t help you on test day.” A child asks, with rising panic in his voice: “You can’t even read us the passage? Not even a word we don’t know?! I realize I am in tears.

During our time together, the three teachers at the Standardized School (Sara and Lindsay, who were co-teachers, and Gwen) and I engaged in many conversations about the fairness of standardized testing. The teachers often demonstrated great care for their students and their quality of education, and as a result they were reflective and articulate about their work in the classroom. Gwen was in her fourth year of teaching. An Asian-American woman in her late twenties, Gwen had a gentle but serious demeanor. Her large, bright classroom was often quiet and organized, with very clear protocols and systems in place. She never raised her voice. It became clear that she harbored criticism of the work she was being asked to do, but never wavered in doing it. Lindsay is white and was raised in a middle-income suburban town, attending her local public schools for her K-12 education. Sara is African-American, slightly older than Gwen and Lindsay, and the only mother in this group of teachers. I noticed that Sara had a maternal way with
her students—the kind of “tough love” that a mother gives her child. Lindsay and Sara co-taught in one ICT classroom and were louder than Gwen—their big personalities translated into their teaching styles. But their classroom was still often quiet, with the children broken into two small groups, each led by one of the teachers, working away at a reading or writing assignment. Lindsay, in particular, as the only teacher in this group who had been at the school from its’ inception, demonstrated a constant commitment to her students. Lindsay said to me on more than one occasion: “I want this to be a really good public school.” Whenever I walked into either of these classrooms, the teachers were hard at work, and they never stopped to rest even for a moment until the children were at lunch. They had only a brief respite of about 25 minutes before their work continued. While all of the teachers worked hard, Sara’s view of her students will be called into question in this analysis. While Gwen and Lindsay tended to be more critical of standardized testing (though Gwen was quiet and careful in her misgivings), Sara often searched for ways to support the practice. None of the teachers loudly lambasted the test. It seemed to be a sensitive subject, and I inferred that some part of that resulted from their own responsibility for administering it. It is challenging to be deeply critical of something you are responsible for carrying out. There were, though, clear criticisms around the level and expectations of the test.

One week after the ELA test, I sat down with the teachers. I asked how testing had gone, and Sara, to my surprise, began with this:

…the level of the texts themselves were a little bit…challenging…It was us walking around while we’re monitoring them…you could see what the content was and it was like ugh…one was about a scientist…all about him and how he became a…astrophysicist?…So, I mean, just the word astrophysicist [laughs] (field notes, 4/5/17).
Here, Sara demonstrates her frustration with the linguistic level of the test. There were other moments when Sara would laugh in acknowledgement of a perceived injustice, but she always stopped short of labeling it that way. Throughout this study, Sara rotated between what I call “soft criticism” and support for standardized testing. The issue of language came up frequently among the teachers, as they are working with a large population of ELLs, as previously noted. In the passage Sara mentions, students are expected to know the word “astrophysicist,” or at least be able to figure it out in context. At the heart of this is the question: is this fair? Is it appropriate? In this conversation, Sara’s laugh is interpreted as an acknowledgement that this expectation is not appropriate for her third-graders. Teachers consistently couched their criticisms in these terms: “It isn’t good for my students”. Though the teachers didn’t frame it as such, this was an acknowledgement of a disconnect between the cultural capital the test requires, and the cultural capital the students at this particular school, in this particular grade, bring with them. Language acquisition is a key piece of cultural capital, and in a school where almost 50% of the students have been labeled as English Language Learners, access to that foundational capital is therefore lacking. To expand on earlier discussion of this concept, David Swartz (1997) explains Pierre Bourdieu’s conception of cultural capital this way:

…cultural capital covers a wide variety of resources including such things as verbal facility, general cultural awareness, aesthetic preferences, information about the school system, and educational credentials. His [Bourdieu’s] point is to suggest that culture…can become a power resource. …School success, Bourdieu finds, is better explained by the amount and type of cultural capital inherited from the family milieu than by measures of individual talent or achievement (p. 76).

A student population largely living in poverty and learning English as a second language will not bring the same recognized capital that earns academic rewards as a middle-class,
English-dominant population. They do not wield the same kinds of power that white, middle class families do. While in some contexts the word “astrophysicist” would not pose difficulty, here, as a result of the contextual capital of the students’ lives, it does. The students do not have the same access to this vocabulary as proficient English speakers do. The fact that so many students are English Language Learners is complicated by the fact that many of them also live in high-poverty circumstances. Thus, the intersectionality of language, ethnicity and poverty may hinder these students’ success on tests. As we reflected on the ELA test together in one interview, Lindsay explained:

Many of these kids, it’s not just that they’re ELLs, they’re also not literate in another language…even our top students can’t…is like starting to learn how to read in Chinese…even if the stuff was fully translated…the parents don’t even have the literacy skills in their native language…[while vocabulary is a concern] there’s much more of a class issue…that’s all the stuff that’s underneath the test…that you have to cipher through…(field notes, 3/16/17).

Here, Lindsay connects linguistic competence to social class. She explains that students, in her view, lack both a home language and their emerging English. The implication is that students would be helped by stronger linguistic aptitude in at least one language. She also implicitly connects school success—as measured through test scores—to social class. While she names vocabulary as an issue, she emphasizes that “there’s much more of a class issue.” In mentioning “all the stuff that’s underneath the test” Lindsay implies that there are layers to what students bring (or do not bring) with them on test day, and that their social class is significant in how they fare. Unlike standardized tests, educators recognize when their students may not have access to capital; the expectations of the test, though, force students and teachers into impossible positions as they attempt to push all
students toward the exact same knowledge at the exact same time. There is an inequity between the expectation of the test and the realities of students’ lives. This is very different from arguing that these students are not capable of learning the meaning of challenging words. Lindsay and Gwen, in particular, demonstrated high expectations for their students. They worked their students hard, expected a great deal from them, and pushed them throughout the day to meet the standards. But, the very fact that a third-grade-level test expects all students to make sense of the term “astrophysicist” at the exact same time in their education is striking, revealing the problem with the standardization of literacy expectations and the lack of cultural and contextual awareness on standardized tests, particularly in a city as racially, ethnically, and economically diverse as New York. The limitations of educational policy, which pivots on test scores, become clear.

In her dissertation on the impacts of the CCSS ELA exam (2015), author Angela Jean Mooney found that two out of three elementary school teachers in her study agreed that the test level was inappropriate, and that their students struggled to comprehend reading passages. She quoted one teacher as saying, “I could teach those skills on their level if the passage could be on their level, but they’re not able to comprehend the passage” (p. 121, italics original). Sure enough, when Mooney analyzed the ELA passages using a readability test, four out of five sample texts had readability grades of 7.0 or 7.9, indicating a seventh-grade reading level (Mooney, 2015, p. 123).

Professor Christopher Tienken of Seton Hall University has found that parts of the first-grade mathematics standards require cognition that over 70% of first-graders simply don’t possess yet (2013, p. 311). Children are operating at cognitively different levels
than the ones they are being tested on. If this is indeed the case, there are serious consequences. It is worth quoting Tienken’s lengthy conclusion:

Cognitive misalignment among standards, test questions, and human development is potentially troublesome to historically lower achieving students when the curriculum standards, test questions, and corresponding proficiency cut-scores point toward higher levels of cognition that require rich and extensive prior life experiences…The potential mismatch between cognitive mastery expectations and cognitive reality can result in policy favoritism for more economically well-off children (2013, p. 311).

The clear suggestion here is that standards and test questions often do not match the cognitive or developmental level of the children. When this is the case, answering such questions requires “rich and extensive prior life experiences,” as Tienken writes, and therefore puts low-income children at a severe disadvantage. For children who are non-white and English Language Learners, the disadvantages multiply. As Patricia Hill-Collins has written: “oppressions work together in producing injustice” (Collins, 2000, p. 18). The academic challenges for English Language Learners must not be distinguished from the structural oppression they face. Research has demonstrated that ELL’s “also experience higher rates of poverty, higher mobility rates, and they are more likely to attend segregated, underfunded, and unsafe schools, compared with their non-ELL counterparts” (Jimenez-Castellanos & Garcia, 2017, p. 428). While there were no safety concerns at this school, it nonetheless stood as an example of an environment largely segregated by race and poverty, meaning that the ELL population has less access to resources that a more affluent, whiter school would likely offer. This includes the school neighborhood and the lack of creative resources for students, who learned primarily from standardized textbooks. This is exactly what Lindsay was inferring when she mentioned “all the stuff that’s underneath the test.” Access to cultural capital is being tested.
Children from families with fewer advantages, who may not be able to travel, to own as many educational resources, or to send their children to educational programs, are not taking these tests on an equal playing field with children from more middle-class homes. The intersection of poverty and language works to disadvantage students and diminish their chances of achievement when assessment is rigid, inflexible, and plainly inequitable.

Standardized tests, though, in their limited framework, do not consider structural oppression or inequality. As Fine and Weis (2012) have written:

One might worry…that public policies framed as educational progress and accountability are actually widening inequality gaps and exacerbating the cumulative segregation and exclusion of children already plagued by rising poverty, destabilized lives, and disrupted families and housing situations (p. 195).

Standardized testing is far more about the economic and linguistic capital of students and their families than about objective academic achievement. David Berliner (2014) demonstrated that student achievement on standardized tests is largely attributed to out-of-school factors. A student’s score is more connected to where he lives and how much money his parents make than to his actual “level” or “proficiency.” Berliner writes:

Out-of-school variables account for about 60% of the variance that can be accounted for in student achievement. In aggregate, such factors include family income; the neighborhood’s sense of collective self efficacy, violence rate, and average income; medical and dental care available and used; level of food insecurity; number of moves a family makes over the course of a child’s school years…all substantially affect school achievement (2014, p. 2).

This research, then, calls into question the term “achievement” and how we define it. Using a test score to measure student achievement is both unethical and inaccurate. Because a student’s score is profoundly impacted by social class, achievement in the purest sense is not being measured. What we have is a developmentally inappropriate
one-size-fits-all measuring stick with incredibly high stakes for a population that is economically, linguistically, and socially diverse. This is a deeply unequal, and therefore immoral, system of assessment, marked by a false claim of fairness and transparency. The general public agrees. In a 2004 poll, one question asked if the government should hold schools accountable for student achievement. Seventy-one percent of respondents answered in the affirmative. However, when the question was asked differently in a 2005 poll, sixty-eight percent of respondents said that a single test cannot provide a fair picture of achievement (Loveless, 2006).

In one of our conversations, Lindsay (at the Standardized School) spoke about a child she tutors: “I tutor a kid….whose parents are keeping him in the test…But you’re paying $100 an hour for a tutor for an eight-year-old” (field notes, 3/17/17). In this example, the child’s parents are using their economic capital to, presumably, give him a better chance at success. When this child’s score on the ELA test is compared to another child living in a high-poverty environment, this comparison will not be fair. One child has access to economic and, as a result, symbolic capital, which increases his success on tests, while another child does not possess this capital. The teachers at the Standardized School echoed David Berliner’s findings, as they discussed on multiple occasions the economic, social, and linguistic contexts of their students. Social class, they argued, played a paramount role in their students’ school success. According to the teachers, the most fundamental impact of social class on students was the lack of exposure to experiences that, the teachers believe, would help with reading comprehension. In making this argument, the teachers both acknowledged and supported Tienken’s and Berliner’s findings.
In one revealing conversation about this, Sara and Lindsay disagreed about the equity of the test. A clear (but mostly amicable) tension emerged in terms of their views on the subject. Sara had demonstrated her support for the test. Lindsay pushed back, leading to this exchange:

“But I feel like the problem with the test is…the tests in themselves are so biased against my kids. …The last year’s released test that we’ve practiced a lot with has that digging for dinosaur thing…”

Sara laughs, “I mean yeah, I know!”

Lindsay continues: “…oh, they’re not actually digging [in the story] it’s like brushing things away…which like, some of them were even confused by…and then I was at the Natural History Museum this weekend and in the kids section it literally is a fake dinosaur dig and I was like ‘Oh! My four-year-old niece knows what that entire passage is talking about without reading any of the words!’”

“It’s true,” Sara conceded. “Comparing my kid to these kids, same thing…I don’t know what we can do as teachers to disrupt that” (field notes, 3/16/17).

This conversation demonstrates that out-of-school factors, largely connected to social class, play a deeply important role in a student’s school success. This issue of experience came up again and again, and it is a critical component of Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital. Here, Lindsay is demonstrating that her preschool-aged niece could make more sense of a third-grade test passage than her eight-year-old students. She does not frame this in terms of intelligence or ability, but rather as a direct result of life experience and context. Because of the ability of her niece’s family to visit a museum, her niece has the background knowledge required to comprehend the meaning of a dinosaur dig, to visualize what that looks like, and to personally connect to the experience. All of this would equip her to understand, analyze, and answer questions about this reading passage on the ELA test. Sara, here, acknowledges Lindsay’s point, thus acquiescing to the argument that Lindsay’s niece has an advantage that their students do not. Her response
to this, both unfortunately and understandably, is somewhat resigned. She says, “I don’t know what we can do as teachers to disrupt that,” implying that perhaps the inequities are beyond the scope of what a teacher can address. While advocates of standardized testing insist that these tests create greater equity, this story and others like it insist that they cannot.

At the Progressive School, Marian, the fifth-grade teacher, spoke to the issue of economic inequality more directly:

If we disaggregate by wealth, our upper middle class [is] doing first in the world…our placement is more a reflection of how poorly we as a society cope with the inequities economically…schools [are supposed to be] where all of society’s ills are supposed to be addressed and corrected (field notes, 3/13/17).

David Berliner’s research (2014) has borne out this idea. He cites research that has shown that if the number of people living in poverty in the United States decreased to match the Finnish statistic (4%), and their poverty increased to our percentage (22%), our test scores would look vastly different:

A bit of statistical modeling by Condron (2011) suggests that the Finnish score on mathematics would drop from a world-leading 548 to a much more ordinary (and below the international average) score of 487. Meanwhile, the U.S. below-average score of 475 would rise to a score above the international average, a score of 509! A major reduction of poverty for America’s youth might well improve America’s schools more than all other current educational policies now in effect, and all those planned by the President and the Congress (Berliner, 2014).

Again, this research directly correlates social class to test scores, and thus to the idea of “achievement.” Whereas meritocratic assumptions tend to place success or failure squarely on the individual, researchers such as Berliner, Condron, Mooney, and myself among many others insist that achievement is fundamentally tied to the lived experiences and contexts of individuals which themselves are byproducts of an extremely unequal society. Because the relationship between students and school is complex and impacted
by a variety of circumstances, standardized tests are an inaccurate, and moreover an immoral, form of assessment. If it was true that students all began life in the same conditions, and that students were given the same kinds of resources from birth until high school graduation, and if schools were truly equal in the quality of teaching, curriculum, and resources, then measuring students by the same test at the exact same time in their education might make sense. This is, of course, not the case. Electing to allow for-profit companies and political and business insiders to determine which knowledge and skills all students should know by a pre-determined age is unsound and irresponsible. Further, testing them on this knowledge and skills merely reinforces distinctions around social class, language, and opportunity, while doing nothing to alleviate those distinctions. Marian, Lindsay, and Sara all spoke to the political economy of public schooling, and the pressures on both teachers and schools to solve these inequities. While Marian takes a slightly more critical and macro view, Sara’s view is a macro approach (focused on teachers and students) and a bit more resigned. The simple fact is that tests do not change the circumstances of a child’s life; they simply measure the differences among them. As Swartz (1997) explained:

School success, Bourdieu finds, is better explained by the amount and type of cultural capital inherited from the family milieu than by measures of individual talent or achievement…

The accumulation of cultural capital in its embodied form begins in early childhood. It requires “pedagogical action”: the investment of time by parents, other family members, or hired professionals…The investment of inherited cultural capital returns dividends in school, rewarding those with large amounts…and penalizing those without (pp. 75-76).

Experiences—trips to museums, theatre, vacations—are incredibly important kinds of cultural capital. Often, they stem from various privileges, or other forms of capital, such as economic capital (money to spend) and symbolic capital (time away from work;
knowledge of, and access to, events). This is, therefore, cyclical. The students who bring the most capital to school are rewarded the most in return. They are rewarded through recognition and comprehension of literature and other elements in the curriculum based on their own life experiences. These are the most privileged students. In the aforementioned example, a four-year-old has greater recognized capital than eight-year-olds; her comprehension on this particular part of an ELA test would actually surpass that of students much older than she is. Her acquired cultural capital is recognized and rewarded by schools, and by tests. Her experience of a dinosaur dig would bring meaning and understanding to a text in a way that the text alone could not for these students. As Bourdieu maintained, “[T]he educational system…has become the institution most responsible for the transmission of social inequality in modern societies” (qtd. in Swartz, 1997, p. 190).

One day, when it was just the two of us, Lindsay told me, “[T]hat big gap is in comprehension and like so much of comprehension is using your, like, background knowledge and how do you build background knowledge if you’re only focusing on testing?” (field notes, 3/17/17). Here, she distinguishes between teaching (building knowledge) and test prep, a distinction she would make repeatedly. She also acknowledges that test success depends on capital (background knowledge), and that teachers are in a limited position when trying to build in what their students haven’t had access to. At the Progressive School, Marian discussed some of her concerns about the ELA tests. She recalled a particular passage and said: “I honestly didn’t think there was enough information in the passage to answer the question…it wasn’t just that it required inferring…it required previous knowledge” (field notes, 3/13/17). These comments
support the findings that standardized tests unfairly advantage students with greater life experiences, which grow out of access to capital. Social, linguistic, and economic capital all stem from having some form of privilege in society. Families who lack these privileges, the families who face the most disadvantage and the greatest vulnerability, also face the greatest hurdles towards achievement as it has been narrowly defined. They also address a large body of research showing that a focus on standardized tests has narrowed the curriculum and contributed to a marked decrease in out-of-school experiences, such as trips. So the very thing that helps students on tests—increased background knowledge—has diminished in school as a result of the tests.

During one ELA test-prep lesson, Sara was attempting to teach students the differences among four kinds of literature. One type was a drama. When she asked how many students had been to a play, I counted about four hands out of 21. The information that they were trying to digest in one lesson—multiple genres of literature and the details of each (a scene versus an act, for example)—felt overwhelming. If children with middle-class or wealthy parents have access to a larger variety of experiences to which they can connect reading passages, while children of a lower socioeconomic status do not, standardized tests are not creating a more equitable situation. They are, in fact, as Professor Tienken writes, “[penalizing] poorer students who have less access to out-of-school experiences” (2013, p. 295), and therefore actually exacerbating inequality. Now, students who live in difficult circumstances, who fail to meet these narrow standards, will be further penalized rather than helped.

In another conversation, Sara described former students in another school who took the fourth-grade test the previous year. She said, “[O]ne of the stories was about
music and it was some music language that we would know…but I said none of my kids had ever been exposed to music that way and we don’t have a music program in school, so how would they know” (field notes, 3/8/17). The teachers agreed that the background knowledge their students needed was overwhelming for them. After a bit of discussion, Lindsay asked Sara and Gwen, “How would you make the test fair?” Both teachers answered in unison, “There’s no way” (field notes, 3/8/17). This felt like a significant admission. All three teachers, without overthinking, all shared the opinion that, in fact, the ELA test was unfair and there was really no way to make it more equitable.

At the Progressive School, there were both subtle and more overt ways in which it was clear that the social class of the student body, while diverse, was overall more affluent than at the Standardized School. In the third-grade class, I spoke with one boy about his after-school experience doing woodworking. Many of the children wore camp T-shirts, signifying their involvement in these fairly expensive pursuits. Marian’s description of the students supported this observation when she explained that the school had been “gentrifying” and that she would describe the student body as “solidly middle class…with some people who are very upper middle class and a few people who do qualify for free and reduced lunch…but it’s been very few” (field notes, 3/13/17). The principal’s input that the PTA fundraising goal for the 2017-2018 school year is $360,000 also signifies that there is a solid group of parents with economic capital. While this capital would greatly help the student body on standardized tests, almost all of the students here opt out. It is not surprising that the Progressive School is largely an “opt-out” school and has a large population of white families (about 43%), while the Standardized School is a test-centered school and only 3% of its’ students are white, with
a far higher population both of Hispanic students and ELL’s. This segregation by race, class, and language is citywide and growing. Orfield and Lee (2005) have highlighted this triple segregation.

Schools both mirror and reproduce broader societal inequities. This process is not simplistic or deterministic. For years, research—including Anyon’s “Social Class and School Knowledge”—has shown that a child’s schooling tends to correspond with her social class, and that it plays a defining role in reproducing that social class. As Bourdieu theorized, schools “are neither neutral nor merely reflective of broader sets of power relations, but play a complex, indirect, mediating role in maintaining and enhancing them” (qtd. in Swartz, 1997, p. 191). While the teachers at the Standardized School expressed their intent to help students move out of their social class, as shared through their efforts to secure them spots in the good middle schools, the central role of standardized testing and curriculum in this school actually serves to reproduce their class status. By limiting the kinds of work students do and by assessing children so narrowly, these policies work to reproduce children’s social class. Even if they manage to be successful on standardized tests, these students will likely experience an impoverished system of narrow curriculum and assessment that doesn’t leave space for critical thinking, creativity, or choice. Students with greater means—more capital—will be more likely to have an education marked by creativity, greater independence, and less standardization.

Language, Ethnicity, and Cultural Capital

There is not only one way to measure or define cultural capital. It is a matter of position and perspective. A critical aspect of cultural capital is how you view your own
capital—whether you perceive yourself as having any, and which kinds of capital you may want to acquire. At the Standardized School, white, Chinese, and Hispanic families had differing conceptions of their own cultural capital, according to the teachers. For Chinese and Hispanic families, whose students tended to be labeled as ELLs, gaining cultural capital meant gaining fluency in English. For this reason, most of these families did not choose to place their child in a dual-language track. They preferred English-only. The white families, though, whose children already had fluency in English, assessed that bilingualism in an asset, and as a result take advantage of the dual-language option in the school. All three sets of parents are making a conscious attempt to increase their children’s cultural capital, but with different ideas about what that means. In one of our early conversations, Lindsay explained her view of the situation in pre-K and kindergarten in a hushed voice:

Ummmm…I don’t know if I’m supposed to say this part. Well, in the K and pre-K there’s a very big difference in…the socioeconomic status of the dual language classes and the mono language…All the gentrifying parents want their kids in dual language…and it’s like a problem because we want the school to be as integrated as possible but like all the Chinese kids are in the monolingual classes, all the white kids are going in the dual language classes and all the poor Hispanics who are also going to be in the mono language classes…and their parents may have had bad experiences like being ESL…I think the less educated parents are like it’s gonna be a disadvantage, they [their children] have to learn English… (field notes, 2/16/17).

The gentrification of the school is occurring in these early grades, and, according to Lindsay, there are clear differences among the parent groups. Teachers and administrators want to create an integrated setting; complicating that aspiration are the unique contexts of each family and their desires for different educational outcomes for their children. Lindsay mentions social class, but it is only a piece of the puzzle. As Bourdieu theorized, social class is merely part of a larger scheme of factors. Here,
language is a key piece of cultural capital, and a critical factor in families’ perceptions of their own cultural capital. Considering the requirement that ELL students take state tests in grades 3-8 after only one year in this country, it certainly makes sense that parents whose first language is not English would be eager for their children to learn the language and be immersed. Taking or rejecting the test is another disputed form of cultural capital. This is yet another way that standardized testing exacerbates inequity.

Clearly, knowing two languages is an asset—it can help students stand out on college applications, for example, or in the job market. But the demands of standardized testing push some families—often families with the most vulnerable students—to give up their home language in favor of English, therefore giving up capital they possess in favor of capital that will support standardized tests.

*Standardized Testing: Gaining or Giving Up Cultural Capital?*

For some families, particularly those who are low-income or ELLs, standardized tests can actually act as cultural capital. They are a demonstration of both English mastery and school success. Culture, of course, plays a deeply important role here too. The teachers at the Standardized School explained that for many Chinese families who come from a test-driven school culture in China, testing is both expected and revered as a significant milestone of achievement. For low-income families more generally, passing a standardized test can be viewed as getting over an important hurdle. This is part of Lindsay’s point when she said, “[T]heir fourth-grade test scores like determine where they can go to middle school” (field notes, 2/16/17). When a family lacks options (sending their child to a private school, for example, or using their connections to get him
into a top middle school), the test becomes an important gateway into building a child’s cultural capital.

For more affluent white families, however, the test is often seen as an unnecessary burden, as something that takes away from the real learning their child needs. There may not be a sense of respect for the business of standardized testing, and in fact, there may be an avid disrespect for standardized testing. Part of this might connect to one’s sense of entitlement. The more cultural capital families possess for which they are rewarded by institutions (proficiency in English, money, racial privilege, access to important social networks), the less that family is inclined to see the importance of standardized testing. They already have multiple openings into the institutional worlds that matter for their children; the tests themselves do not offer new ones. Lindsay hinted at this when she said: “I don’t want providing [students] as much as possible to do well on the test to take away from, like, why you guys [Sarah and myself] are deciding to send your kids to, like, private school” (field notes, 3/17). Speaking personally, and for the many parents I know who have decided on private school over public, a disdain for standardized testing is a major reason for that decision. Research on the opt-out movement has supported this, demonstrating that families opting out of testing are generally whiter and more affluent (Pizmony-Levy, & Saraisky, 2016). Interestingly, the website www.optoutnyc.org contradicts this, and insists that opting out is occurring across race and class lines. While this holds merit, there seems to be an increased anti-testing sentiment among more affluent individuals.

Rather than holding the view that standardized tests will increase a child’s cultural capital, many teachers and families who possess recognized forms of cultural capital
frequently view these tests as *detracting* from their child’s education. Five of the six teachers in this study characterized standardized testing this way. Marian explained that testing “didn’t make sense,” in part because the grading was “meaningless.” She spoke about her own experiences grading standardized tests. While essentially plagiarizing an answer from the question gained a point, “someone who could, like, actually construct a thought…were losing points” (field notes, 3/13/17). About the test creators, Zoe said, “[T]hey lack imagination, they don’t understand how teachers teach and how children learn” (field notes, 5/1/17). Louisa said the test “didn’t seem reasonable” anymore and “they don’t tell you anything” (field notes, 5/15/17). Lindsay called the tests “biased” and “ridiculous” (field notes, 2/16/17), and Gwen described them as “developmentally inappropriate” (field notes, 3/16/17).

Sara was the only teacher who assessed the ways in which her students and their families lacked cultural capital, and then looked toward standardized testing as a solution. In one conversation, she compared the capital of her own son, who is in first grade and “can already read, he already can write,” to her students, and explained it this way:

…we might have another student whose parents are from Mexico…they don’t speak English, they may not have gone to school past fifth grade, they may not have the ability…or even know that’s [having a structured approach to reading] something they need to do…so, I just feel like we have to… train them to be prepared…sometimes it sucks, and it sucks on us as teachers because we’re taking on a lot…it’s nice to look at another school…imagine having fifteen of my kids in the classroom (field notes, 3/16/17; italicization of “my” is mine).

Here, Sara compares her son, who is English-speaking, presumably (as the son of a teacher) in a middle-class home, and who attends a private school, with her high-poverty students, most of whom are ELLs. Rather than framing the general characteristics of her students as cultural capital (i.e., possessing the knowledge of two different cultures and
languages), she frames them as deficits. These deficits call for a particular kind of structure, and as she often emphasized, a push for skills. There is a sense here that she would perhaps like to be able to do other kinds of work with her students, if only they were like her child. However, with the students she has, other kinds of goals might just be fanciful. Ultimately, Sara makes it clear that “the test is a hoop, you have to know how to navigate it” (field notes, 3/17/17). Sara’s conclusions signal two things: first, that she does not hold her students to the same standards as her son and his peers, and second, that she is willing to obscure social and economic inequalities in support of standardization.

In the first place, Sara seemed to experience a brief moment of reverie as she laughed and imagined fifteen children like her own in a classroom. My interpretation was that sort of environment would be: easy, successful, full of capable students who would come to school already possessing the variety of skills Sara worked hard at instilling in her students. In this is an unspoken admission, then, that this skills-oriented work is not equal in quality to the work that her son and his peers do in their school. It is precisely the lack of capital here that, in Sara’s view, necessitates an impoverished curriculum. Her comments here are somewhat reminiscent of the teachers in the working-class schools in Anyon’s study (1981), who believe their students aren’t capable of moving beyond the basics. Thus, despite her reliance on standards (an outwards assurance of equity), her beliefs about the capabilities and needs of her students render her own teaching inequitable and perpetuate the existence of a two-tiered system. Second, while Sara is able to name and explain inequities, she continues to pursue the powerful narrative of standardization in the name of civil rights. Here, I second the suggestion that: “educators…need to engage in sustained inquiry to interrogate their implicit beliefs about
learning and learners, as well as the norms, values, and assumptions inherent in all educational standards” (Abu El-Haj, 2006, p. 139).

**The Use & Impacts of Standardized Testing**

The second major concern that arose during this research addressed the uses and impacts of the standardized tests. In one interview, Gwen demonstrated support for the overall idea of standardized testing while directing some criticism toward the realities of society that seem to, at least in some ways, defeat the purpose:

I’m not opposed to the general concept of [standardized testing], but I feel like all the tests are bad and not used well… it’s not really a standardized test if our school has 100% of the kids taking it and down the road another school has like thirty kids taking it… (field notes, 4/5/17).

Gwen is raising a controversial issue here, one that the new iteration of NCLB, ESSA, and New York City, in particular, are wrestling with. One central tenet of the argument in support of standardized testing is that students across the nation should be learning the same skills at the same time. Some believe that tests are a way of ensuring high standards across all states, and a way of seeing how children are meeting particular benchmarks. However, thousands of children attend private schools that don’t give these tests, and, in New York City, 20% of families opt out of state tests. All of this raises questions about the accuracy and fairness of comparing children. In January of 2015, the Commissioner of Education in New York, Pam Stewart, wrote:

Regarding the question of test integrity, opting out may have an impact on the ability to interpret the test results in a meaningful way… results might not accurately reflect student achievement, and would make it difficult to make teacher, school, district, or state comparisons… (qtd. in Crowder & Konle, 2015, p. 286).

The ability of standardized tests to perform a central function—testing students at particular benchmarks to make comparisons and judgments—is called into question here.
If the combination of opting out and attending independent schools leaves this purpose unfulfilled, does standardized testing retain importance? Furthermore, if the comparison doesn’t actually include all children, then is it fair? Why should some children be forced to comply while others are not? Who is tested, who isn’t, and how do those decisions get made? These questions were at the heart of many recurring discussions. There were clear resentments among the teachers that their students had to contend with testing while others did not.

Another argument in support of standardized testing is that teachers will be able to use the results to improve their instruction. This, too, was challenged by the teachers. Lindsay explained:

I feel I understand the kids better without the test than with the test… If the teachers know the kids and are giving good instruction these tests aren’t doing anything that you don’t know… (field notes, 4/5/17).

Here, Lindsay declares that the tests don’t contribute to her knowledge of the students. She attributes her understanding of her students to both knowing the children and providing good instruction. Sara supported this assertion:

I think…as a teacher when you’re with kids after a certain amount of time you gain a lot of insight about them and so you know like this student is really well at such and such…we knew who the kids were who are strong [at math]…we didn’t need a standardized test to tell us that… (field notes, 4/5/17, italics mine).

In this statement, Sara is again distantly critical of standardized testing. She echoes the importance that Lindsay places on knowing her students well, and argues that the tests do not help them with this process. These two teachers expressed clear concerns that the test itself does not improve their knowledge of their students or their instruction. They agreed that if instruction is good, teachers have all of the information they need to assess their students well, and they do not need a test to help with this task. Importantly, these
comments also diminish the notion that standardized tests increase equity. If a test shows you only what you already know, then it is not actually contributing to change.

Educators at the Progressive School agreed that the uselessness of testing centered around the idea that teachers didn’t gain any information from the tests that would allow them to improve their teaching or knowledge of students. Marian said: “I never have felt like…I get any information from [the tests] that is useful to me as a teacher…I feel like I already know whatever it is that, that it shows me” (field notes, 3/13/17). She also critiqued the grading, as Zoe had in an earlier interview, as being overly simplistic and not capturing a full picture of the child. She added, “I don’t think [the students] know what the 2, 3, or 4 means” (field notes, 3/13/17) and brought up the fact that tests are scored on a curve. Supporting this stance, Zoe said:

We can’t use it to improve our teaching…it’s not just to see where a child is. We have children who are doing really well throughout the year and might get a one on this silly test…or children who are really struggling and might figure out how to take this test and get a four…and they take up time when we could be teaching (field notes, 5/1/2017).

Here, Zoe describes a mismatch between the test’s assessment of a child and the school’s. In doing so, she demonstrates a clear belief that the test is an inaccurate assessment tool and can in fact be “gamed” by children. This is a widely held criticism of teachers—and many spend their time helping their students “figure out” how to take the test. Like Lindsay, Zoe positions test preparation in opposition to teaching. Marian took a similar stance and explained: “I always think it’s ridiculous spending time teaching them like how to take a multiple choice test because I’ve only ever used that skill for the SAT” (field notes, 3/13/17). Again, Marian is highlighting the distinction between teaching and
test prep, which is useful only for the specific test and not beyond it. Zoe took a slightly harsher stance and insisted that:

[The test] is not going to help their teachers become better teachers...not going to show their teachers...what they’ve learned, what they’re excited about, so it’s...pretty much for nothing...and they’re stressed, upset, worried...we’ve had children bang their heads on tables, run out and hide in bathrooms...it’s pretty abusive, actually...(field notes, 5/1/17).

Not surprisingly, teachers at the Progressive School took an overall stronger stance against standardized testing, and their critiques sometimes included policy or politics. When I asked Zoe what she felt the purpose of standardized testing was, she had this response:

Money. ...the people who are trying to measure how well public schools are doing...lack imagination, they don’t understand how teachers teach and how children learn...and the only thing they can imagine is we have to have this test...(field notes, 5/1/17).

The major pushback against standardized testing revolved around the ideas that tests don’t help teachers learn about their students or improve their teaching; that test scores are an inaccurate measure of student knowledge; and that they involve too much social/emotional stress for kids.

It’s...Complicated...

However, despite their criticisms, among all three teachers at the Standardized School there was at least tacit acceptance of standardized testing. Sara was the most vocal in her support of the practice, and her vacillation between acceptance and soft criticism highlights Foucault’s concept of discursive power. After the ELA test, Sara mentioned the short answers and explained that she thought they were fair.

“I felt like the short answers were fair...Particularly the one about the quilt...because we had just done some stories about quilts...and then earlier in the
year we had did… the Keeping Quilt, so I felt like they had three references… ooooh, we have three references to draw from!”
Lindsay pushes her here: “But that was kind of luck?”
“Yeah, exactly,” she responds (field notes, 4/5/17).

It is clear that Sara harbors mixed feelings about the test. On the one hand, the linguistic level felt inappropriate, and she clearly states the tests don’t help her gain knowledge of her students; on the other, some of the familiar content convinced her that the test was fair. Further, Sara tended to focus on the micro context when defending standardized testing: the test itself, their current crop of students, their zone, etc. The slight pushback from her colleague on this is important; Lindsay is acknowledging the larger apparatus at work by speaking to the randomness of the text choices. The subtext is that if the short answer had been about a different topic, perhaps their students wouldn’t have had the same amount of success. Lindsay’s tone here was frustrated- and I inferred that she felt aggravated by a lack of control. The test content was not up to her; she could prepare her students as much as possible, but ultimately, the test creators welded tremendous power in the futures of her kids. If luck factors into one’s success on a test, this deeply challenges the idea of equity.

A critical point from all three teachers was the inescapable reality of standardized testing. For Lindsay and Gwen, this reality resigned them to contending with test prep; Sara expressed a stronger alignment with the value of standardized testing as an important hurdle for students to overcome in life. While she acknowledged a lack of fairness, she also kept coming back to the idea that tests are our reality, and that students must tackle them:

I just see it as another way for…the students to be assessed, and it’s not fair…but at the same time it’s reality… I usually have no sympathy, it’s terrible, but…it’s
what you have to do, *you have to get through it*, and you have to do it well (field notes, 3/8/17, italics mine).

For Bourdieu, the test itself is a product of our culture’s economic and social anxiety. It is, in part, this anxiety that pushes families and teachers to focus on “getting ahead”—a belief in the ideology of upward mobility, and in the test as one of the important gatekeepers to such mobility. For students already born with upward mobility, however, the test is an unnecessary burden. They may attend elite schools, have parental connections for their education and employment, enjoy a wide array of extracurricular activities, and/or possess complete control over the English language. For these students, a standardized test will not shape their educational future. It is precisely for the students without cultural capital (as the school views them) that the test is so important, and for these same students, the test is such a challenge. For these students, and not others, it is something that they indeed have to get through, and it is something that will dominate their educational landscape for most of their youth.

Standardized tests were alternately referred to by teachers in this study as the “boogeyman” and as “hoops” to jump through. Marian commented on this anxiety when she described a child whose parents decided she would take the tests. She explained:

[H]er [parents’] rationale for it was this has become the boogeyman, and I want her to face her fear in this safe environment…and I accept that, sort of [laughs]…I feel like the fact that it’s feared in the first place is part of the problem (field notes, 3/13/17).

Sara referred to the test on two occasions as a hoop to get through, as the parents of the student above did. Interestingly, though, Sara had put her son in private school, where he would not contend with state testing, while she remained the most supportive of the practice among this group of teachers. So, again, Sara takes a critical stance on the test,
but one that stops short of being decidedly against it. Here we see Foucault’s point that power is not one-directional. It is not so simple as oppressor and oppressed. Rather, “power is a multiplicity of intersecting and overlapping ‘force relations’ of different kinds…set within a ‘process of ceaseless struggles and transformations’ (qtd. In Ball, 2013, p. 30). Standardized testing holds tremendous power over Sara’s life as a teacher, because of the importance of test scores for her students’ middle-school applications and for the rating of the school, as well as her own professional evaluations and reputation. As a result, she spends the bulk of her time and effort preparing students for these tests, worrying about them, and designing her day based upon the expectations of those tests. But she also makes an active choice to do this. While consistently acknowledging the lack of fairness in the test, she continues to use her own power as a teacher to both defend and enforce standardized testing. Some of her acceptance of testing stems from her deficit view of her students. She views her students as lacking cultural capital, and because of this framing she takes a basic skills approach in her pedagogy.

In one conversation, Sara explained, “It really boils down to the skill. They’re really assessing how literate you are…can you read? Can you comprehend?…If you can’t do those things, you can’t be a citizen” (field notes, 3/8/17). Sara couched her own teaching and student learning in the importance of basic skills, similarly to the teachers in the working-class schools in Anyon’s study. Most of those teachers, Anyon wrote, asserted that their students needed “the basics” and “the three R’s” (Anyon, 1981, p. 7). Here, too, Sara is demonstrating that standardized testing does hold value. She aligns the test with preparation for citizenship. What’s fascinating about this part of the conversation is that it directly contradicts her point, made just a week after the test, that
the reading level was inappropriately high. On the one hand, she argues that the state is testing reading skills of children, and she sees fairness in doing so. On the other, she acknowledges that the reading level on the test is actually unfair because it is too high. Sara supports the intent of the test—to assess students’ reading levels—but not the reality of the test. Bourdieu’s concept of misrecognition is helpful here, which “denotes ‘denial’ of the economic and political interests present in a set of practices” (qtd. in Swartz, 1997, p. 89).

Sara’s misrecognition contributes to the way in which she legitimizes standardized tests. Because testing is often viewed as a neutral practice, it seems disinterested—that is, free from economic or political ties. Sara asserts this when she says the test “is really assessing how literate you are.” Here, the idea of literacy is neutral, apolitical, and decontextualized. Research has shown that this isn’t the case, however. The research in this dissertation tying standardized testing companies to profits, for example, and the research linking social class to educational success, all contribute to the understanding that standardized testing is rooted in social/economic/political context, and is not a neutral practice. This is why Sara’s students, who are English Language Learners and low-income, struggle so often on the tests. Her comment earlier about the advanced reading level hints at this contextual importance, but ultimately, she ends up in safer territory, defending the practice and denying connections to larger, and unequal, forces.

Using Foucault’s concept of discourse here to mean “that which constrains or enables, writing, speaking and thinking” (Ball, 2013, p. 19), the structural dominance of standardized testing and the way in which the policy of testing has restructured schooling have constrained the language and thinking of teachers. What Foucault (1979) wrote
about schooling in the nineteenth century resonates today: school became an “apparatus of uninterrupted examination woven into [the school] through a constantly repeated ritual of power” (p. 186). Over our six months together, Sara never reached a point of thinking away from or outside of standardized testing. She consistently came back to the idea that it is valuable, that she must prepare students for it, and that her students must therefore deal with it. Stephen Ball (2013) writes, “Discourse is the conditions under which certain statements are considered to be the truth” (p. 19), and in this school, the truth was that standardized testing is a reality for students and holds importance for their lives. But the context is much larger than the school. The truth and value of standardized testing are woven into the fabric of life at the state and city level.

No Question About It: The “High Stakes” of High-Stakes Testing

Despite serious concerns about standardized testing, the ELA and math tests remain critically high stakes for many children and families. Tests play a huge role in determining whether children can move onto the next grade. Lindsay told me, “[T]here were also lots of kids worried that they weren’t going to pass and move into fourth grade” (field notes, 4/5/17). Grade retention has been linked to dropping out and even incarceration, so the connection between test scores and retention is no small matter. It also creates tremendous anxiety for students and their families. Professor Martin Wasserberg, in his 2017 article on African-American elementary school students and their perceptions of standardized testing, describes the anxiety associated with these hurdles as existing on two levels: the students wanted to perform well for themselves, and they were concerned about the success of the school.
In New York City in particular, where high-stakes tests are used to admit or reject children from middle schools, this gatekeeping tool can be viewed not only as a reality, but as a mechanism for greater access and equity. If kids do well on the tests, they may gain entrance to a strong middle school. On the other side of this coin, then, the test has the power to bar a student from attending a good school. In one of our early conversations, Lindsay explained:

…part of me is like I don’t want to do any test prep, I just want to teach them, but, then…in stupid New York City…for these kids, like their way to get into a good middle school in NYC is to do well on this test. It’s not like their parents can even take them to open houses to like explore all the middle schools…So I’m like well if I don’t prepare them for this test am I doing them more of a disservice?...they’re so smart…their fourth grade test scores like determine where they can go to middle school, it’s so ridiculous (field notes, 2/16/17).

There are a number of salient points here. The first is that standardized testing acts as a gatekeeper to the “good” middle schools. Therefore, a lack of success on the tests threatens children and their families with a future in a potentially dysfunctional school. This is disciplinary power at work, analyzing, locating, and separating students (Foucault, 1979). This is also the work of the school system masking itself as neutral in assessing students and placing them into a hierarchy of “achievement.” Bourdieu writes that:

The educational system…transforms social classifications into academic classifications, with every appearance of neutrality, and establishes hierarchies which are not experienced as purely technical, and therefore partial and one-sided, but as total hierarchies, grounded in nature, so that social value comes to be identified with “personal” value, scholastic dignities with human dignity (1984a, p. 387).

Test scores, masked as neutral or objective forms of assessment, classify students into categories that become intensely personal and high-stakes. A student may be marked as intelligent or not, and which middle school they attend will both impact their educational trajectories academically and also signal their intelligence or lack thereof. The “good
schools” are widely known by children and their families, and the students who don’t make it in are also widely understood to not have met the standards. They have been classified as less intelligent. This categorization of students also stems from a vision of intelligence or capability as fixed. That is, a standardized test score doesn’t include room for growth—it is a fixed version of a child’s intelligence, and therefore her academic worth. If this score holds such power over a child’s future, then clearly others trust the score to give them important details about that child. Swartz points out, “The classification system of schooling is buttressed by its legitimation function…Because actors believe these classifications to be academic, they employ them as legitimate labels without full awareness of their social consequences” (1997, p. 204). But this notion of intelligence, and the idea that it can be captured in such a narrow form, is in contrast with a great deal of recent scientific research demonstrating tremendous flexibility in brain development (Stetsenko, 2017). Standardized testing has been given the power of legitimacy. It needs to be seen as legitimate, or the entire apparatus of standardization would collapse.

The second point, then, is the difficult position of the teacher. If she resists standardized testing, she may in fact harm her students by not adequately preparing them for this hurdle. As Ball points out, the pressures of the regime of numbers defines “a whole field of new realities” (Foucault, 2009, p. 75, qtd in Ball) and the “pertinent space within which and regarding which” (p. 75) they must act (Ball, 2013, p. 104). The final point Lindsay makes is critical to the socioeconomic context of her students. Their poverty deepens their dependence on high-stakes standardized testing, because, as Lindsay makes clear, her students’ families lack other options. They are unlikely, perhaps
because of work schedules, language difficulties, or other reasons, to visit middle schools and help make their child’s application visible through school interviews, tours, or other means. At the Progressive School, because of the activism on the part of teachers and the administration, families were aware that middle schools would accept an alternative to a test score in student applications. One of the most elite middle schools in New York City, as a matter of fact, gets many applications from students who attended a private elementary school—so this school accepts recommendations and/or student essays as part of its middle-school application in place of test scores. The district of the Progressive School, which has the highest number of families who have opted out of the tests, understood that middle schools can accept alternatives to test scores in student applications. In the district of the Standardized School, though, none of this seemed to be the case. Whether or not this is the legal and actual situation, the teachers agreed that their students must have test scores in order to access the better middle-school options. Their only mode of entry, then, becomes the test, which heightens the stakes for the children. Fail the test, jeopardize your future.

The position of the teachers is further complicated because students’ test scores reflect both on them and on the school. In Wasserberg’s study (2017), one student said: “We are going to put maximum effort [into the test] because [we] don’t want the school to be teared [sic] down” (p. 47). A school with low test scores will likely receive a low rating, and after a few years it could be shut down. In this research project, it was clear that the impact of testing on the school as a whole was understood even by young students, such as the fourth-grader quoted above.
In March, before testing, I asked Lindsay how she was feeling about the upcoming ELA test. She responded:

“I’m nervous…I’m nervous for the school.”
“How come?”
“Ummm…you know it’s the first test the school has…” (field notes, 3/17/17).

Here, Lindsay seems to acknowledge the pressure that the school, bracing for its first testing cycle, was under. As a faculty member since the school’s inception, she understood that the scores would matter for the school’s reputation. Over and over, she demonstrated her deep commitment to the school and to her students. In this way, Lindsay was aware that these test scores mattered for an institution and for individuals she cares very much about. On a more fundamental level, though, she positioned the tests themselves as obstacles to greater equity. In the same conversation, she said:

…it’s like painful to watch some of them [the students] try [to take the test]. I’m, like, nervous for them, taking it. And it’s also like, I feel so bad for them because if you’re reading like a year and a half below grade level no amount of test prep is going to, like, really change your ability to comprehend…I’m glad we’ve been able to teach reading and writing [as opposed to doing test prep all year]…but then…they struggle…(field notes, 3/17/17).

Lindsay’s remarks highlight, again, the nuanced position for teachers. While she doesn’t believe that standardized testing does her students much good (she feels badly for her students for having to take the tests), she wants testing to go well both for their future successes (she connects the tests to middle-school applications) and for the sake of the school (as shared above). Remarkably, Lindsay describes standardized testing here in opposition to actual teaching and learning. In doing so, she positions standardized tests as barriers to equity. First, she makes the point that test preparation does not improve student comprehension and implies that a student’s reading level at the beginning of test prep will remain the same at the end. In other words, student learning is disconnected...
from test preparation. The second point she makes is that because the school focused on test prep only for a few weeks, they were able to teach reading and writing. The underlying belief is that had they done a greater amount of test preparation, the real teaching of reading and writing would have decreased. In these comments, then, Lindsay is sharing her analysis that standardized testing is separate from learning. It does not serve her students. In this same conversation she expressed that “the tests in themselves are so biased against my kids” (field notes, 3/17/17). For Lindsay, like Sara, the test is a hurdle that her students must overcome, but for Lindsay, it is a hurdle fraught with inequities.

In contrast, while Sara seemed to acknowledge some of the context that created an unfair testing reality for students, she continued to view the test as a tool toward increasing equity. She said:

We have a lot of kids who English is not their first language, that’s one and they don’t have anybody at home that can support them with language and then...given just strictly their zone...they don’t have a lot of options in terms of school...I feel like...you have to really work hard and get out of something as much as you can so you can be successful (field notes, 3/17/17, italics mine).

In the first part of Sara’s comments, she acknowledges the political economy of her students—facing a lack of English acquisition, a lack of parental guidance, and a zone with few school choices. Whether or not these all hold true—and this is a somewhat deficit view—the acknowledgement of various complicating factors in her students’ lives remains important. Instead of using this context to develop a critique of standardized testing, though, Sara pivots and positions the test as a mechanism for increasing equity. She places the impetus on her students to work hard, despite their stressful circumstances,
and use the test to bring success into their lives. The test, then, can provide real benefits for her students if they put in the effort.

These two comments from Lindsay and Sara contradict each other. While Lindsay positions the test as a barrier to her students’ learning, Sara views it as a tool for their future success. Lindsay places more responsibility on the larger forces at work—policymakers, test makers, etc.—to increase fairness, while Sara puts the responsibility on her students to take advantage of what they’re given. Her view is deeply individualistic, and in line with meritocratic idealism. If her students work hard enough, they should succeed. Nonetheless, both teachers engage in test preparation and therefore, to some extent, in reproduction. This highlights Bourdieu’s analysis that “schools are neither neutral nor merely reflective of broader sets of power relations, but play a complex, indirect, mediating role in maintaining and enhancing them” (qtd. in Swartz, 1997, p. 191).

Unlike in the Standardized School, teacher views in the progressive school did not vary much with regard to standardized testing. Teachers were largely against them, as one might predict in a school with an opt-out rate of 95%. Marian called them “borderline useless” (field notes, 3/13/17), and Zoe described them as “worse than useless because they’re hurtful” and “pretty abusive” (field notes, 5/1/17). She described various reactions students had to the tests, such as banging their heads on tables or crying (field notes, 5/1/17). Louisa contrasted the new tests, which are connected to the Common Core, with the old tests, and argued that before, tests were not a big deal, and were generally “reflective of what [students] could do” (field notes, 5/15/17). Now, however, “the test became an entirely different beast.” All three teachers framed testing in
opposition to teaching, with Marian calling the practice “disruptive to the flow of the school year”; Zoe commenting that the tests “take up time when we could be teaching”; and Louisa remarking that “in order to get kids to be successful you would have to completely suspend your teaching” (field notes, 5/15/17). She embellished on this and exclaimed: “[Not doing test prep] has been so freeing. We use that time in ways that are so much more valuable. We’re so busy! What would we give up for test prep?” (Field notes, 5/15/17). Lindsay, at the Standardized School, made a similar point when she said, “[P]art of me is like I don’t want to do any test prep, I just want to teach them” (notes, 2/16/17, italics mine). It is worth noting that out of eight teachers interviewed for this study, six positioned standardized testing in opposition to teaching and learning.

Curriculum and Assessment

Skills Versus Content

The daily schedule, classroom observations, and discussions with teachers all signified that standardized testing and standardized curricula contributed to a narrow curriculum focused on skills at the Standardized School, while the absence of standardization freed teachers and students to develop rich, intellectual work at the Progressive School. The curricular contrasts paint an important portrait regarding the two-tiered, segregated system of schooling we have built in this country. Leading up to the ELA test, for four weeks, teachers and students engaged in three hours, or slightly more, of ELA prep every day at the Standardized School. After the ELA test, the focus switched from ELA to math so that approximately two and a half hours per day were focused on this subject alone. The students had a science class, art twice a week, and earlier in the year a music residency with a drummer. Social studies, meant to be woven
into ELA, was not its own subject and was largely absent. When asked about social studies, Gwen explained:

“We took a break from social studies for testing. We did China, but not really [laughs]…super superficial…then we did Nigeria…”

Me: “Do you feel like Nigeria was less superficial?”

“Ummm…compared to China, yes…[laughs]” (field notes, 5/31/17).

There were social studies-oriented readings, but because students were reading for skill practice, such as finding a main idea, rather than as part of a large social studies unit, comprehension was minimal. During one lesson, for example, the teacher was reading a book on Nigeria, with the goal of finding the main idea. About halfway through this lesson, one of the kids raised his hand and asked, “What’s Nigeria?” (field notes, 4/5/17).

Because the curriculum was largely skill-based, it lacked context and deeper understanding. This is, in part, where we see the power of the test in the curricular design. As Sara said, “[I]t boils down to the skill”—and the need for students to make sense of unfamiliar information, pick out important details, and write about it. Because the ELA test itself is designed as a skills assessment, rather than, for example, a chance for students to craft written pieces about information they’ve been studying, the curriculum follows suit and becomes skill- versus content-heavy. The curriculum-in-use in third grade is the Teachers College Reading & Writing Curriculum, which the teachers closely follow. When I asked them what kind of approach this curriculum has, Lindsay said this:

I think TC is very skills-based…I know they try to make it thematic, like with the units, but I feel like it’s really superficial…it’s nice that [students] get to choose the books they read—at the same time it’s not really interdisciplinary (field notes, 5/31/17).

In her dissertation on the outcomes of the Common Core ELA standards, Jean Mooney observed and interviewed three elementary school teachers. She found the same
intense focus on skills and documented the shift from more in-depth content to a skills-oriented curriculum with the advent of the Common Core-aligned tests. One teacher said, “I don’t feel like I’m a language arts teacher anymore. I feel like a reading sergeant just drilling skills” (Mooney, 2015, p. 118). She also noted that “none of the teachers mentioned knowledge development beyond knowledge of skills” (p. 127).

There were also significant questions about the appropriateness of the skills expected of students, and the role of the teachers. In the same conversation as above, Lindsay said, “[I]n middle school and especially in college you need to be able to read something and respond to it…it’s a good skill to have. But I don’t know how, like, developmentally appropriate it is. Especially looking at, like, where their actual reading ability is” (field notes, 5/31/17). In the past few years, the standard of “college and career readiness” has taken on importance in the policy world, and many educators have claimed that this detracts from the grade they teach and from their ability to address their students’ actual levels. In other words, is it really appropriate to think about preparing a second- or third-grader for college? Does it help those students? How does that shift in thinking potentially change the teaching of that grade? At the Progressive School, Marian pushed back on this idea directly. She said, “I don’t believe in the thing of sort of like we have to be college and career ready and they’re eight! [Laughs]…the [test] questions seem to be sort of well beyond what most of the kids are comfortable executing” (field notes, 3/13/17). Zoe shared a similar sentiment, and explained with regards to reading and writing:

[T]here’s that pressure that put on ourselves…the recognition that when our children go to first grade…a more formal reading and writing structure starts…I believe that my work is to teach kindergarten…I am not overwhelmed with the
idea that I have to get them ready for first grade…I’m doing the work of kindergarten (field notes, 5/1/17).

At the Standardized School, there was a greater sense of pressure to get students ready for the next thing—even for far beyond the next thing. In both third-grade classes there was often mention of not only fourth grade but middle school, high school, and college. The purpose in this may be for students to see how their current work connects to their future, but there is also a danger of placing undue stress and anxiety on children and teachers, and detracting from the immediate and important goals of the current year.

In addition to the curriculum being skills-oriented, there were concerns about it being meaningless and boring as a result of the focus on test preparation. After the ELA test, I asked the teachers about the pros and cons of test prep. They discussed some of the positive aspects of test prep, including the students’ skills becoming stronger, their writing improving, and their ability to use strategies teachers had taught (field notes, 4/5/17). When asked about cons, Lindsay said: “[T]he cons would be it was boring and dry” (field notes, 4/5/17). Gwen added, “[A]nd the kids probably felt that way, too. I think they were really excited in the beginning and then, like…they had to get used to, like, reading boring texts” (field notes, 4/5/17).

Here we see Bourdieu’s theory about the commodification of knowledge. Knowledge, he wrote, has market value in exchange for college and/or jobs. What students learn is meant to directly prepare them for a test, which will then directly increase their access to a middle school, a high school, a college, and employment. Students do not learn for the sake of learning; school has become commodified. The work students were tasked with often felt random, inflexible, and lacking meaning. I observed them reading about gold mining, blimps, and sea creatures, topics that were
largely disconnected from their lives and difficult for them to imagine or make connections to. The only lesson I observed that really considered and involved students’ lives and identities was early on, when they discussed their parents’ jobs as well as issues of race. This lesson was engaging and exciting—but I never witnessed another like it. Lindsay brought that lesson up with me later in the semester, and told me she would love to do more like it, but there wasn’t time. When Lindsay spoke about the literary essay unit, she acknowledged that reading and responding to literature is “a good skill to have” but questioned its developmental appropriateness for third grade (field notes, 2/16/17). She continued: “If it was on, like, write a literary essay about one of the characters in the books you just read I feel like that would be much better, instead of like on this random passage [laughs]” (field notes, 2/16/17). Here, Lindsay is suggesting that the work students do should have meaning to them by connecting it to reading they are involved in and enjoy. She also makes it clear through this comment that the teachers lacked the freedom and autonomy to change their literary essay assignment and connect it to books the students were reading. They were forced to comply with the scripted curriculum despite, at times, their better judgment.

Rigid & Mechanical

Overall, the curriculum at the Standardized School was largely pen-and-paper-oriented. Students were not building or creating, acting or performing. Creativity and self-expression were extremely minimal. When students were discussing, reading, or writing, it was always in a particular format, rather than with an element of freedom or choice. When I inquired about the test-prep period, Sara explained that the students’ writing had improved. She said it this way: “[T]hey know how it should look” (field
notes, 4/5/17, italics mine). In reference to their speaking, she explained, “It felt like the conversations were more meaningful than any other conversations they had…they knew, like, exactly what to talk about and how to talk to each other” (field notes, 4/5/17, italics mine). For Sara, their writing improved because they were able to follow a particular format, not because of their own ideas. Their speaking, similarly, “improved” because they knew what to talk about and how to talk. Again, here is the disciplinary power of the standardized testing and curricular apparatus in the classroom. This power “imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility…The primary and ultimate point of focus is on students as productive subjects, as ‘abilities-machines’ (Ball, 2013, p. 107). Rather than allowing students, at least some of the time, to talk, write, or read freely, each action is constrained by the need to push particular abilities and formats as the test requires.

I was somewhat astonished at the number of protocols in place in these classrooms. These include: QTIP, RAP, ADDS, CUPS, and ABBC. QTIP stands for: Questions, Title, Instructions, Picture, and sums up the steps involved in reading and answering questions about a non-fiction passage. RAP stands for: Restate the question, Answer the question, and Prove your answer. ADDS means: Answer, give Detail, give Detail, and ask: does it make Sense? CUPS is a system of editing for: Capitalization, Understanding, Punctuation, and Spelling and Spacing. ABBC is a protocol for an extended response, and stands for: introduction with an Answer to the question, a paragraph for each Bullet, and a Conclusion (field notes, 3/16/17). These protocols were for ELA work, and there were others for math. The teachers spent time creating thoughtful anchor charts, visually guiding students through these steps. Different kinds of
texts required the students to use different protocols to set up their responses, and students often debated quietly among themselves about which protocol was necessary. They were unable to begin crafting their responses until they were sure which protocol they should be using. While watching the students, I often got the sense that they were more concerned with which protocol to use and which steps it entailed than the actual substance of their writing. In addition, I wondered how these eight-year-olds could keep track of so many protocols and the various steps involved in each. In my notes one day, when Gwen’s students were given a passage about a blimp, I wrote down the following exchange:

Kids working in partners on ELA prep reading passage. One student starts by writing ADDS on the other’s paper and his partner replies: “No! It’s not a short answer.” They ask me, and I hesitantly agree with the first boy that it does seem like a short answer because of all the lines in the answer section. I ask what ADDS means, and a bunch of students pipe up, “Answer, Detail, Detail, does it make Sense!” in unison (field notes, 3/8/17).

The formulaic nature of the work at the Standardized School was clear. There were no open-ended assignments that I observed. In my notes from another observation, students were asked to explain two reasons that sea turtles are made for the sea. In order to do this, they had to look back at what they’d read and compose a sentence. I observed that:

In answering the question, some students wrote their two reasons together as one in the same sentence. But you won’t get credit that way. You have to separate the reasons and say something like “Another reason is…” (field notes, 3/16/17).

Other procedures they were supposed to follow included: starting their answer with part of the question, beginning the conclusion with “in conclusion,” and using specific details from the passage. Students seemed so bogged down with these steps that I wondered how much substance they were really getting. These protocols, perhaps, were the bulk of the curricular substance. I noted one day: “Kids are so focused on protocol that they almost
I kept coming back to something Michael Apple (2006) wrote about the impacts of standardized testing and curricula on schools: “[M]ore time and energy is spent on maintaining or enhancing a public image of a ‘good school’ and less time and energy is spent on pedagogic and curricular substance” (p. 63). Were these protocols helping to deepen student learning, or were they more time and energy spent on procedure?

During one memorable ELA test-prep lesson, students read a text on gold mining. At one point, the teacher asked why the narrator would be interested in finding gold. A student raised his hand and said, “[T]o maybe make necklaces” (field notes, 3/8/17). My pedagogical instinct was to praise his imagination and the connection he made between finding gold and making jewelry with it. The teacher, though, gently told him not to use that idea in his writing because it wasn’t in the passage. In order to get points, students must only use what’s in the passage. There is importance in finding evidence in a reading and using it to compose a response; the problem is that as a result of the test’s requirements, the children’s imaginations are muted. The definition of a “good reader”—someone who uses the information in the text to compose a response—leaves out many other aspects of good reading, including using your own imagination and making connections outside of the passage itself. I wrote in my notes: “Is that really what ‘good readers’ do?” In one interview with Marian at the Progressive School, she spoke about grading standardized tests and said:

…the process of grading felt very meaningless because… I felt like we were… rewarding kids with a good score even if they kind of like plagiarized from
the text if they just happened to pick out the right detail...whereas someone who could, like, actually construct a thought...they were losing points...it didn’t make sense to me in terms of what we say we’re trying to help kids achieve (field notes, 3/13/17).

The procedural focus, coupled with the strict requirements for scoring the tests, translates into significant limitations for how student work can sound or look. This analysis is supported by a recent policy brief published by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), in which they wrote:

Most important, standardized tests limit student learning because they focus only on cognitive dimensions, ignoring many other qualities that are essential to student success...ELA teachers have to, for instance, cut back on large-scale projects that require perseverance, reduce the number of literary texts that engender the empathy necessary to sociability, and limit opportunities for developing student curiosity. Student learning that could lead in positive directions is diminished when tests prevent teachers from helping students develop the noncognitive abilities that support better life outcomes (p. 2).

Student curiosity played a minimal role in these two classrooms, because it can’t be tested and therefore has no place. Again, while standardized tests are praised by some for raising standards, throughout this research I witnessed ways in which testing limits and constrains both the thinking and decision making of teachers, and the thinking, doing, and learning of the students.

Perhaps the only time I witnessed choice and creativity was when students had written research books on a topic of their choosing. At the end, they had the chance to create the cover to their book. However, the cover creation was only allowed once the self-assessment portion of the lesson was over, and it lasted for only about ten minutes. The creativity in doing this was not valued; it was treated more as an extra, rather than a potentially important demonstration of student expression. When teachers clapped at the end, signifying that the drawing portion was finished, it was the only time I heard
students complain, “Aaaaaawwwww!” (field notes, 5/25/17). They were disappointed! This was one of very few times when there was collective sadness about class ending—and it was not lost on me that it was the only moment that they were allowed choice and creativity.

The teachers clearly wanted more freedom and autonomy to do different kinds of work with their students, but they felt that their hands were tied. In one of our last interviews, Sara shocked me. I asked the group if they would want to create their own curriculum, and they immediately said yes. When I asked why, Sara answered with ideas that mirrored the Progressive School’s vision, despite her support for standardized testing and the focus on skills. She made the following points:

Because then we could meet the kids where they are. We could have realistic expectations and set the criteria as to how they could go from A to B. And also, your own interests or passions…it would be nice to include some of that and not just be mandated you have to teach this in this way. And use that as a way to teach writing, research, reading…sort of how they do in private schools. My son was studying a graffiti artist and they learned about graffiti history and went on a trip (field notes, 5/31/17).

Here, Sara is able to name and critique the exact concerns this research highlights: that teachers cannot meet the students where they are; that teacher interests aren’t part of their work because topics are selected by Teachers College to match the tests; and that the curriculum would be improved by embedding skills into larger units rather than working only on isolated skills.

Despite this clarity, the teachers still struggled to conceptualize school and curriculum outside of the narrow context they were given. Sara had her son’s private school as an example, but Gwen and Lindsay didn’t have many other examples of schooling that looked different, such as a context in which teachers developed units rather
than using standardized curricular packages. In one of our last interviews, I asked teachers about their curriculum over the course of the year and what they would change if they could. Their answers stayed within the confines of the curricular and testing apparatus in which they currently work. Their responses included, “I would teach more foundational skills up front,” and “I would change the order of the reading units” (field notes, 5/31/17). Gwen mentioned that the TC mini-lessons often don’t apply to their students, and her concern was that if they changed them “they’re going to be perpetually behind because we’re not teaching into the third-grade standards” (field notes, 5/31/17). I gently pushed her on this and asked, “Couldn’t you develop your own mini-lessons that focus on those expectations, just in a different way?” After a pause, she replied, “Yeah, I guess we could” (field notes, 5/31/17). Her reaction signaled to me that this was a new idea. Perhaps the notion that she could create lesson plans hadn’t occurred to her or seemed possible. Earlier in the conversation, when I asked if they’d designed any of the assessments they had given students, they all laughed. “None of them,” Lindsay clarified. Here we see the totalizing power of the testing and curricular apparatus that is the reality for these educators; despite their interest, the idea of actually creating curriculum seemed out of their purview. A lack of planning time came up as a concern, and some comments signified that the administration hadn’t met their needs in this regard. They had asked, but, according to them, the administration hadn’t granted this time. This raises the significant issue of administrative support in cultivating teacher roles and teacher work that go beyond the scope of standardization.
Authentic & Creative

At the Progressive School, teachers create their own curriculum. The schedule was organized to allow significant planning time each week, when teachers were expected to meet together. Standardized testing doesn’t play a role when they consider what content or skills to teach. As a reminder, at the Standardized School teachers had little to no say in the curriculum; they followed the Teachers College Reading & Writing Curriculum in preparation for the ELA test. The work tended to be entirely skills-focused, rather than having broader importance. Curriculum development at the Progressive School was vastly different. Marian told me: “We’re learning and working for its own sake rather than being able to perform on a test” (field notes, 3/13/17). When I asked Zoe to describe the kindergarten curriculum and where it comes from, she said:

It comes from...a team of teachers...this is what we’re interested in...also knowing four- and five-year-olds and saying this is what we need to offer them and let’s see what they do with it...and see where the children take us...we listen and observe a lot so when there’s an interest we give room to that and see where we want to take it... (field notes, 5/1/17).

Here Zoe highlights a few key pieces of the curriculum. First, it is clear that teachers are treated as autonomous and professional; they determine the curriculum rather than having a curricular package handed to them. Teachers were trusted by the administration and by families to create and develop curriculum they felt best fit the needs and interests of the students. This leads into the second point, which is that the developmental levels of children are considered by teachers as they design their curriculum, which contrasts with the questions around developmental appropriateness at the Standardized School. There, teachers questioned whether the work and the tests were cognitively appropriate for their students. Here, teachers plan curriculum that they feel matches the developmental levels
of their students. Importantly, the power of the students came across again and again, as teachers like Zoe left curricular openings to see where kids would want to go in their own learning. While children aren’t planning curriculum, their voices, interests, and needs are central in determining what will be explored. At the Standardized School, it seemed that the students were almost an afterthought, second to the standards and benchmarks that had already been determined for them.

As a result of not having to worry about standardized testing, teachers were not bound to the format of the tests themselves. Their curriculum, therefore, could look quite different, and it did. Only a fraction of the student work was pen-and-paper; much of it took more creative forms. When asked about the place of testing within the school, Marian explained:

We definitely have the kids represent most of their knowledge in other ways [than tests and quizzes]…papers and projects and discussions…I’m asking them to do like a much broader…array of work than like the ELA test measures…it requires more than…the short answers are really formulaic essays (field notes, 3/13/17).

At the Progressive School, the Mayan project in fifth grade included an essay (that took at least one revision), a built model of one component of Mayan life (such as a temple or a garden), painting, and T-shirt making. The fiction book that Marian used for read-alouds was titled *The Will of Sacrifice*—it imagined a Mayan girl trying to avoid this sacred ritual. Students were given a lot of choice in terms of what to focus on throughout their projects, and how to complete them. I never saw students follow a rigid set of procedures. Often, the room and the work were messy, busy, and loud. As a result of this process, finished products were unique, with each one showing a lot about the students who created it. Art and hands-on creation were central.
In explaining his connection to the school and his role as a teacher there, Travis said:

I went to [art school] for two years…teaching Social Studies through hands-on project making was right up my alley…building the wigwam…doing clay, and doing hands-on projects was just kind of second nature for me…I bought these big pieces of cedar wood and carving tools…to make their stools…I took a mold-making class this year…so we can make gold weights…and then I took a class in natural dyes and, um, I figured out how to do this clay-staining process that they do in Mali…we just did that project last week…my art background has been a perfect match for what I’m permitted to do [here]. If I hadn’t been …I probably wouldn’t have made it all these years [laughs] …[I love] how things work, how things are made, and what’s the backstory (field notes, 11/13/17).

This description of the teacher’s role is vastly different from the rote nature of the teachers’ work at the Standardized School. The richness, passion, and openness of the curriculum are all apparent. Travis also claims that if not for these attributes, he may not have stayed in teaching. This dovetails with the research demonstrating that teacher turnover has increased with the push for standardization. Teaching without joy, without autonomy, and without passion eliminates so much of the beauty of the profession. In “Social Class and School Knowledge,” Anyon pointed out the contradiction between “the value placed on creativity and personal decision-making, and the systematic, increasingly rationalized nature of school and professional work in the U.S. society (1981, p. 36).”

Because schools are sites where societal values are debated, the rational, procedural focus at one school and the creative, autonomous orientation of the other represent this same contradiction in society as a whole.

Social studies was the heart of the curriculum at the Progressive School, and science played a significant role as well. Reading and writing were constant but embedded in the larger work of the classrooms. Units were driven by an in-depth engagement with the world, and the skills were built in. In kindergarten, children studied
the shore, which they visited, as well as families and communities. In third grade, students studied West Africa, and in fifth grade they studied the Mayans. The units were months long and encompassed all of the reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills for that grade. Instead of students participating in a lesson to learn a specific skill, they would participate in lessons in which that skill was embedded. For example, in one third-grade class, the teacher read a picture book called _Here Is the African Savannah_ as a prompt for students to use more description in their own writing. The book was connected to the overall unit of West Africa, while also being an example of beautiful and rich description. The skill of description was not separate from the larger content and broader purpose of the unit as a whole. During the class, Travis read the entire book straight through, without stopping to ask comprehension questions. At the end, the prompt to students was: “What are you inspired to do today?” (field notes, 4/6/17). Rather than giving students a skills-oriented prompt, such as finding three places to add details, he inspired them with a beautiful, descriptive book and then allowed them the freedom to decide what to work on and how. The only time I witnessed teachers focusing solely on a skill was during cursive writing practice, which students did for about 45 minutes a day.

Critically, the work at the Progressive School was more meaningful, risky, and connected to students’ lives. At the Standardized School, topics were often random and disconnected from students’ lives—such as reading about blimps or gold mining. I watched students struggle through these texts, clearly confused, unable to make meaning out of them (or enjoy reading them). I often walked into a silent room with children
involved in an assessment. One day I walked into Gwen’s room, and the kids were silently working away. On the smartboard it read:

   Remember to:
   Write an intro, use transition words, include conclusion, and add text features (field notes, 5/31/17).

Again, the curriculum here was marked by a focus on skills, and it was therefore often uninteresting, disconnected from students’ lived realities, and void of meaning. At the Progressive School, the work often concerned controversial issues, connected in some way to the lived realities of students, involving student choice, and meaningful. One day, Marian read a story out loud to her students about two friends—one Hispanic and one Jewish—who were segregated in their school cafeteria. It was powerful, and unattached to a specific assignment. Students were asked to discuss “belonging” afterward—a topic children certainly relate to. This was one of the entry points Marian used before diving into a unit on the Holocaust (field notes, 4/6/17). Another day, students read various poems by Mary Oliver, Ann Turner, and Karla Kushner. The fifth-grade students also visited the library during the week, and the librarian led powerful lessons about Fannie Lou Hamer, Frederick Douglass, and the Ku Klux Klan, to whom she referred as “terrorists” (field notes, 5/22/17). The school culture invited difficult issues into the center of the curriculum, and the learning that students did felt deep, important beyond the walls of the school, and connected to the wider world.

*The Classroom and Teacher/Student Interactions*

At the Progressive School, the classrooms mirrored the richness of the curriculum and the flexibility of the school more broadly. Rather than multiple anchor charts explaining skills or protocols, in Louisa and Travis’s third-grade room there were long
fabrics from West Africa hanging against one wall, a large bookcase labeled “Africa
Library” with 15 baskets of books, and an art supply area with 27 buckets of supplies
including oil pastels, glue, scrap paper, color swatches, and Sharpie markers. The walls
were covered with student-created, rather than teacher-created, work. The final project on
West Africa included clay models, woodworking, student writing, and drawing.

The kindergarten room was split into various stations, which changed but often
included: a table of paper mache; a table with the class turtle and children taking care of
it; a table of paper where students could draw, fold, and cut; a block center; a Magna-Tile
area; and a clay station. Make-believe and science were other stations (one day, for
example, the children were exploring water and ice). The holistic approach was clear. A
question on a board asked, “Did you eat breakfast today?” Each child’s picture was on a
magnet, and they moved it to the “yes” or “no” side. The room also included a meeting
area with a rug, bookcases, and an easel. On the wall hung children’s self-portraits in
chalk on black paper and in watercolor, as well as their paintings from trips to the shore.
Again, student choice was central to the running of the room, and therefore to the
curriculum as a whole. Each day, children were allowed to vote on the work time choice
they wanted to participate in from a list. One day, a student requested a building station,
and the teacher found big boxes and pieces of boxes in the closet to set it up.

Marian’s room, the fifth-grade classroom, was large and often a mess. Like Zoe
and Louisa, Marian had a casual nature—she was sometimes in braided pigtails, and
often in jeans. All three teachers had a quiet disposition, became firm when needed, but
rarely raised their voices. They were all loving toward the students, responsive to their
needs, and constantly on their feet, moving around the room in order to facilitate
Like the teachers at the Standardized School, these educators demonstrated incredible commitment to their craft; much of the day was serious, focused, and driven toward multiple accomplishments. Here, though, there was greater flexibility, autonomy, and joy. The teachers and students laughed more, and there just seemed to be more energy—and because they personally designed the curriculum, their investment in it was clear.

This autonomy and flexibility also impacted how children worked and how teachers and students interacted. At the Progressive School, children were able to move naturally and with a great deal of freedom. Children were able to let out their voices and their movements, rather than having to stifle them for long portions of the day. Students could leave the classroom when they needed to use a bathroom; students got up to get snacks from their backpacks when they were hungry. Students were frequently talking and laughing while working; classrooms were never silent. In Zoe’s room, as mentioned, students were able to choose their work station each day, so you might see students standing, sitting, kneeling with blocks, cutting with scissors, or feeding a turtle. In Marian’s room, there was often a group of students working on the floor, spread out.

I noted many moments of silliness that were never reprimanded. For example, one student playfully threw a pencil at another. Students were generally expected to re-focus themselves, which they often did, when they were ready. Teachers did not focus on behavior. If there was an issue, the teachers generally handled it quietly, pulling a student aside to speak with them or joining them in their workspace, and then moving on. But teachers did not nitpick. They generally intervened only when behaviors became disrespectful or dangerous. For example, when the pencil throwing in Marian’s class
turned from silly to aggressive, she immediately intervened. During one whole-class conversation at the meeting area, I noted that about seven kids seemed distracted, and there were some side conversations in whispers. Marian quietly shushed these students but did not stop the discussion or pursue this with much effort.

In my phone interview with Travis, he explained how his views of teaching were shaped by his mentor, one of the founders of the Progressive School. He said:

I was coming from parochial school and you didn’t have great relationships with your teachers…[My mentor] was a humanist, “oh c’mon kids, let’s work this out…” and when I saw that style of teaching that was honest, and that kind of reflected to me that, you know, you can be yourself and be real with the kids and they’ll still be motivated to work, you know, just based on a rich curriculum…the style of [my mentor] in the way he related to the kids that I was really drawn to. So…a switch went on…that let me know I could be…I didn’t have to put on an authoritative approach…punish, consequences, you could just talk to kids and appeal to their best nature… (field notes, 11/13/ 2017).

Here, Travis frames the teacher/student relationship as authentic and based on honesty rather than control or domination. He also connects this relationship to the curriculum. A rich curriculum, he suggests, will engage children and diminish the authoritarian stance a teacher has to take. This is, in fact, exactly what I witnessed at the Progressive School.

This was a marked contrast from the Standardized School, where students were seated at desks in specific groups or at the meeting area almost the whole time in their classroom. Movement was minimal, and talking was quiet, controlled, or absent. Students didn’t laugh very often. I wrote in my notes on many occasions how surprised I was by the quiet, focus, and hard work demonstrated by the students at the Standardized School. For young children, they worked extremely hard to sit, read, write, listen, follow protocols, and follow rules. I consistently felt exhausted by lunchtime.
The classroom décor was cheerful and welcoming but much more traditional than at the Progressive School. Toward the front of both classrooms was a smartboard and a rug for a meeting area (which also existed at the Progressive School), and student desks were grouped together. Most of the work that hung on walls was teacher-created, consisting of anchor charts reminding students about protocols to follow when completing particular assignments. These were colorful, artistic, and helpful. The classroom libraries were leveled; books were organized in bins by letter; in both classrooms, there were also some books organized simply by category. Students all kept a Ziploc bag of independent reading books in their desks. State math and ELA books were stacked on windowsills and on the teachers’ desks. Hard copies of the Teachers College curriculum also sat in both rooms.

The largest differences in classroom design between the Progressive School and the Standardized School were the lack of student work displayed at the Standardized School, and the organization of books. While there was a leveled library in Travis and Louisa’s third-grade room, there was, as described, a large Africa library as well and many book bins that were organized by category. In Marian’s room, books simply sat in a bookcase, not organized by level or topic. In all three rooms at the Progressive School, art supplies and art projects were visible and in use, while at the Standardized School there was no art in the regular classrooms. Overall, there was a sense of greater creativity and freedom in the classrooms at the Progressive School.

While it was obvious that the teachers at the Standardized School cared deeply for their students in the ways they spoke with and about them, there was much more of an authoritarian approach to the teacher/student relationship here. Behavior was consistently
a focus for the teachers. There were frequent reminders to sit “criss-cross applesauce,”
and side conversations were always admonished almost immediately. Fidgeting was not
allowed in the meeting area. In Gwen’s class, one day she told her students, “[W]e have
to start getting ready for fourth grade which means we have to practice sitting on the
rug…we’re not wiggling in our seats” (field notes, 5/17/17). Here, she is connecting the
work of older students to being still and quiet. Thus, the preparation for future grades
takes on a technical, rather than an intellectual, form. Teachers often asked students to sit
on their notebooks so that these would not be a source of distraction. Students’ bodies
were regulated and controlled much more. Teachers spent time sending students back to
work by table, depending on how ready they appeared, and they spent time lining them
up silently and in an organized fashion to walk to lunch. In one of the classrooms, a
voice-level sign hung on the wall that read: 0-silence; 1-whisper; 2-talk; 3-outside; 4-
emergency. The classrooms were almost always at a zero or a one. It felt as though
students were being forced to push the child part of them away and behave in a manner
that was unnatural.

One day, we all stopped as we listened to a kindergarten teacher yell at her
students for not being in the correct line spots. “It’s not safe!” she said sternly, followed
by: “We’re going to do it the right way! When I call your number, get in the line” (field
notes, 5/31/17). It seemed hard to imagine that a student in the wrong line spot would be
such a safety concern, and I felt sorry for these very young children being yelled at so
loudly. In general, teacher/student interactions were marked more by frustration, with
teachers feeling the need to constantly push and push students in ways that, perhaps, were
not best for the kids or the teachers. Even Sara described how she felt teaching one day
when she said: “[W]e just have to…train them to be prepared…sometimes it sucks…and it sucks on us as teachers because we’re taking on a lot” (field notes, 3/17/17; italics original). Here, she describes the feeling I often perceived as I spent time in their classrooms—that the work students and teachers were doing was marked by a sense of pressure, and therefore stress. While there was hard work at the Progressive School, the sense of joy in classrooms was much more palatable. Children and their teachers were doing work that had meaning for them and that they believed in, while at the Standardized School, in large part, children and teachers were doing work they had been assigned, that therefore lacked meaning for them, and that did not match the needs and interests of students.

Scheduling

The daily schedules revealed much about the curriculum and the school day. At the Standardized School, a typical schedule (after testing was finished) looked like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DURING TEST PREP</th>
<th>AFTER TESTING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:20- morning meeting</td>
<td>8:20-9:05-morning meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:05- reading workshop</td>
<td>9:05- reading workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:50-writing workshop</td>
<td>9:50- theme (interdisciplinary, social studies/science unit)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snack</td>
<td>10:35-writing workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:35-ELA</td>
<td>11:55-read aloud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:45-L &amp; R</td>
<td>12:45-Lunch &amp; Recess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:10- math problem solving</td>
<td>1:10-math problem solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:55- steam</td>
<td>1:55-math workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:40- gym</td>
<td>2:40-gym</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For about five hours a day, third-grade students were being asked to speak, listen, read, and write. Speaking was quite minimal, so the bulk of their day was really listening, reading quietly, and writing quietly. The volume in the classroom was always very controlled.
At the Progressive School, a typical schedule looked like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:10-9am</td>
<td>P.E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00</td>
<td>Unpack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:15</td>
<td>Cursive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:55</td>
<td>Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:25</td>
<td>Reading Buddies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:10</td>
<td>Lunch &amp; Recess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Wellness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:50</td>
<td>Loose Ends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Painting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Browsing AA Books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:40</td>
<td>HW Meetings/Pack Up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:25</td>
<td>Dismissal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this schedule, about two or two and a half hours of a child’s day is spent listening, reading, or writing quietly. The other parts of the day involve gym, wellness, and painting and browsing choices. There is greater variety, movement, and choice in this schedule. In fact, my visits to these two schools were very different. At the Standardized School, students were given about twenty-five minutes for lunch and recess. This is not a lot of time to eat *and* play. By contrast, at the Progressive School, students were given fifty minutes, or double the time. When I visited the Standardized School, I could almost always count on students being in their regular classroom except for the usual gym, lunch, or recess times. At the Progressive School, however, I had to be much more savvy
about seeing kids in their classroom, because they took part in so many other activities. Some days they were out at Spanish, other days at library, or movement, or visiting younger students as reading buddies. The only time they would, for certain, be in their regular room was before 10am. Over the course of the day, they were able to move around the building and outside much more than the students at the Standardized School. Furthermore, recording classroom observations proved more difficult, as there was often much more noise than at the Standardized School, with children talking and singing while they worked. Their quiet work time was also broken up so that they were not expected to sit in silence for long periods of time.

As a whole, the themes of freedom, autonomy, choice, and creativity were critical to the curriculum here. These stood in sharp contrast to the rigidity, lack of creativity, lack of autonomy and freedom, and intense focus on skills at the Standardized School.

**Standardized Versus Authentic Assessment**

The form of assessments in each school set up a very different curricular course. These two parts of school life (assessment and curriculum), in turn, had a crucial role in defining students, as well as the work of teachers. At the end of May, I sat down with the three teachers at the Standardized School and asked about assessment. I started with what I thought was a simple question, but it turned out it was not.

Me: “Can you describe the assessments the kids have had since January?”
Lindsay: “Oh my God.”
Gwen: “Wow.”
Silence. (field notes, 5/31/17).

Lindsay proceeded to try to walk me through the assessments of the past five months. She described the three-day ELA test and the three-day math test; the running records teachers have to write for each student, which take hours; the New York City math test,
which is separate from the state assessment; the city test for kids who are promotion-in-doubt; the end-of-unit assessments in the TC curriculum; and, for ELLs, a host of other assessments referred to as New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT), which include separate assessments for speaking, reading, and writing. Because the ESL teacher administered these tests, she had not been able to provide intervention services for the ESL students since about February. Meaning, the focus on standardized testing had taken over the focus on helping students with language acquisition for nearly three months. After this conversation, it became clear to me that the students who were the most vulnerable were tested the most. Students who were learning English or who might be held back faced an extra battery of tests from New York City, in addition to the state’s testing. The curricular focus oriented toward the demands of these tests as a result. If assessments are standardized, the curriculum must fall in line.

At the Progressive School, students participate in Performance Based Assessments (PBATs). This means that students engage with a body of work over a long period of time, and then present that work to a panel of teachers. They share their work and answer questions about it. This form of assessment begins in fifth grade, but students start practicing sharing their work and responding to questions about it much earlier on. Discussion, opinion (why did you…?), and the work process are all important aspects of assessment here.

In March, I sat in during some of the PBATs with Marian and other fifth-grade teachers. Three educators sat at a long table with student work on it, and they called in students one by one for their assessment. Students were generally nervous, understanding that this was important. Some of the questions teachers asked included:
- What did you learn, by carrying out this research?
- What got you interested in this?
- What were some things you were trying out as a writer?
- What was your research process?
- What were some of the challenges and advantages of working [alone or with a partner]? (field notes, 3/6/17)

Other than the expectation that students would be able to demonstrate their understanding of facts about Mayan life and culture, which were also shown through their research essays and models, the assessments were open enough to allow individual interests, modes of working, writing, and reading to shine through. The assessments, in other words, did not pigeonhole students. Each project was distinct based on the topic students chose, the materials they used to create their model (clay, wood, etc.), and the content of their research papers. The writing, research, and revision processes were all different based on the needs of the students; some students revised their papers five or six times, according to Marian, while others needed only two or three revisions to get to their polished final draft.

While assessments at the Standardized School were entirely standardized and created by outsiders, assessments at the Progressive School were created by the educators there and in line with the units of study. They were comprehensive assessments, often with various pieces, that matched the unit of study and allowed students to take ownership of their learning. The implications for student identity formation are far-reaching and quite significant. These came across in planning meetings and are explained below.

At each school I attended one formal planning meeting with teachers. At the Standardized School, this meeting came in March as they headed into test-prep mode. Of course, as a result, the focus was on test prep and testing. That said, the distinctions
between the two meetings highlight deep differences between the schools, which foster and promote divergent views of student learning and student identity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Standardized School</th>
<th>The Progressive School</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>March 1, 2017</strong></td>
<td><strong>June 8, 2017</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-The word “level” was used or referenced seven times</td>
<td>-Students’ levels were never mentioned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-[Coach]: “We’re not going to get everyone here…”</td>
<td>-the meeting focused on “big ideas,” questions, materials, and logistics</td>
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<td>-“[the TC workshop] talked about…starting more at their level and building to like a Friday being more like test-like passages which is way above their level…”</td>
<td>-teacher writes BIG IDEAS on curriculum map: what do ppl need to survive? Which resources are essential and which are luxuries?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-“…kids can be a low one or a high one…”</td>
<td>-“What are our water big ideas?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-“[students] are probably solid two’s, maybe midway two’s…how to like push them up the higher end of two maybe three…”</td>
<td>-“How does topography change with the climate?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>-Lack of teacher professionalism:</td>
<td>-“How did we justify giving them plastic tubing for the irrigation?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-“I need to spend more time reading this massive thing [book from TC]</td>
<td>-trying to get the idea of how you move water from place to place…”</td>
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<tr>
<td>-Focus on test-taking skills</td>
<td>“After they’ve become a mini-expert on their city…reading the information on the travel guide…then they should be able to take their own map and write or draw their own understanding of the environment…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-“…teaching them actual test-taking coping mechanisms…”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-“how are we going to build up their stamina”</td>
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A central theme of the planning meeting at the Standardized School was the level of the students and how to move them either within that level or to a higher one. This limits student identity to a number, and it insists on thinking about children as how they can fit into an existing structure, rather than how the structure can fit them. There’s also a narrowing of the curriculum to focus on this very limited set of skills as needed for the test. The curriculum, for at least four weeks at this school, becomes the test. Children learn test-taking strategies, read test passages, and answer test questions.
Because there is no actual curricular planning on the part of teachers, their planning was consistently about the logistics—the when, how, and which parts—rather than creating and developing the *what*. The content is predetermined and inflexible. In contrast, at the Progressive School, the teachers create each of their units and determine which content and skills to focus on. So, within their unit on the Ancient Mayans, they had the autonomy to select water as a significant topic, and the big ideas and questions surrounding its usage. The second major distinction is that, at the Standardized School, the curriculum was driven by a skills focus as a result of the skills-oriented assessments. One unit might hone in on the skill of narrative writing, for example, or one lesson might focus on the skill of using evidence to support a claim. This bare-bones skills approach lacks context, content, and motivation for students. It is practicing a skill for the sake of the skill. At the Progressive School, skills were practiced with the purpose of creating something connected to a larger unit. Within the unit on Ancient Mayans, for example, students practiced many writing skills, like using evidence to support a claim, but for the purpose of a research paper that would be published, read, and discussed by teachers. Skill practice always had a purpose larger than the skill itself. Finally, what is quite noticeable in contrasting these two meetings is the total focus on standardized testing in one and the absence of testing in the other. During the meeting at the Standardized School, there was a lot of talk about building student stamina. There was a well-meaning attempt to accept “where the kids are” (field notes, 3/1/17), coupled with a clear sense of pressure to “conquer and tackle the test” and “push them up” (field notes, 3/1/17).
When schools broaden their curriculum and assessments, a wider view of the students becomes possible. When I asked Marian how she assessed her students, she explained:

Just observing them everyday…I’m always listening to how they talk about literature…whole group discussions, small group discussions…I have them write about their reading a lot…writing several small narratives…then we’ll do poetry… (field notes, 3/13/17).

In one short description, this teacher was able to name at least six different formats (some not quoted here) in which students could express themselves. Thus, rather than a reading level, this educator has at least six different ways she can assess and speak about the way her student thinks and works in a variety of formats. A student might have a low reading level, for example, but be a brilliant poet. This is a fuller, more authentic view of a child.

The teachers at the Progressive School all commented on the oversimplification of students as a result of testing. Marian commented that “to get one number for three days of testing…doesn’t capture very much” (field notes, 3/13/17). Zoe, when discussing alternative kinds of assessments, described the PBATs that their students participate in as third-, fourth-, and fifth-graders. But, she added:

Zoe: “[T]o do those, it takes a lot of time, and again, understanding about different ways of learning.”
Me: “They’re complex.”
Zoe: “As children are. We’re trying to reduce them to a 1, 2, 3 or 4.” (field notes, 5/1/17)

This is an important framing of standardized testing, as simplifying the work and lives of students and teachers. At the Progressive School, complexity is appreciated and wrestled with. Students are not labeled as a reading level or a test score.
Knowledge, Value & Implications for Teacher and Student Identity

Knowledge

I asked the participating teachers who determined what knowledge was important in their school. At the Standardized School, the answer was simple and to the point: “The test,” answered all three teachers in unison. After a pause, some eye contact, and laughter, they added: “Teachers College.” The teachers were not part of the equation at all. They had very little professional autonomy to make decisions about knowledge. The students were not mentioned or discussed as part of this construction. It felt as though a large hand came through the building, disseminated their tasks, told them all what to value, and moved on. The individuals in the building obeyed. At the Progressive School, it was the opposite. Teachers made the ultimate, important decisions about knowledge, and all of the outside forces—test companies, Common Core creators, etc.—were kept at bay. At the Progressive School, one could envision the large hand as a protector of the community and its vision, pushing these forces out, rather than dumping them in. When I asked Zoe who decided what knowledge mattered, she said this:

I’m more interested in their questions, in their wonderings, in their imagination…So, while they learn their letters and their sounds and stories and predictions I mean they learn a lot of things…I really do believe in…keeping imagination alive…I want them to keep thinking out of their little boxes that knowledge and information will get presented to them in…we need a world of people to think differently…children do that naturally but so much in our world stops them…(field notes, 5/1/17).

Here, Zoe positions knowledge as imagination and creative thinking. She has the freedom to consider it this way and to make that a central focus of kindergarten—perhaps above and beyond a development of skills. She also presents the students as powerful makers of knowledge. By indicating that it is “their questions” and “their wonderings” that, in part,
dictate and shift the class curriculum, she makes it clear that students have active agency in what they learn. She also added that she and Simon “see where the children take us” (field notes, 5/1/17). During this discussion, she provided an example: “[T]hey have all this information about a turtle…but when I say: ‘would a turtle be a turtle without a shell?’ Some of them can really go with that” (field notes, 5/1/17). The push is moving students away from simple comprehension of information and opening them up to thinking about the world in new ways. Travis, Louisa’s teaching partner in third grade, explained his answer this way:

I’ve always had a huge say in what knowledge is important and being a member of a team…the team I’m working with is the most impactful on what’s important…we’re all so different…everyone has the freedom to do things differently…Louisa is like a brilliant curriculum creator…I probably had a bigger hand in doing the China unit when we were doing that for like fifteen or sixteen years…but with the Africa unit Louisa has really taken charge of a lot of this thinking and so her imprint is felt on all of us and we are loving that we have Louisa…(field notes, 11/13/17).

In his response, Travis makes clear that he is treated with the respect and autonomy of a professional, and has the power to determine what knowledge matters and how to develop curriculum. He also lauds the brilliance and importance of his team, including his teaching partner, Louisa. It is clear that they each bring various skills and knowledge into the school and take the lead in curriculum development at different times. Like Marian, he refers to the way he is treated by the administration as “a luxury,” suggesting that this is not typical. In fact, it is rare.

Value

Schools are a reflection of the larger society and what we value. We see these values in the ways that schools treat teachers and students, in what knowledge is given importance, and in how learning is assessed. We also see what is valued when there is an
absence of focus, analysis, or reflection. One morning in February, Lindsay at the
Standardized School reflected on the impact of Donald Trump’s inauguration [one month
earlier] on her students. He campaigned, in part, on the promise of immigration reform,
and had proposed building a wall between the United States and Mexico, and deporting
undocumented immigrants. She explained that her students frequently come to her,
scared that one of their parents or relatives will be deported. She told me:

...they’re like actually afraid for like their safety and like they’re going to go
home one day and like no one will be there....I wonder if my roommates would
mind if I suddenly got my foster license in case I suddenly need to take all of
these children in [laughing]...they were like, that’s fine [laughs]. [Pause. She stops
laughing.] It’s like, terrifying (field notes, 2/11/17).

Despite the students’ and teachers’ very real concerns around immigration and the threat
of deportation, I never heard of this being addressed in the school in a larger way. It
never came up in class or in staff meetings. Perhaps there wasn’t time. This begs the
question, though: What is the purpose of school? If there is such a disconnect between
school and the lived realities of children, what do schools value? Further, how can
children’s school knowledge be so disconnected from their lives? In other words, these
children may not have much to say about a blimp after reading a test passage, but I
wonder what they would have to say about immigration. While most of the curriculum
was characterized by a mechanical, skills focus, there was an enormous, wasted
opportunity to build these skills into relevant units of study, for example a study of the
election itself. But Teachers College creates specific units of study, and “TC Schools”
follow these closely. Therefore, teachers and schools don’t have the freedom and
professional license to make their own curricular decisions. If something important is
happening in the world or the lives of students, teachers cannot comply decide to include it in the curriculum.

Implications for Students

The narrow labeling of students permeates life at the Standardized School and has significant implications for students there. On one of my first days, I wrote the following observation in my notes:

One girl, an ELL (native Spanish speaker) finished her “B” level book and needs a new one. This student spent most of the reading time not reading because there wasn’t a book in the bin at her level. I go over and pick out a “C” level book and we try it together. She struggles with words like “that” and “is.” I feel nervous, unsure if she is allowed to try the “C” level book (field notes, 2/8/17).

In this example, the leveling of books and the labeling of students limited this student’s engagement with reading and learning. Instead of being able to choose from a variety of books, she was intent on choosing a “B” level book. When there wasn’t one, this student was stuck. Furthermore, what does this label do to a student’s identity? How does the assignment of “level B” impact this student’s identity as a reader and as a whole person? How much is gained and how much is lost as a result of this label?

The conclusions about knowledge at the Standardized School mirror Anyon’s findings from the working-class schools in “Social Class and School Knowledge.” She found that there were two ways in which school knowledge was reproductive. The first was because students were not taught their own history; they were given “little or no conceptual or critical understanding of the world or of their situation in the world” (1981, p. 32). Without an opportunity to consider their identities or histories, students are left unable to understand their positionality, and have no tools to agitate for change. School knowledge is also reproductive due to its mechanical nature, which does not provide the
cultural capital these students need. While, in this study, standardized tests and the skills in the curriculum were both framed as providing cultural capital by the teachers, this view of capital is limited. These things may allow students to gain access to a good middle school, for example, but the rest of their lives and identities will not necessarily benefit. Through a mechanistic approach to schooling, students are being groomed to be obedient workers. As Anyon wrote:

These aspects of school knowledge in the working-class schools contribute to the reproduction of a group in society who may be without marketable knowledge; a reserve group of workers whose very existence, whose availability for hire, for example, when employed workers strike, serves to keep wages down and the work force disciplined. A work force is, of course, essential to capitalism because lower wages permit profit accumulation, which is necessary to the viability of…the entire system (Anyon, 1981, p. 32).

Anyon ties knowledge-building directly to the needs of capitalism. Students are not taught to view themselves as change-makers; as powerful; as knowledge-creators. Rather, they are taught to follow rules, do what they are told, and ask few questions. The strict rigidity of school overshadows the social/emotional realities of students lives, also leaving them unequipped to manage their overall well-being.

Despite the fact that teaching is a profession that depends on relationships and is a deeply human endeavor, the humanity of it is overshadowed by the intense focus on developing certain skills and meeting particular standards. Marian relayed an emotional story one day that shed some light on this. She described a former student whom I will call Emily:

I remember having this conversation with her mom and her mom said to me: “This is the first time Emily has had friends.” And…nobody can tell me that that growth isn’t more valuable and important than like what she gets on an ELA or a math test. Maybe I didn’t move her along…as much as I would have liked [laughs]…[but] she’s connecting with people like she never has before. So there’s
that whole thing that’s like how do you show what you value? (field notes, italics mine, 3/13/17).

Standardized tests do not measure the social/emotional growth of a child, which in turn means that schools either cannot value these aspects of a child, or that by doing so they risk their test scores and the narrow measurement of “school success.” By centering the importance of standardized tests and curriculum, the social/emotional lives of students and their connections to school frequently become erased. There is no time for them. In re-visiting the very first lesson I observed at the Standardized School, during which the class was able to discuss race and the identities and lives of students—and then Lindsay’s comments that she wished she could do more of that work—it became evident to me that what students and teachers at the Standardized School value, at least in part, is totally separate from the work they do. If students cannot discuss and engage with issues they care about and value in school—then where can they? Furthermore, if the values of teachers, students, and the larger school community are not present in the curriculum and knowledge building within school, then we are stripping learning of its’ value and meaning. This begs the question: what is learning for?

Implications for Teachers

The work of teachers, and their overall “school life” were both dramatically different between these two schools. In the Progressive School, teachers were trusted, autonomous, and allowed to be creative masters of their classrooms. In a phone conversation with Travis, he said:

there’s so much trust in our school that [the principal] gives to the teachers…no teacher works alone… It’s a real luxury…I can honestly say that I go to work everyday and I don’t view it as I’m going to work, oh gosh…there have been very few days when I’ve walked into that building and wished I was somewhere else…your needs get met, you’re creative, you’re working with children, …you
are to a certain extent autonomous and you have people to lean on and collaborate with, you have respect…it’s quite remarkable...(field notes, 11/13/17).”

He communicates that he is treated with the respect and autonomy of a professional, and has the power to determine what knowledge matters and how to develop curriculum. He also lauds the brilliance and importance of his team, including his teaching partner, Louisa. It is clear that they each bring various skills and knowledge into the school, and take the lead in curriculum development at different times. The idea of trust was echoed by Marian, when she shared the following during one of our long interviews:

“I feel like we’re [the Progressive School teachers] in this luxurious position where we know we’re trusted and…nobody’s asking me to turn in lesson plans that open with, like, this is the standard I’m teaching…I couldn’t function within that set of parameters…that would feel like a hoop I was having to jump through that didn’t actually make the experience more meaningful…I don’t know how to make something both meaningful and flexible… (field notes, 3/13/17).”

Here, Marian brings up the idea of meaning again. At the Progressive School, teachers have the freedom and intellectual space to couch their work in what has meaning or value for them and their students. Rather than a standardized test, or a standardized curricular package, dictating their work, they make decisions about what is needed and what makes the most sense. Zoe also confirmed the professionalism teachers have at the Progressive School when she said this:

“I can [modify the curriculum], we all do that…there might be something bubbling in here that isn’t…We are so fortunate here. We’re trusted by our administration. We’re really trusted…I think this is so rare…[the principal] does her observations of us cuz she has to…she sees the teaching going on (laughs)…it’s not a threat….And there’s no fear…I’m going to be in trouble…No, no (field notes, 5/1/17).”

Zoe, Marian, and Travis are all keenly aware that their autonomy and professionalism are rare. Travis and Marian refer to the trust they receive as “a luxury” while Zoe comments on how fortunate they are. The other important point Zoe raises here is the role of fear.
For many teachers, interactions with administrators are marked by fear and distrust. This is detrimental and counterintuitive to running a school community. But as measures for student learning have narrowed; teacher tenure has come under attack; and administrative observations have become more high-stakes, this fear has increased.

Teachers have been stripped of their professionalism as standardization has increased. Rather than joy, autonomy, and flexibility, teaching has been increasingly marked by anxiety and stress. Expecting teachers to follow a particular curriculum, and even regulating the appropriate methods for teaching said curriculum, has become a much more common practice since the beginning of NCLB. As Michael Apple writes:

Such a regime of control is not based on trust, but on a deep suspicion of the motives and competence of teachers…a strong and interventionist state…will see to it that only “legitimate” content and methods are taught. And this will be policed by statewide and national tests of both students and teachers (2006, p. 43).

At the Standardized School, the school administrators demonstrated respect for their teachers, but teachers were not at all autonomous. When I interview them and asked if they would want to be able to plan a unit, I suggested talking to their principal to ask for planning time. There was uncomfortable laughter, and one teacher joked: “No more questions!” (Field notes, 5/31/17) indicating a division between themselves and the administrators. They then explained that they had asked for planning time. Lindsay said “It hasn’t been a priority, the planning time…it’s been like, if we can give it to you” (field notes, 5/31/17). It was evident that the teachers felt somewhat dismissed, or unheard, by their administration. This is a perfect illustration of the de-professionalization of teachers. They were clearly expected to prepare their students for standardized tests, and to strictly follow the Teachers College and Engage (math) curricula in order to do so. Despite their adherence to these structures, they continued to
feel that requests for other priorities, such as planning time, were not listened to. Their roles felt much more robotic than intellectual, more mechanistic than creative. As a teacher myself, I was struck by how little of themselves they were able to give to their students. Their personalities and their care for the students came across, but unlike Travis who used his art skills in his curriculum, or Louisa who designed a unit on Africa using her own knowledge and passions, the three teachers at the Standardized School didn’t have the space to put their interests or passions into their work with children. In fact, over our six months together, I never gained a true understanding of what each teacher loved to do, or excelled at, because it really never came up. This echoes what Apple (1995) has found, that the technical control over schools and teachers contributes, in fact, to the “de-skilling” of teachers. Rather than contributing to a better prepared, professional cohort of educators, this intense standardization dumbs down the profession. He wrote that:

Skills that teachers used to need, that were deemed essential to the draft of working with children—such as curriculum deliberation and planning, designing teaching and curricular strategies for specific groups and individuals based on intimate knowledge of these people—are no longer necessary. With the large-scale, influx of prep-packaged material, planning is separated from execution. The planning is done at the level of the production of both the rules for use of the material and the material itself. Thee execution is carried out by the teacher (1995, p. 132-133).

This is precisely what occurs at the Standardized School. Planning and design are not part of the teacher work, thus altering the profession in that school altogether.

Resistance

The teachers at the Resource School managed small gestures of resistance. One decision these teachers do have a say in is which texts to read with their students. In many ways I found they used these texts as an entry point to meet the needs and interests of their children. They chose books such as “Who is Malala Yousafzai?” and “I am Sonia
Malala is the Palestinian young woman who was shot by the Taliban for attending school. Sotomayor, the Supreme Court Justice, is Puerto Rican and writes of growing up in a housing project with a single mother, as well as struggling with diabetes—difficulties that personally connected to some of the students’ lives. The teachers also read and analyzed a short story titled “William’s Doll,” about a boy who wants a doll, but whose father believes boys shouldn’t play with them. Here, questions of gender and gender norms were discussed. These books and stories were powerful examples of culturally relevant work and were devices for connecting with students and making the curriculum more meaningful (field notes, 5/31/17). However, their use was still limited by a focus on building particular skills, rather than as a jumping off point to do authentic work around students lived experiences. That said, I interpreted these and other texts as the teachers small way of resisting the mechanical role they had been forced into. When allowed to make some curricular decisions, the ones they made were incredibly thoughtful, considerate of who their children were, and even somewhat controversial in raising difficult issues (like gender or poverty) and addressing them in class. While they spoke of their scripted curriculum as boring, it seemed to me that they made sure that when given the opportunity, their curricular decisions would be engaging and valuable.

Whereas the resistance at the Standardized School was small, the entire existence of the Progressive School stands in defiance to current policy. Nearly the entire student body opts out of state testing; teachers communicate with families about this position; and the curriculum is completely developed by educators in the building rather than outside groups. This demonstrates the power that one school can wield. When a school
community is able to coalesce around an issue—in this case, opposition to 
standardization—they can create tremendous change. As the story was twice relayed to 
me during my fieldwork, the opt-out movement in this school began with one parent. The 
policymakers pushed too far; test time lengthened, and one family had had enough. The 
following year, a handful of other families followed suit, and the year after it became a 
movement. One action ultimately transformed the landscape of this school. One deeply 
important factor in this transformation, though, was the readiness of both the principals 
and the teachers to take a risk. They certainly understood that there could be political 
repercussions—perhaps a lower school rating, or even removing the principal. Together, 
these educators dared to take that risk. While so much of the response to policy initiatives 
has been fear and anxiety, this school stands as an inspiration to those of us who refuse to 
go along with measures we feel strongly against.
Conclusions:

This research shed light on a number of salient findings. First, it is clear the teachers agreed unilaterally that standardized testing is unfair. While Sara argued that tests are a valuable tool in students lives, she nonetheless admitted that they are an inequitable measure of student learning. The other seven teachers took a more coherent view that standardized testing was inappropriate for young children, and largely unnecessary. Some of the teachers went further and claimed that testing is actually harmful. Teachers described a variety of ways in which standardized testing unfairly impacted their students and their own lives. They spoke to the linguistic level of the ELA tests; the time that test-prep takes away from actual teaching and learning; and the fact that student scores do not improve their own teaching practice. In sum, many of the arguments generally offered in support of standardized testing were critiqued. Critically, all three teachers at the Standardized School noted the significance of their students’ social class, most often characterized by their access to out-of-school experiences. The overall finding was that standardized tests necessitate these experiences, which bring background knowledge and a deeper level of comprehension to test-taking situations. Because most students at the Standardized School lacked these kinds of experiences, teachers believed the tests were biased against them. The role of cultural capital here was paramount. Teachers at the Standardized School lamented that their students did not have the necessary cultural capital (such as out-of-school experiences) needed for test success. However, they and their students families framed these same tests as the cultural capital
they would need for future success. Thus, there was an understanding that something could be gained by taking (and scoring well) standardized tests. At the Progressive School, there was a sense that students there already had access to cultural capital, and the tests would actually be a hindrance to increasing it. Notions of capital intersect here with both social class and language. The fact is, the Progressive School is whiter and more affluent, and so the students there do tend to have access to economic and social capital that the Standardized School students do not. They can afford, therefore, to resist standardization and remain free from potential consequences for doing so (ie: rejection from good middle schools). The capital that surrounds them provides a cushion of protection.

The second set of findings is around the use and impacts of standardized tests. Teachers voiced their concerns again around fairness, since some students opt out of standardized tests or attend independent schools and don’t take them. This raises questions of equity in who takes standardized tests and why, and which groups are free from the shackles of standardization. All eight teachers agreed that the tests didn’t contribute to their knowledge of students. There were differing views on how accurate test scores seemed to be; some teachers said they knew exactly what the test would show, and therefore didn’t need it, while others cited a mismatch between test scores and what they know about their students’ abilities. But none of the teachers argued in favor of standardized testing for helping them understand their students; they were all clear about knowing their students better than any test could dictate. Despite concerns across the board, at the Standardized School there was general acceptance of the reality of standardized testing and curriculum, in part due to its high-stakes nature. The teachers
understood their difficult position; if they resisted standardized testing, their students might score poorly and be rejected from the strongest middle schools. So, in some ways they recognized that standardized testing was not best for their students, but jumped through the hoop nonetheless in order to access what will be best for them in the future. Teachers also work within particular contexts, informed in part by parents and families. At the Standardized School, there was strong parent support for standardized testing, while at the Progressive School there was a coherent parental view that standardized testing was harmful. Again, this shed light on the nuanced position of teachers attempting to navigate the school system for their students.

The third set of findings is around curriculum and assessment. Despite teacher criticism and a long history of scholarship against standardized testing, standardization in public schools has increased with the creation of the Common Core Standards and the attached tests. This nexus of standardization imposes a strict regimen onto the Standardized School, controlling the work of teachers and students and limiting the ways in which achievement is measured. Teachers have very little autonomy in regards to what they teach, and content is typically fragmented and mechanical, with an emphasis on skills. Without this apparatus of control, the teachers at the Progressive School enjoy freedom to develop curricula they feel best meets the interests and needs of their students. The quality of work is significantly different, as it involves higher-order thinking, creativity, and much greater decision-making on the part of students. Furthermore, the interactions between students and teachers mirror the level of freedom at each school site. At the Standardized School, where the teaching and learning are tightly controlled, the teacher/student interactions are caring, but rigid. The most pervasive feeling is that there
is much to get done, and not enough time. Teachers try their best to fit students into boxes that are not made for them. Teachers focus more on student behavior, and on controlling their bodies. The rooms are quiet and often still. At the Progressive School, in contrast, the teacher/student interactions are more casual. There is a clear delineation of respect, but the feel and tone are more conversational rather than authoritarian. There is much to do, and yet less pressure. There was very little focus on behavior and on students bodies. I noted more joy, and more laughter. Finally, the two forms of assessment—performance-based at the Progressive School and standardized at the Standardized School—pave the way for the contrasting kinds of curricula that emerged. While one form of assessment is open-ended, concerned with process, and allows for individual students to create, imagine, and explore a topic in a variety of ways, the other form of assessment is narrow, mechanical, and expects students to demonstrate their knowledge within an incredibly rigid set of parameters.

The final set of findings is around knowledge, values, and the broad implications for teachers and students. Teachers reported the involvement of vastly different stakeholders and processes for determining which knowledge has importance in their school. At the Standardized School, Teachers College and the Common Core tests determined which knowledge mattered, while at the Standardized School this was largely left up to the teachers, with guidance from their students. This split reveals a critical division in values. In one setting, the tests are valued over and above everything else; in the other, teachers ideas and students interests are both highly valued. The implications for students and teachers are tremendous. In this era of standardization, students suffer the most. There is no space for uniqueness. Children who want to move their bodies, or
who may have more creative tendencies, or who are talkative—become troublemakers, rather than simply what they are—children. Carla Shalaby writes beautifully about this in her recent book, *Troublemakers* (2017). This translates into a greater frequency of discipline, increased labeling, and a narrower set of children who can find success at school. This has critical implications for the most vulnerable students—those from low-income households and/or who are English Language Learners, who could benefit the most from a more open system but who instead find one that is rigid and punitive.

Despite a beautiful intention at the Standardized School of viewing one’s home language as an asset, which is described on their web site, the rigidity of standardized testing and its’ requirements may contribute to parental decisions to opt-out of the dual-language program, and also places severe pressure on students to quickly gain proficiency in English, perhaps at the expense of their home language.

Teachers are losing their professionalism completely. A profession that has always lacked status, teaching is now being controlled by corporations, de-professionalizing educators even further. At the k-12 level, Pearson, Houghton-Mifflin and others may have more control over student “learning” and the content of curriculum than actual educators. At the college and graduate school level, corporate interests such as Pearson are determining teacher certification through EdTPA. This privatized, neoliberal takeover of public education stems from a lack of trust in educators, but it may even be more sinister than that. It may not be over-reaching to argue that public schooling itself is under threat. We already see an entirely privatized system in New Orleans. The implications of this are no less than the survival of our democracy.
Re-Visiting Anyon’s Findings

While the educational landscape has changed a great deal since Anyon wrote “Social Class and School Knowledge,” in the categories of curriculum and pedagogy, striking similarities between my findings at the Standardized School and Anyon’s findings at her two working-class schools exist, three decades apart. In both working-class schools, Anyon found two ways in which knowledge was reproductive, which refers to “aspects of school knowledge that contribute directly to the legitimation and perpetuation of ideologies, practices, and privileges constitutive of present economic and political structures” (1981, p. 31). The first way knowledge was reproductive was that students were not taught their own history. This was the case at the Standardized School, as well. Where curricular work around immigration, immigrant histories, and language would be so relevant and profound for students, none of this takes place. Students therefore have “little or no conceptual or critical understanding of the world or of their situation in the world” (Anyon, 1981, p. 31). In a school where a majority of students come from immigrant families, it is a disservice not to have the opportunity to explore their own roots, and to embed those roots in a larger discourse around immigration and immigrant communities. Especially now, in our current political climate when immigrants are under attack, students should be armed with knowledge that situates immigrants as a deeply important part of the fabric of this nation—which is historically accurate—so they are prepared to defend themselves. It is this kind of work that is referred to in the statement ‘knowledge is power.’ We do not empower children simply through learning the three R’s—reading, writing and arithmetic. We empower them
through learning their own history and situating themselves in this society and in this world. Despite Lindsay’s remarks, for example, about her students’ fears of deportation, there was no space to address this with a group of young children who desperately needed guidance and support from the adults around them.

The second aspect of school knowledge that Anyon found reproductive in the working-class schools was the mechanistic nature of the curriculum. She connected this kind of work to that necessitated by a capitalist economy; these students were groomed not as executives or leaders, but rather as “the work force whose jobs entail primarily carrying out the policies, plans, and regulations of others” (Anyon, 1981, p. 32). Students, she found, were not being offered cultural capital that could be used to transform their position in society. This is similar to my own findings from the Standardized School, where the work was largely mechanical and skills-oriented, leading to the same conclusions that these children were not given the cultural capital they need. Crucially, though, the teachers in Anyon’s study were uncaring and negative towards their students, while the teachers in this study were loving and genuine in their concern for the children. Despite Sara’s dependence on testing as an important hurdle for her students to master, however misguided, even that came from a sense of caring about them.

The important distinction between these two studies is the role of educational policy. While the teachers in Anyon’s working-class schools were making their own choices about what to teach and how, and making these choices based, at least in part, on their own biases and stereotypes of their students, the teachers at the Standardized School were forced to go along with scripted curriculum and pedagogy so that their own decisions-making was extremely limited. Gwen and Lindsay both told me on separate
occasions that they would love a more thematic curriculum, one with greater creativity and that could be more responsive to the needs of their children. These teachers, in other words, were not bound by their own biases but by the rigid requirements of policy.

One argument in favor of standardization is that it can be a force to combat teacher bias; no matter who the teacher is, the thinking goes, the standards raise the bar for all students and in so doing they create greater equity for children across the board. Anyon’s findings, interestingly, could potentially be used to support such an argument.

The problem with this argument is that it perpetuates the framing of standardized tests as rigorous and improving the quality of learning, an idea burned into the fabric of our minds but not borne out by research. Let’s use a comparison that is frequent, and conceptualize students as athletes. Standardized tests can be compared to the drills an athlete would practice to get ready for a big game; they test narrow, separate sets of skills. The game itself is what takes rigor—when an athlete demonstrates their use of all of the skills they’ve mastered, and decides for herself how and when to use them. In a school, the game would look like performance-based assessment. When we ask students to create a scientific invention, or develop a museum exhibition about a topic they’ve researched, or use their math and science skills to build a structure—these are more than the sum of their parts, and they take much more than routinely applying one skill at a time. This idea that tests raise the standards for our children is misguided and dangerous. They actually simplify the work that we ask of them, and fail to fully prepare students for authentic tasks they will have to do in the real world that require planning, organization, multiple steps, and the use of various skills and kinds of knowledge at the same time (ie:
math and literacy). Rather than superficially separating one “subject” from another, the real world asks us to consider them together and make complicated judgments.

The second problem with the notion that standards can diminish teacher bias is that prejudice is a human problem and one that is too large for standards to solve. We all have biases, but we do not live in a society where we can discuss them, unpack them, and therefore work to unload them. This is the kind of work Lindsay wanted to do through her lesson on race, after which she told me there was no time for more lessons like it. This is critical work for children, and it should be part of what schools do. It should also be an essential component of teacher education before teaching begins, and throughout a teacher’s career. Sara, at the Standardized School, had no sounding board for her vacillating sentiments around standardized testing. There was no one, it seemed, with whom she could really explore her feelings, unpack them, and analyze to what degree they stemmed from her own biases of children and/or of schools themselves. Without the ability to deepen her analysis, Sara is left in an uncomfortable position—defending standardized testing, even upholding its’ necessity, while still understanding its’ uselessness and harm. If more teachers were given the time and resources to unpack their views on policy, we might have a much stronger opt-out movement on our hands.

Anyon found the dominant theme at both working-class schools to be resistance, largely because of the antagonistic relationship between teachers and students (1981, p. 11). This was not the case at the Standardized School. Because students felt cared for, there was a much greater sense of possibility, as Anyon found at the middle-class school in her study. She wrote that: “there was the feeling that if one works hard in school (and in life), one will go far” (1981, p. 16). At the Standardized School, this message was
constantly presented to students by the teachers in the building. While this is a message of optimism, it is also oversimplified and unrealistic. This message doesn’t account for the systemic oppression many of the students face as a result of their ethnicity, family’s immigration status, linguistic ability, and social class. Worse, it positions their own parents—many of whom have low-wage jobs—as potentially lazy. It promotes an individualistic stance. Standards, tests, and societal institutions are all given importance, while there is no critical exploration of meritocracy or capitalism. Even though the use of “I am Sonia Sotomayor” was one form of resistance, these stories and others promote the view that anyone, from anywhere, can be anything. If you don’t become great, then, it is your fault. Again, even one unit of study on immigration could open up avenues for exploration and questioning, and an age-appropriate means for children to consider the hardships various immigrant communities, perhaps their own families, have faced. These stories alone complicate the powerful narrative of meritocracy, individualism, and the ideology of “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.”

While Anyon found potential power in the theme of resistance—perhaps students would harness it to work towards social change—the theme of possibility here worries me. These children are told that if they work hard, anything is possible. But inevitably, some will work hard and still fail, because our capitalist society is not set up to have thousands of poor children succeed. What, then? What will these children think of themselves when they cannot succeed, despite their best efforts? Anyon wrote about this as well, and hoped that these children would gain “a critical view of the system” (1981, p. 34-35), and be exposed to “alternative ideas” (p. 35). It is my hope that many of these
children will be the first in their families to go to college, where such ideas will manifest and begin a path towards potential transformation.

The Progressive School best matches the “Affluent Professional” school in Anyon’s study. In both schools, “there was a stress on “humanitarianism” or “liberal ideals” (Anyon, 1981, p. 22). There was an emphasis on doing for others, community service, and a pervasive critical view of wealthy elites. In addition, knowledge “is open to discovery, construction, and meaning making…[it] has individualistic goals, but it also may be a resource for social good” (p. 23). Despite the fact that the population of the Progressive School is far less affluent than Anyon’s “executive elite” school, there is an important connection between the two. Like Anyon’s finding that the history curriculum here was the most “honest” (p. 37), children at the progressive school are taught the history of dissent and conflict, making their history much more “honest” than the history at the Standardized School or Anyon’s working-class schools. Importantly, wealthy, middle-class, and poor children alike are accessing this history, which explores such topics as the harsh realities of racism, union busting, and genocide. This has potential transformative possibilities for all students from a variety of backgrounds at the Progressive School to work towards change as adults.

Implications for the Future

*Standardization Exacerbates Inequity*

The role of standardized testing in reinforcing and extending social inequalities in educational opportunities has now been thoroughly researched and supported (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 1995). The fact that “minority” students are disproportionately
impacted by the outcomes of testing is also clear. Unfortunately, this research contributes to the discourse on widening educational equality. As Fine & Weis have written:

> There are empirical accounts of how public opportunities, institutions, and resources are being redesigned in law, policy, and academic practices that further tip educational advantage in the direction of children of privileged families, while an array of equally expensive public policies—testing, policing, and surveillance—are being unleashed within low-income communities, widening the inequality gap that already characterizes urban America (Fine & Weis, 2012, p. 187).

There is a two-tiered system of schooling in this country. The middle-class and wealthier families negotiate this system to preserve their class status, (Fine & Weis, 2012) while the working-class and poor are left behind in schools dictated by the rigid, inflexible, and meaningless work of standardization. Professor Alan Luke has written that:

> The key policies of scripted, standardized pedagogy risk offering working-class, cultural and linguistic minority students precisely what Anyon presciently described: an enacted curriculum of basic skills, rule recognition, and compliance (Luke, 2010).

The landscape has changed, but Anyon’s concerns from over thirty years ago carry tremendous validity today. In this current context, powerful terms have been co-opted by the conservative Right—and one of these terms is equity. Politicians and policymakers advocate for standardization in the great name of equity. The Civil Rights Movement is evoked to shed light on the distressing inequities of our public school system, and standardized testing and curriculum are held up as providing the answer. This is a fallacy. As the Historian Yohuru Williams has written:

> In shrinking students’ lives to test scores, the opportunity for them to dream and achieve beyond the arbitrary measures of intelligence offered by standardized tests will be lost. Coupled with punitive disciplinary policies, high stakes tests narrow the pathways to success for poor and minority youth even as they come neatly wrapped in the language of colorblind assessment...More significantly, testing will continue to feed, not eradicate the real great civil rights issue of our time; the growing school to prison pipeline, which like a malignant cancer,
continues to eat away at the fabric of many inner cities by robbing students of their future (Williams, 2015).

Standardization has contributed to a shrinking of education. While it is framed as an agent of equity, in fact, standardization has exacerbated already-existing economic inequality by ensuring that students from low-income backgrounds will encounter an impoverished system of schooling. In their thirteen years of schooling, these children are likely to encounter a curriculum that asks very little of them beyond basic skills and an ability to test well; social studies which fails to interrogate their lives and histories; a lack of creativity, imagination, and aesthetic education; teachers who don’t see their full potential; and a system which will score, measure, and categorize students according to a handful of days out of their entire lives, marking them as intelligent or not. How we manage to subject poor children to this kind of education and call it civil rights is an astounding act of manipulation on a broad scale.

Furthermore, there doesn’t seem to be any promise in forthcoming policy that equity will gain renewed focus. In fact, as a recent paper presented at the 2018 American Education and Research Conference (AERA) attests, the Trump Administration took out the Obama-era requirement for states to demonstrate a commitment to equity in their ESSA proposals. These authors concluded that state proposals now do not address persistent inequities in education (Cook-Harvey et al, 2016). Only two states, New York and Minnesota, have actually included a definition of equity in their proposals, while the rest take a largely race-neutral approach, discussing “equity for all” rather than naming particular groups (ie: racial and ethnic minorities) who have been historically underserved. In the current political climate, it seems unreasonable to expect any
meaningful action towards increasing educational equity at all at the Federal level. Thus, it falls to the people—the teachers, the students the parents, the community members—to heed this important call through grassroots movements.

**Threat to Democracy**

Democracy and public schooling are intertwined. A strong democracy requires a strong public school system. Professor Nicholas Michelli has written a quote I frequently use in my college and graduate school courses. It reads: “One of the primary purposes of public education in the United States of America is to prepare students to be participating citizens in our social and political democracy” (Michelli, 2005, p. 3). Michelli added that “the general education goal might be preparing students for critical participation in democratic life” (2005, p. 4). To this end, political scientist Benjamin Barber has argued that:

Democracy is not a natural form of association; it is an extraordinarily rare contrivance of cultivated imagination...For true democracy to flourish, however, there must be citizens. Citizens are women and men educated for excellence—by which term I mean the knowledge and competence to govern in common their own lives. The democratic faith is rooted in the belief that all humans are capable of such excellence and have not just the right but also the capacity to become citizens (1992, p. 5).

The fragility of democracy is felt more now, in our current political landscape, than perhaps ever before. As the current president, Donald Trump, is investigated by the FBI for possible collusion with Russia to win the election; has twice attempted to pass what most effectively agree is a Muslim ban; has banned journalists from briefings and pushes the notion of “fake news;” and positions a business insider with zero educational experience to lead as Secretary of Education— the dismantling of various pillars of our democracy take shape. The institutions and ideals—though always less than perfect, still
deeply important—that make this country unique, are under siege. The free press, religious freedom, and public education all stand to be undone. The more that we as a society allow outside forces to control the work of teachers and students in schools; the more obedience becomes more important than questioning; the more tests become more important than independent thinking—the more the threat to our democracy increases.

We are not preparing a vast number of children for democracy. We are preparing them for dictatorship. When an absence of questioning, critical thinking, and creativity become commonplace in so many of our schools, we are setting our children up to fail. It is incumbent upon us to have far more inspired reasons for education than tests and competition. Education without greater meaning and value is void, and will not support an individual’s ability to flourish, or the ability of our democracy to grow.

Why Are We Here? (And, Where Can we Go?)

In the first few pages of her book, “These Schools Belong To You and Me,” Deborah Meier (2017) writes:

Regardless of the content of the lessons we intend to teach, these superficial “school moves”—the “grammar of schooling”—appear to be the dominant messages that many children internalize about the purpose of their twelve years of education…suppose children did ask the adults responsible for making their schools what they are—“why are we here?” Do we adults—parents, educators, superintendents, policymakers, reformers—have a more substantive and compelling vision to impart to them? (Meier & Gasoi, p. 11-12).

We have entered dangerous territory, when what we teach is dependent on standardized tests and therefore, why students learn particular content is because of the tests as well. For millions of students, it seems that standardized tests have become part and parcel with education as a whole. At the Progressive School one day, Marian relayed an anecdote that surprised and upset her. When she asked her daughter, a new middle-
schooler, why she was learning a particular topic, she answered “because we have a test.” While for Marian this was dismaying, and had been a rare kind of response from her daughter, for a large number of students and teachers in this country that is exactly why they are learning something. I wasn’t able to interview students as part of this research, but I would venture that if I asked students at the Standardized School why they were learning how to write literary essays, or how to read nonfiction, that they would answer: because it will be tested. We are teaching children that school has meaning for tests in school, not for life beyond. And, in fact, when school is skills-oriented, mechanical, and test-based, we are not preparing children to be successful in this world. We are not teaching them to work collaboratively, make complex connections, or think critically and creatively—the skills required of a twenty-first century citizen. We are merely requiring students to follow the correct procedures, to search for the correct answer, to draw within the lines. This vision of public school is bare-bones, and harmful to children. In order to create a more substantive—to use Meier’s word—vision for the future of this country, because after all that is at stake—we must be prepared to fight for dramatic changes in the educational landscape.

A Call to Action

Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Social Class

The next great frontier of social justice work in schools must tend to pedagogy and curriculum. I currently visit elementary schools for a living. My own research here mirrors what I see each week as I walk into schools to observe student teachers. Inevitably, in the more affluent schools student work is much more open-ended, creative, and constructivist. In the poorer schools, student work is rigid, procedural, and it all looks
the same. While teachers in wealthier schools tend to focus more on the work and less on behavior, in less wealthy schools there is a greater focus on controlling student bodies. This is maddening. Why, in one kindergarten classroom are children coloring in green leprechauns as Saint Patrick’s Day approaches, while in an affluent school children of the same age are developing a bakery—baking, pricing items, organizing them, creating signs—in their classroom? This two-tiered system feeds a two-tiered society.

Three years ago, when our older son Joaquin turned four, we eagerly enrolled him in universal pre-kindergarten in Washington Heights. Universal Pre-K, or “UPK” was a new initiative under Mayor Bill de Blasio, making this level of school possible for thousands of children whose families could not have afforded the private option. We chose a school in our Washington Heights neighborhood, one that serviced a high-poverty population and offered a dual language (Spanish/English) program. As a bilingual family, this feature was really exciting for us. I was nervous. The school was housed in a trailer, surrounded by a metal fence—not the most beautiful image one might conjure when imagining bringing their small child to school. But, I pushed away stereotypes associated with the school’s appearance because I knew that the substance of the school is what counts. Soon, however, that substance began to reveal itself and we were faced with a tough call. The classroom definition of “curiosity” that hung above the board was following rules. This detail struck me, as both inaccurate and depressing. It wasn’t long before we began getting phone calls that our four year old was in trouble—again. And a few weeks into the school year, Joaquin started saying the words parents dread: “I hate school.” Having flexible work schedules allowed both my wife and I to meet with the principal and the teachers. All three women were caring and absolutely
wanted the best for our son. I was personally frantic. I didn’t want to risk anymore of Joaquin’s education in an environment that wasn’t responsive to him. We took the privileged way out, and, with some financial help from my mother, enrolled him in a private pre-k (to the tune of $20,000 for the academic year). The differences were stark, and absolutely remarkable. Joaquin himself did not change. He was still energetic, still interrupting, still needing to move around, still eager to show everyone he was “right.” In short—he continued to be a challenging kid. But we no longer received phone calls home, despite a very close relationship with his teacher and our clear request that we be told about his behavior. So, what changed? Over the course of many months of reflecting on this experience, we came to some conclusions.

Primarily, we determined that at the first school, Joaquin had been bored. For large chunks of the day, students were all expected to do the same exact thing. There was only freedom to choose one’s activity during a forty-minute block called “choice time” (something often taken away in public elementary schools due to a lack of time). At the second school, choice was infused throughout the day. Children could frequently be found in various sections of the large classroom, involved in a number of different activities. This approach allowed all of the children to find something that interested them at any given time. Second, at the first school much of the work was teacher-driven; at the second school, students took agency in their own learning much more. This was a good fit for someone like Joaquin. Third, the resources at the second school were distressingly superior to those at the first one. When Joaquin started at the high-poverty pre-k, I asked teachers what they needed and hurried out to buy things for them. I spent hundred of dollars on bilingual picture books. At the private pre-k, the teachers didn’t need a thing.
With their resources, the teachers instituted a play-based curriculum that centered on inquiry, art, and joy. They had a set of African drums, and each morning began with a drum circle. A scientist from the American Museum of Natural History came each week and engaged in scientific inquiry with the children. His wife, an author, wrote stories with them. A music teacher enriched all of our lives with a jazz program focusing on Ella Fitzgerald and culminating in a family concert. While access to resources like these have a distinct economic reason behind them, access to a holistic, choice-based, inquiry-oriented curriculum should not be determined by social-class. The question continues to linger: why is this curricular distinction between low-income and affluent schools so pervasive, so inevitable? If Joaquin had stayed at the original pre-k, I fear he may have taken a path so many children—especially boys of color—take. He would have continued to get in trouble; his antagonism towards school would have increased; his academic progress would decline; eventually, he may have dropped out.

A stickier question emerges, too. It is hard for me, because I myself am a teacher and know firsthand how grueling and exhausting the work can be. I used to leave school some days and feel like all I could do was collapse. But, the question must be asked: why are some teachers comforted by rigid parameters in their work with children? Why do we sometimes shy away from opening up the classroom to their questions and curiosity, over and above, perhaps, the rules? Further, why does this comfort with rigidity and control seem to appear far more often in schools with low-income children of color? The definition of curiosity in my son’s original pre-school was plainly inaccurate, but more importantly it put the onus on rule following over the critical importance of pursuing one’s curiosity about the world. The teachers in the high-poverty pre-k had far more rigid
procedures for school, and more punitive outcomes, than the teachers at his private pre-k. Both sets of teachers cared for the children. But their approaches to the children were different in critical ways. When schools strip students of that joy, teachers are often part of the equation. Teachers need pedagogical education, and continuing education, that promotes inquiry, exploration, and student-centered work, and that provides real-life models of such work. If children find happiness and meaning in school, it makes the work and lives of teachers so much better. Improving our pedagogy to respond to the needs and interests of our children can infuse joy back into schooling for everyone involved. Pre-service and current teachers also desperately need continuing work around race and equity. Organizations like Border Crossers, who will lead workshops in schools, play a fundamental role in helping teachers, administrators and parents to unpack their own stereotypes and biases, to understand other points of view, and to begin unpacking how their own work, expectations, and interactions with children ultimately connect to issues of race, power, and privilege.

Ultimately, it was in large part our economic privilege that may have saved Joaquin from the fate described above. Most other children and families do not have that privilege to fall back on, and they are stuck with a system that refuses to be responsive to their children. As educators, we forget sometimes that it is our duty to serve all children. Education is not a privilege, it is a right. If we truly believe in this right for everyone, then we must fight unethical policies that harm children, and we must fight for a more holistic view of school.

*Personal Compliance & Integration*
The Trump administration has been exceedingly successful in widening already existing divisions in our nation. He is not the symptom of these divisions; but he sows them for personal and professional gain. An “us vs. them” mentality threatens the cohesiveness needed to build and maintain a strong country. That doesn’t mean we can’t disagree—rather, dissent, debate, and critical questioning are central to democracy and must always continue. But, we must engage in these debates with rationality, evidence, and empathy—three things lacking in this current administration. One way—perhaps the only way—to work together to improve this country is to live together, and to go to school together. This echoes Nikole Hannah-Jones powerful calls for integration. The widening inequality gaps that exist now mean that we do not know one another, and the separation perpetuates “us vs. them”—a competitive sentiment versus a collective agency. We are all responsible for this. In this research, I have tried to make plain the intersections of privilege and disadvantage, as Fine and Weis have encouraged:

We need research that can peer behind the drapes that hide the strategic coproduction of privilege and disadvantage, revealing the micro practices by which privilege and structural decay come to be produced, sustained, reproduced, embodied, and contested, even if safe spaces can protect a few, for awhile, from the acid rains of oppression (Fine & Weis, 2012, p. 175).

One of the “micro practices” that help produce disadvantage is the personal choices that middle class families consistently make to avoid urban public schools, or public schools altogether. In a powerful article explaining her informed choice to send her daughter to a high-poverty, urban public school, Nikole Hannah-Jones explained that:

I understood they so much of school segregation is structural—a result of decades of housing discrimination, of political calculations and the machinations of policymakers...But I also believed that it is the choices of individual parents that uphold the system (Hannah-Jones, 2016).
Despite the U.S. Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v. The Board of Education* (1954), persistent segregation and racial inequality have plagued this country. Throughout this research and doctoral work, it has personally haunted me that I send my son to independent school. I am part of the problem, and that cannot be ignored. I sit, writing about public schools and inequity, while refusing to include my own children in the public sphere, instead sequestering him in the elite comfort of a private one. It feels inauthentic to write and research educational inequity as a scholar, but not as a mother.

Despite the power of the call for integration, I myself have been unwilling to heed it. The contradictions between my political and professional views on the one hand, and my personal choices on the other, are troubling. This raises some of the complexity around integration, a great and important call that has never found lasting success. Indeed, as Hannah-Jones has testified, the years of bussing transformed educational experiences for many children, but these programs were then abandoned. To be sure, integration plans have always faced intense criticism, skepticism, and outright anger.

A renewed call towards integration is needed, now perhaps more than ever before, as New York City and others face worsening economic and racial segregation. However as Abu-El-Haj (2006) points out, true integration must be differentiated from assimilation. She writes:

> Education that is assimilationist—that aims to fit students from racially oppressed communities into the dominant schools without a transformation of those institutions and the larger society within which they operate—has been shown to further educational inequalities in contradictory ways. For some students…assimilation leads to alienation and disengagement from schooling; for others…alienation from families (2006, p. 6-7).

A long and complex history of attempts towards integration compels us to tread carefully. This work does not provide silver bullet responses, but it can be said with complete
conviction that any educational work in the name of equity which does not aim to transform existing societal structures marred by racism and social class inequity can never truly succeed.

While this dissertation focused on the immoral role of high-stakes policies in schools, all of us remain complicit in the acceptance of these policies. No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act were passed by politicians who do not send their children to high-poverty schools. They insist that standardized testing can create equity, but I would love to see what kind of testing takes place in the lives of their children. Moreover, I would love to see the curricula their children have access to overall. The wealthiest Americans, and even many middle-class Americans, do not send their children to schools that begin and end with “the three R’s.” The basics is not education. Why is this good enough for poor people? Parents, politicians, and most importantly teachers and administrators must ask themselves this question, and frankly, demand better. We need an overhaul in the way we conceptualize school. There is a deficit in our society about how we discuss education. This is part of the reason why Pearson, Houghton-Mifflin, and Eva Moskowitz have gained such traction. We must tend to a better vision, and part of that vision must involve a personal dedication to undoing segregation. As long as we live separately, we will attend school separately, and the two-tiered system in this country will continue.

Re-Imagining Assessment

Critically, we must resist the narrow and simplified vision of schools and children that standardization emphasizes. Part of the problem is that so many teacher do not have a different vision of assessment. I had the great opportunity of observing and participating
in performance-based assessments in my student teaching and in my first five years of teaching. My student teaching was in an elite public school on the Upper West Side in New York City, where students created portfolios of their work and presented them to a panel. I then taught in a high-poverty school in the South Bronx, that was part of the “Coalition of Essential Schools” in New York City, where students also created portfolios that they presented. These were required to move to the next grade and to graduate from high school. The process was rigorous, creative, and inspiring. I watched students who struggled to write one paragraph as they revised, edited, and revised again until an entire five-paragraph essay about “Romeo and Juliet” had been written. Students, on average, developed three to four drafts of every single piece of work in their portfolio. At the end of this laborious process, they felt so proud. Their work said something individual about who they each were, and it had meaning. Furthermore, their presentations taught them about public speaking, dressing professionally, answering questions on the spot in front of an audience, explaining their thinking, and reflecting on their growth. This did far more for our students than sitting for a standardized test, which would happen once our waiver for the Regents ended and students were forced to pass the ELA and Math A to graduate. During this research, the Performance-Based Assessments at the Progressive School contrasted sharply with the tests at the Standardized School. The experience of the performance assessments was rigorous, exciting, nerve-wracking, individualized, creative, and contributed to preparing students for the real world. Testing was nerve-wracking without the excitement, and there was no meaning, individualization, or real-world preparation involved. The testing experience was accompanied by a sense of dread, while the performance assessment experience was
accompanied by a sense of *possibility*. Students were eager to demonstrate to their panel what they knew and could do. This brings us back to the critical question of what we value, both in our schools and in our society. We have moved so far away from school being a place of joy. Why? Why, and how, should learning be removed from joy, excitement, and even fun? I strongly believe that without these elements, actual learning will not take place. Students need to feel joy and meaning in order to build and create knowledge. We must re-imagine the purpose of school, the values of school, and the role of assessment in students’ lives. Schools should be trusted with developing performance-based assessments that they design. These can easily be made electronic and uploaded for comparative purposes. They can also be attached to standards. But the testing of students in elementary school must stop.

*Continuing Anyon’s Work*

Finally, as Anyon consistently emphasized in her scholarship (2014), public school problems are both caused by and reveal other crises, such as poverty and segregation. While Anyon was critical of the way schools were tasked with fixing all of society’s ills, she also positioned educators as important linchpins in movements for change. And so, educational change must attend to larger questions of economic and social justice. Anyon, accompanied by colleagues and students, took part in the 2012 ‘Occupy Wall Street’ protests. The fight to increase the minimum wage is another current movement that has significant implications for families and schools. When parents earn more money, their quality of life increases for them and their children. Furthermore, families can contribute more to schools and their children’s education in general. Additionally, we must fight against the corporatization of education as it threatens the
entire existence of public education and the fabric of our democracy. The great possibilities of this country are threatened when children become commodities, knowledge is narrowed, histories are lost, and creativity is an afterthought. The tremendous and complicated work of sustaining and growing our democracy, and the truly important work of extending civil rights to all, are under attack in a corporatized and standardized world. The opt-out movement is deeply promising as families and schools challenge neoliberal policy and its’ undermining of public education. In that vein, Anyon would be cheering on, and likely participating in, the teacher strikes that have been spreading across various states including Oklahoma, West Virginia, and Arizona (www.pbs.org, April 18th 2018). These teachers are claiming their rights to collective bargaining, protected by teachers unions, and their right to be treated as professionals and to receive a living wage. They are also standing up for their schools and students by demanding improved resources. These strikes, in other words, are a cry for greater equity. Anyon would also be buoyed by the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo Movements, both of which aim to secure overdue justice for Black Americans and women, and in so doing aim to transform the inequitable social fabric of this nation. As Anyon wrote: “I want to remember that to turn anger into a commitment to struggle for justice, we cannot stay in the classroom; we must engage our students in actual political contestation” (2014, p. 172). The neoliberal turn in education risks shutting down the beautiful tapestry of multilingual voices and critical counterpoints that make this country its best version of itself. We owe it to our children to heed Anyon’s call and commit to the struggle for justice, and equity for all.
**APPENDIX A: OBSERVATION PROTOCOL**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher: ___________________________</th>
<th>Date: ______________________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structural and organizational features – what the actual buildings and environment look like and how they are used; curricula in use</td>
<td>People – who, where, how they behave, interact, dress, speak</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notes on events as they occur chronologically- The daily process of activities</th>
<th>Reflective Notes- My own thoughts, feelings, connections</th>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Special Events</th>
<th>Reflective Notes</th>
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<tr>
<th>Key Moments/Highlights</th>
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APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

*Semi-Structured Interview Protocol with Teachers-Test Prep*

1.) Can you describe what you’re doing right now to prepare for the upcoming test(s)? (How much time are you spending each day/week on test prep?)

2.) How do you feel about the upcoming tests?

3.) How do you think test prep affects your classroom curriculum? (Are you teaching or covering certain topics because they might be tested? Would you be teaching different topics right now if the tests weren’t coming up?)

4.) How do you think test prep impacts the way you teach? (Do you feel like you need to teach differently than you would like to in order to prepare kids for the tests?)

5.) How does test prep impact your students and your classroom community?

6.) What do you think your administrators expect in terms of test prep from you? Do your administrators support the use of standardized tests (or, where do you think they stand?)

7.) Do you think these tests are a fair measure of student intelligence?

8.) Do you think we need standardized tests to assess where kids stand? (Are there other ways you would assess students? How?)

9.) How do you think standardized testing impacts students and teachers in your school as a whole?

*Semi-Structured Interview Protocol with Teachers- Post-Testing*

1.) How did testing go for your students?

2.) What did you think of the quality of the tests this year?

3.) How did the testing period impact your classroom (and your school as a whole?)

4.) Now that the tests are over, how do you think your teaching and curriculum will change? How will your classroom in general change, if at all?
5.) Do you think these tests are necessary? (why/why not?)

6.) Who benefits from these tests (if anyone?)

Semi-Structured Interviews with Teachers-Curriculum

1.) Can you describe the ELA curriculum you use, and how/where it comes from?

2.) How much of your own decision-making do you use in determining the ELA curriculum? (Do you design any of it? Modify it? Etc…)
   - How much autonomy do you feel you have with regards to the curriculum?

3.) Is the curriculum you’re given helpful (if so, how? If not, how come?)

4.) What’s missing from the curriculum you’re given, or what would you change about it?

5.) Are your students getting a strong education with this curriculum? Why/why not?

6.) In this curriculum, who decides what knowledge is important?

7.) Do you think the curriculum influences your teaching methods? If so, how?
APPENDIX C: STUDENT WORK IMAGES

Shown here: Fifth Grade Mayan Projects
Third Grade Bridge Study:
Work Samples- Writing-The Standardized School
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[https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/whats-different-about-this-wave-of-teacher-strikes](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/whats-different-about-this-wave-of-teacher-strikes)