

On Their Own Terms: Curriculum, Identity, and Policy as Practice in a Successful Urban School

Dissertation

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in The Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Sara M. Childers

Graduate Program in Education

Ohio State University

2010

Dissertation Committee:

Patti Lather, Advisor

Antionette Errante

Sarah Fields

Copyright © 2010

Sara M. Childers

## Abstract

This dissertation is the result of a year-long ethnographic case study of a nationally ranked high-performance, high-poverty college preparatory public high school in Ohio. As a multi-sited qualitative study, it brings together field work, interviews, and focus groups with historical and policy document analysis. Through a sociocultural analysis of *policy as practice* it examines how a complex set of federal and district policies are negotiated and re-appropriated by critical schooling actors as material practices aimed at supporting equity and excellence in urban student achievement. At the same time by unraveling the discourses that overburden urban educational identity with notions of disadvantage and risk, it uses an *analytics of disruption* to unfix urban students from these constructions to resituate them as educational agents *on their own terms*. This project makes apparent that even after *Brown v. Board of Education* and the No Child Left Behind Act, race continues to matter in school and hopes that bearing witness to such “difficult knowledge” will bring us closer to meeting our expectations for a more just and democratic education.

In Honor Of

Marianne Audia, my great grandmother who emigrated from Italy to WV  
Sarafina Spatafore, the grandmother I never knew  
Margaret Colella, the only grandma I could ever want  
I'm here because of you.

To

Ohio Public High School,

All the teachers in my life,

And

To Mark, Maizie, and Vincent for "letting mommy work."

## Vita

1997.....B.A. Women's Studies, The Ohio State University  
2001.....M.A. Cultural Studies in Education, The Ohio State  
University  
2002.....M.Ed. Social Studies and Global Education, The  
Ohio State University

## Fields of Study

Major Field: Education

## Contents

Abstract .....	3
Table of Figures .....	10
List of Tables .....	11
Chapter 1 The Invention of “Urban” Educational Identity .....	1
Introduction .....	1
The Politics of Who’s at Risk .....	3
(Not) Best Practices: Standards, Accountability, and Translating Policy.....	7
Policy context .....	8
Standards and accountability .....	10
Translating policy as practice .....	11
The Now of Ethnographic Educational Policy Research .....	13
Key Texts and Terms .....	13
Loosening and Tightening Theory: Racing Poststructuralism and Troubling Critical Race Theory in Education .....	21
Critical Race Theory/ in Education .....	22
Foucaultian Theories of Discourse, Power/Knowledge, Subjectivity, and Genealogy .....	28
Deconstruction as an Analytic Ethics .....	31
Historical Context of OPHS .....	34
Before and After Brown vs. Board of Education .....	36
Overview of Chapters .....	43
Conclusion .....	46

Interlude.....	48
Snapshot of Ohio Public High School .....	48
What makes OPHS “OPHS?” .....	53
Chapter 2 Unraveling Urban Educational Identity: The Productive Effects of Race, Culture, Sports, and Educational Research.....	59
Introduction .....	59
Social Science Research on Race: Producing the Urban Child as Other .....	60
Towards a History of Interscholastic High School Sports in the US .....	78
Tracking .....	93
Ethnographic Policy Studies of NCLB and Minority Students .....	107
Conclusion .....	115
Interlude <i>Can I get into Trouble: Negotiating the Terms of Research</i> .....	116
Chapter 3 Being in Trouble and of Use to Education: A Methodology of Disruption.....	117
Introduction .....	117
Feminist Post-Critical Policy Ethnography.....	117
Research Design.....	125
Pre-Pilot .....	125
Access and Research Plan .....	126
Grounded Theory and Situated Inquiry .....	127
Data Sources: Slicing up a Case Study.....	129
Methods of Data Collection.....	136
Data Analysis: Ethics of Disruption.....	139
Disruptive Validity.....	141
Triangulation as an Ethics of Disruption .....	141
Consent/Confidentiality/Rapport.....	142

Member Check and Reciprocity .....	143
Conclusion .....	145
Chapter 4 Subverting and Being Subverted: How OPHS Negotiates District, State, and Federal Policy .....	147
Introduction .....	147
Curriculum and Instruction as Policy as/in Practice .....	147
“State Standards are the Minimum of What We Do:” Curriculum and Instruction Practices That Subvert the Constraining Effects of NCLB and Support Student Success .....	147
Standards and Accountability: How to Punish What Really Works.....	159
District NCLB Policy Practices That Undermine Success at OPHS: OGT Preparation and Credit Recovery .....	159
Member Check: “We really feel that the Program is at Risk” .....	181
Conclusion .....	184
Interlude Field Notes from Three Classrooms.....	186
“Is Sex Art?:” IB Theory of Knowledge at OPHS.....	186
Mr. Hart’s Split Class.....	188
“He Just Gave Us All the Answers:” Boys Participation in 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade Humanities ..	189
Chapter Five The Concept of the Academic High School: Complicating Excellence and Equity	192
Introduction .....	192
The Absence of Interscholastic Sports at OPHS.....	193
Excellent Intentions: Racialized Enrollment Practices in Humanities, AP, and IB programs.....	204
Faculty and Staff Explanations and Practices of Racialized Enrollment: “Race Doesn’t Have Anything to Do with Being an Individual” .....	209
Enrollment as White Privilege: Leaving the Troublemakers Behind .....	224



Negotiations of Urban Student Identity and Subjectivity as Policy as/in Practice .....	226
Urban Cachet: How Critical Schooling Actors Negotiate Urban Student Identity and Subjectivity as Policy in Practice.....	226
Achievement On Their Own Terms: How “Urban” Students Negotiate Educational Identity and Subjectivity .....	233
“Those” Students .....	233
On Their Own Terms.....	245
Conclusion .....	266
Chapter Six Bearing Witness to Difficult Knowledge.....	269
Recommendations .....	270
Substantive Implications .....	275
Policy as Practice .....	275
The Absence of Sports and the Academic High School.....	276
Urban Cachet .....	277
On Their Own Terms.....	278
Theoretical and Methodological Implications .....	279
The Re-Invention of Urban Education: Disrupting the Dominant Construction of Urban Educational Identity with History.....	279
Tightening and Loosening Theory Revisited .....	280
Deconstructive/Disruptive Practices of Research.....	281
Feminist Post-Critical Policy Analysis .....	282
Conclusion .....	282
References .....	286
Appendix A: Data Samples.....	299
Appendix B: Preliminary Report .....	301

## Table of Figures

<i>Figure 1.</i> Columbus City Schools Enrollment by Race for the years 1978-2005. ....	41
<i>Figure 2.</i> Ohio Public High School Enrollment by Race, 1983 and 1993-2007. ....	42
<i>Figure 3.</i> Enrollment by Race in a Sample of College Preparation, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate Social Studies Courses. ....	206

## List of Tables

Table 1	<i>2008-2009 Demographic Profiles, OPHS and Columbus City Schools (CCS)</i> .....	50
Table 2	Graduation Requirements for Certificate of College Preparation at OPHS and CCS .....	52

## Chapter 1

### The Invention of “Urban” Educational Identity

#### *Introduction*

In the introduction to *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978) states that the “Orient” is in many ways an invention of the European imagination, a system of knowledge that constructs a grid through which “the Orient” and “the Occident” are understood in relation to one another. Rather than seeing this grid of knowledge as inhibiting the knowing of a “true Orient,” Said argues that the persistence and sedimentation of particular hegemonic cultural frameworks demonstrate how systems of meaning constrain and produce representations of thought, living, and experience (p.14). Using texts of the “Orient” as representations, rather than natural depictions, Said situates the Orient as a “strategic formation” of texts and genres that “acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and in the culture at large” (p.20).

I start with Said because urban educational identity might also be viewed as an “invention,” a strategic formation that has gathered mass and referential power in the American psyche, that has been historically produced in and through a grid of knowledge that makes certain representations of urban schooling and student achievement possible and others difficult or (im)possible.

This dissertation looks at Ohio Public High School (OPHS) <sup>1</sup> and the recognition it receives as a high achieving, high poverty *urban* high school. In doing so I assess how the invention of the urban educational identity functions as a strategic formation overburdened by the racialized discourses of disadvantage, deprivation, and risk and how these discourses have acquired a certain mass and referential power within the field of urban education. I endeavor to disrupt this strategic formation to make room for understandings of urban students that are unhinged from these discourses, an unfixing that allows us to make room for other possibilities. I begin this unfixing by historically locating a new historical “starting” point that decenters urban identity within a history of successful African American education located within a long legacy of education for freedom. I argue that disrupting the damaging discourses of urban identity is imperative in attempting to do ethical and valid work in urban educational studies. If we start from the very place that contains African American students and students of color within the discourses that fix and solidify what we think we know about their educational engagement, we have done nothing but further contribute to their marginalization.

To do this work I utilize Critical Race Theory in education as a framework to define and bear witness to structural inequities and racialized experiences as the terms of urban education which structure the connections between identity and achievement at OPHS. Poststructural theory is crucial to recognizing the power relations held within these material experiences to

---

<sup>1</sup> All names in this dissertation are pseudonyms assigned by the researcher to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of study participants.

unhinge these terms, to unfix urban students from identity constructions, and to see the complicated ways they live and learn in schools.

This chapter introduces the political economy and policy contexts that shape present understandings of urban education and research. It then reviews the theoretical framework for the study and offers an overview of upcoming chapters.

### *The Politics of Who's at Risk*

This dissertation encompasses a year-long, multi-sited ethnographic case study of Ohio Public High School (OPHS), a nationally recognized high-achieving, high poverty lottery<sup>2</sup> school in Central Ohio that serves a predominantly African American population. It offers a critical case study of how one urban<sup>3</sup> high school exceeds achievement standards in the current

---

<sup>2</sup> As part of the choice initiative under NCLB, Columbus City Schools has created a lottery process which allows students to complete an application that puts them in a “lottery” to attend schools of their choosing. Students are randomly “drawn out of a hat” for enrollment. OPHS typically has close to 1,000 lottery applicants each year vying for 150 freshman seats.

<sup>3</sup> OPHS is designated by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) as a “high achieving, high poverty” urban school located in a Major Urban District. It has been recognized each year as an Urban School of Promise by ODE since 2004. The percentages of students of color and economically disadvantaged students fluctuate each year. During the member check in 2010 school staff and parents resisted the determination of “high poverty,” because they had been unable to consistently take advantage of Title I funds.

climate of accountability and high stakes testing when other district schools are struggling to meet minimum benchmarks. It also serves as a rare case study of a school that interprets and appropriates district and national education policy in ways that seem to contribute to the academic success and achievement of its students and to avert the constraining effects of high stakes testing and accountability. OPHS provides the opportunity to think about the possibilities urban public schooling holds for creating a climate of success that allows students to become academically engaged with the exploration and construction of knowledge “on their own terms.”

OPHS was recognized in 2007 by the National Center for Urban School Transformation for its ability to transform the urban school setting into one “where all students achieve academic proficiency, evidence a love of learning, and graduate well prepared to succeed in post-secondary education, the workplace, and their communities” (ARAdmin, 2007). The idea of transformation caused me to think about what Michelle Fine (1995) calls “the politics of who’s at risk.” What and who is in need of transforming and how is transformation thought about in urban schools? As Fine states,

The language of ‘risk’ is upon us, piercing daily consciousness, educational practices, and bureaucratic policy-making. Scholars, practitioners, and activists have been quick to name, identify, and ossify those who presumably suffer at the mercy of ‘risk factors.’ It satisfies both the desire to isolate these people, by the Right, and to display them, by the Left (p. 77).

This idea of transformation works in tandem with historical images and sedimented cultural representations to make possible particular conceptualizations of urban schools and students and suppress others. For OPHS to be recognized as an example of the excellence

possible in urban education, it requires a dominant image of urban schooling where students fail academically and socially. These images are in ready supply. The idea of transformation capitalizes on and requires urban students to be represented as unsuccessful, at-risk, and struggling with cultural competencies. This conceptualization of urban education cannot function without its at-risk urban Other. It both contains and displays them. It evades the historical backdrop of racialized schooling practices that have created the conditions for what is now referred to as “urban education.”

Urban education gives meaning to race, and frames itself particularly as a democratic project concerned with equity and access for at-risk students. Though the generic term “urban” education is most often used, race functions in meaningful ways within and through the bodies of its students. Urban students, their raced bodies, and what they signify become useful in showcasing urban education and its transformative effects on “the disadvantaged.” It capitalizes on and solidifies historic and racialized narratives of the always failing, culturally deprived student of color (and more specifically the African-American student), and excludes the history of African American education, the failures of integration, and the implications of these failures for urban education today.

How does the exploitation of these students mask the racism of the past and forestall the possibility for real social change? How might urban student identity and subjectivity then be reconceived? How might urban education as a democratic project function without its ahistoric, agent-less, disadvantaged Other? How can we use the wreckage of the past to see the possibilities of an urban education that recognizes its failures within the context of racism? How might the tensions between access and excellence be rethought and reconceived?



The title of this dissertation encourages that urban schools and urban students be read “on their own terms” as active agents in their own education. I want to make six insistences for how to read the notion of “on their own terms” and disrupt desires to “contain and display” urban students in this ethnography. These insistences are interventions, stop gaps, and protections from tendencies to conceive of agency as unencumbered, to think of subjects as liberated, or to think of this study as liberating. While I argue that critical actors individually and collectively re-appropriate and negotiate the terms of urban education on a daily basis to support student achievement:

1) I insist that policy appropriation is governed by “terms” of engagement and that we read agents’ actions as deeply situated within the power/knowledge frameworks that construct the terms of *urban identity*, *urban education*, and *success*.

2) I insist that these “terms” are always, already situated within larger historical, social, and discursive contexts that are inescapable, yet fluid, always moving, and negotiable.

3) I insist that these terms are always, already invested with race and that race is a function of power relations governed by difficult historical knowledge and practices of subtle and overt racism in the US.

4) I insist that we hold our feet to the fire and foreground race explicitly, always, constantly, over and over and that we reflexively undermine the inescapable implications of eliding race through a focus on culture.

5) I insist that we allow for disruptions, elusive and slippery engagements with urban subjects, and that we situate race as a slippery signifier as well, while continuing to forefront the

materiality of racial and structural disadvantage that shape the ways in which actors teach and learn.

6) Lastly, I insist that we view urban subjects on these terms which situate and construct subjectivity, while constantly troubling our inclinations to romanticize, fix, or contain urban students within these frameworks.

By attending to their innocences, possibilities, and limits I aim to complicate and deconstruct privileged terms – *success, urban, achievement, equity, social justice* – typically operationalized in “victory narratives” that get told about successful urban schools like OPHS. I intend to problematize constructions of *urban schooling* and *urban students* by demonstrating the ways in which *urban subjectivity* is produced and put to work in policy practices by schooling actors and to what effect. The point I want to make is that the urban subjectivity of OPHS and its students get constructed and appropriated in specific ways in and through policy and that issues of race are directly and materially implicated in these productions. This is one place where policy and research get “messy,” where policy plays out in the lives of real students, and where more traditional approaches to policy analysis might not provide the methodological tools necessary to be attentive to the complicit role research plays in constructing the urban student subject in relation to race, disadvantage, and school practices.

#### *(Not) Best Practices: Standards, Accountability, and Translating Policy*

In the current atmosphere of high stakes testing, policy-makers, educational administrators, and teachers are desperate to learn from successful schools. As a designated urban “School of Promise” OPHS has been the subject of a state case study attempting to

delineate the practices that produce the proficiency scores, graduation rates, and college entrance numbers that demonstrate the school's above average ability to propel its students to academic achievement (Rmc Research, 2006). Their success begs the question, "What does this *successful* school look like?" This is one question that I address in this study, however this question is not without its complications. Rather than a "best practices" approach that views practices as simple acts that can be replicated and reproduced to the same effect, this project views *success* as a term contingent on the historical, social, and policy-driven context within which critical schooling actors work. I argue that this school is produced by and productive of historically and socially situated and intricately articulated *discourses of urban educational identity*, and that its practices are made legible as *successful* when enacted within these particular discourses and contexts.

In these ways the successful school question is reframed from a best-practices approach to a local and context-specific understanding of how *success* is defined for this school and its students and what practices and policy negotiations make perceptions of achievement possible while simultaneously foregrounding the limits and ruptures inherent in what it means to be a *successful urban* school in this moment. But let me be clear: there is no debate that OPHS offers amazing opportunities for its students. By exploring the life of this high school via an ethnographic translation study of policy as practice, I hope to better understand the social, cultural, and political contexts that *translate into practices of success* for and by urban students.

### *Policy context*

With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) education has come to be set within the strong current of evidence-based policy and practice (Hess, 2008; Lather, 2004; St. Pierre, 2006). Accountability, high stakes testing, and neo-liberal market-based choice

serve as the constitutive grid of knowledge (Foucault, 1970) that governs assessments of educational “success” in US schools. Situated within a poststructural moment that “foregrounds the limits of consciousness and intentionality and the will to power inscribed in sense-making efforts that aspire to totalizing explanatory frameworks, especially structuralism with its ahistoricism and universalism” (Lather, 2007, p.5), the accountability movement in education has attempted to retrieve a sense of certainty about what counts as knowledge and measures achievement in today’s public schools. With these shifts “knowledge has been obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 3), reassert its ability to define truth, and re-establish its hold on the modern enlightenment narrative of rationality, objectivity, and quantifiability. Graduation rates, college acceptance rates, and proficiency scores, the legitimated rules of the accountability game, serve to make Ohio Public High School a legible example of “what works” in urban education. This study attempts to complicate and enhance these quantitative assessments of academic success by looking at the everyday social practices of teaching and learning.

OPHS sits at the intersection of questions about equity and excellence, race, and policy. Since *Brown*, determining the role of urban schooling in ameliorating continued gaps in achievement has been one dimension of current educational policy debates, and urban or city schools have come to be largely couched within racialized contexts of racism, immigration, segregation and integration, civil rights, and economic poverty that tend to be ignored in the standard processes of policy development, implementation, and evaluation. This study aims to center these contexts in its analysis of educational policy.

### *Standards and accountability*

Title I delineates the requirements for federal educational funding under NCLB. Part A, Subpart 1 outlines the standards, assessments and accountability requirements for states and local educational agencies. It requires that states “adopt challenging academic content standards and challenging academic achievement standards,” develop an “accountability system that will be effective in ensuring that... (all) schools make adequate yearly progress,” and that states determine “what constitutes adequate yearly progress of the state...while working toward the goal of narrowing the achievement gaps in the state, local educational agencies, and schools.”<sup>4</sup>

With the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, OPHS was resituated within the contexts of accountability, high stakes testing, and the achievement gap. Title I of NCLB marks a shift in language from addressing the needs of “children from low-income

---

<sup>4</sup> The state of Ohio has complied with NCLB, developing a fairly transparent accountability reporting system with easy-to-read report cards for state, districts, and schools. It has also developed academic content standards that school districts use to align their courses of study with state and federal mandates and a series of standardized tests for assessment. From these standards, Columbus City Schools has developed curriculum guides and daily teaching pacing guides for individual subjects at each grade level aimed at guiding classroom instruction to prepare students for the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT). The OGT is first taken by high school students at the end of their sophomore year. As we will later see, what is unique about OPHS is that eschews state standards in ways that ultimately benefit its students.

families” as stated in the original 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, to focus on “improving the academic achievement of the disadvantaged” and “closing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers.” The school’s success meets two priorities under NCLB: 1) it meets standards and accountability benchmarks and 2) in meeting these benchmarks it “proves” that standards and accountability are “what works” for closing the achievement gaps in urban education. I intend to undermine these assumptions through a translational approach to policy analysis.

### *Translating policy as practice*

Recently scholars have argued for a “translational approach” to policy analysis (Brabeck, 2008; Hess, 2008), one that spans the gap between policy and practice to translate the lived experiences of those working at this intersection back to policymakers and practitioners. In response to this call for translational policy research, one purpose of my dissertation is to examine how critical schooling actors (i.e. teachers, parents/guardians, students, administrators) at OPHS “translate” and negotiate a complex set of policies in ways that appear to support student success to extend policy analysis beyond evaluation to help policy makers and actors understand the effects and complicated engagements of policy in relation to teaching practice and student achievement. This larger overarching project of translational or sociocultural policy analysis is broken down by looking at *policy as practice* and aims to understand the ways in which this school’s successful negotiations of accountability offer some hope for equitable and

excellent education within the constraints of NCLB and now “Bush’s Third Term in Education.”<sup>5</sup>

To do this I examine the relationship between education policy at the local and national levels, appropriation and negotiation of these policies by critical policy actors and assess both the possibilities and limits for urban education that are exposed at the intersections of policy and its local re-articulation. I have identified four major categories of *policy practices* that simultaneously produce, maintain, and disrupt both macro and micro notions of *success* to be explored in this dissertation: 1) practices of curriculum and instruction associated with the humanities-based college preparatory social studies program, 2) *urban cachet* and negotiations of urban student subjectivity as policy in practice, 3) racialized course enrollment practices, and 4) the absence of interscholastic sports. By looking at the everyday practices of teaching and learning as *policy in practice* this study attempts to complicate and enhance other case studies of success and quantitative accountability measures of academic achievement to challenge our expectations of the role federal and local policies play in promoting educational attainment.

This translation study provides a different way of looking at the impact of policy on schools and students. Given that the school demographics are those conventionally tied to students labeled as “at-risk” and “disadvantaged,” part of this study looks at the convergence of policies and practices of success within the larger historical commitments of education to both equity and excellence. It takes an innovative methodological approach to policy analysis by

---

<sup>5</sup> President Barak Obama’s Race to the Top Initiative is viewed by Diane Ravitch (2009a; 2009b) as an extension of Bush’s NCLB policy.

looking at policy from the bottom-up, the ways it is put into practice, and how these practices create an environment that appears to support academic success for a population of students least expected to succeed.

I pursue these goals via a five-pronged methodological approach that combines feminist, anthropological, and post-critical methodologies with policy analysis and critical race theory.

The next section reviews the key terms and theories that inform this approach.

### *The Now of Ethnographic Educational Policy Research*

This section will establish some historical context for the small but potentially prolific field of ethnographic policy studies in education. Ethnographic educational policy research can be seen as a subfield or form of inquiry among many larger and more diverse fields: anthropology in education, educational policy studies, comparative education, and postcolonial educational research to name a few intersections. I will not define ethnographic policy studies methodologically (see chapter 3), but rather will define key terms that this dissertation implements in analysis.

### *Key Texts and Terms*

As a qualitative educational researcher, I align myself most closely to, and wish to be heard by, the fields of educational policy studies and anthropology in education. Sutton and Levinson's *Policy as Practice: Toward a Comparative Sociocultural Analysis of Educational Policy* (2001) and a recent expansion of these ideas in an article entitled "Education Policy as a Practice of Power: Theoretical Tools, Ethnographic Methods, and Democratic Options"



(Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead 2009) are the main texts used here to define policy and policy studies.

*What is policy?*

Simply put, policies are “things that set limits” (Frederick Erickson quoted in Bridges, Smeyers, & Smith, 2009, p. 161). Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead (2009) unpack ways to define policy, offering a traditional or normative definition and a critical, socially theorized definition of policy as a practice of power. Policy as traditionally defined represents a set of normative guidelines often in the form an authorized, governing text or document that codifies appropriate behaviors and responses to the policy (p. 768). This is the definition operationalized by mainstream educational policy research.

Socially theorized policy is multi-dimensional, and while the normativity of policy is acknowledged, the taken-for-granted positioning of policy as mere mandate is disrupted by the recognition of policy as action, production, practice, discourse, and power. Policy is viewed as an “on-going social practice of normative cultural production constituted by diverse actors across diverse contexts” (p. 770). Rather than a static thing or text, policy is a “practice” or “process” through which life and behavior become authorized by people or groups across social contexts. As such, policy can be authorized, somehow legally binding either by law or force, or unauthorized, developed informally in networks outside of institutions invested with the power of official policy-making. Policy therefore does not have to be a text or document, it can also exist as a form of practice and institutional memory (p. 770). The writing of policy can itself be viewed as one of many policy practices. Power is located within the “will to policy,” a set of conditions that make policy (authorized, unauthorized, as a practice, or a text) possible and also

the “will in policy,” the matrix of competing and overlapping power relations that permeate the social field through which power as policy flows (p. 771-778).

Traditional policy studies have focused on policy implementation<sup>6</sup> as an investigation of operating procedure prescribed by policy that either did or did not produce the intended results. Levinson et al. disrupt this normative notion and foreground how social practice shapes policy via *formation, negotiation, and appropriation*:

1) *Formation* looks at how policy problems become socially and politically normativized or produced within and as normative cultural discourses.

2) *Negotiation* is about meaning-making and the socially contingent process through which meaning is negotiated and mobilized.

3) *Appropriation* takes the place of implementation in understanding how policy circulates in and through the social field at later stages of the policy process. It is the way creative agents take in and interpret policy and incorporate it into their social worlds. It is sense-making as/in practice, and opens up the possibility for resistance and agency through local re-appropriations of authorized policy as new and maybe unauthorized forms of practice. All of these processes are marked by an on-going process of mutual engagement by diverse actors across diverse social arenas (p. 778-779).

The literature review in Chapter 2 further exemplifies the “now” of policy ethnography. As detailed in that chapter, I had difficulty locating ethnographic studies of policy in practice in

---

<sup>6</sup> See Honig, 2006 for contemporary approaches to policy implementation studies that attempt to embrace a more complicated and critical understanding of the policy process.

US contexts, and found few studies that ethnographically analyzed the impact of NCLB on minority students. I was taken aback that there were not more studies in the US that used Sutton and Levinson's sociocultural approach to policy as practice, when there appears to be a proliferation of non-US studies that make use of this analytic tool. My study fits into these spaces, bridging theorized analyses of race with an explicitly ethnographic study of policy as practice in an urban school. It made me think a little harder about why ethnographic policy studies in education though present, are in many ways invisible.

*Ethnographic policy studies: margins and mainstream*

In asking these questions, it is important to address what can be considered the mainstream of policy studies in education, the relationship between mainstream studies and policymaking/policymakers, and the location of policy ethnography at the margins of the field and these relationships.

One way to chart the field of mainstream policy research in education is by looking at the contents of the recently published *Handbook of Education Policy Research* (Sykes, Schneider, & Plank, 2009). This large and daunting 1043-page text attempts to chart the field from the variety of perspectives that contribute to it - economics, political science, sociology, and anthropology to name a few. There are chapters devoted to the discussion of the appropriate methods of policy analysis, including everything from randomized trials, to scale-up evaluations, causal inference, and implementation studies. Others address the intersection of race, gender, and class theory with policy studies, and also think about the present moment and the need to focus on accountability, charter schools, vouchers, language policy, curriculum, instruction and equity issues at large. From this description, the handbook appears to represent a well-rounded, cross-

disciplinary field, or at least one that gives face-time to the multiple manifestations of policy work. But those who have worked within and against the field of educational policy analysis provide a more critical perspective.

I would like to pose a set of questions to guide us through thinking about the location of ethnographic policy studies in the current scene of educational policy research writ large:

- 1) What is the present moment of educational policy studies, and how does it define policy research now?
- 2) Based on these characteristics, how does the field of policy ethnography position itself within the discourse? How do policy ethnographers write themselves and experience their location, and what are the implications of this for research?
- 3) What are the practical questions ethnographers of policy ask themselves to bridge the “gap” between research and policymakers?
- 4) How might we think differently about the role of the researcher in policy *translation*?

Educational policy in the US has a history, one that dates back to the colonies and the beginnings of public schooling. We can trace legislation at the local and national levels through the common school movement, the progressive era, the civil rights movement, the 1980’s, the 1990’s, to the present. The current evidence-based research movement and the “what works” mentality has for many researchers repositioned what counts as good and worthwhile policy research. “Good” policy research in the vein of what works presupposes a direct cause and effect connection between policy research and decision-making, a chicken and egg approach, where policy research comes first and leads to reasonable policy decisions. “Good” policy research is cumulative, instrumental, technical, generalizable, and sets standards. It privileges

the standards of scientificity that value a positivist kind of rigor, validity, and quality in the hierarchy of knowledge production (Bridges, Smeyers, & Smith, 2009; McDermott & Hall, 2007; Oancea & Pring, 2009).

Policy ethnographers and other researchers of the qualitative persuasion set themselves up as outside this mainstream discourse. They see the work of policy studies as both “an art and a craft” (Saunders, 2009). They view policy studies as methodologically profuse, investigatory of the subtlety, dynamism, and inherently political policy process. Suspicious of generalized solutions to educational problems, they see policy as that which is diverse, complex, unstable, unpredictable and messy and view the relationship between policymaking/makers and research as equally complex and complicated (Lather, 2010). They argue that policy and practice should be motivated by democratic dialogue, excellence within the field, and a move toward understanding as opposed to prescription. These are the hallmarks of what this group of researchers might consider a “reasonable” policy practice (Bridges, Smeyers, & Smith, 2009; Oancea & Pring, 2009). In these ways ethnographic, qualitative, and socio-cultural policy studies are set up as outside the mainstream and maintain the insider/outsider binary that “what works” culture, evidence-based research initiatives, and NCLB use to discursively and politically exclude other forms of inquiry.

In response to this exclusion policy ethnographers write themselves in ways that further produce this gap and separation between their work and the presumed symbiotic relationship between mainstream policy studies and policymakers. In an early training manual for policy ethnography, Van Willigen and Dewalt (1985) claim that “Anthropologists should no longer feel insecure about operating in policy relevant research, because our discipline has been innovative

as any other in using a mix of research techniques” (p. 3). Yet, here we are almost 25 years later wrestling with similar concerns.

Authors ask how to persuade policy-makers to take notice of socio-cultural work (Bridges & Watts, 2009). Others write of this relationship with a sense of longing, resentment, and betrayal: “Educational researchers seem to long to make everything rational, systematic, and tidy – neat columns of getting and spending – in order to give the policy-makers what the researchers imagine they want; and then so much passes unnoticed and unremarked and is betrayed” (Smith, 2009, p. 188).

Frederick Erickson (Levinson, Cade, Padawer, & Elvir, 2002) poses a series of important questions as to why this lack of communication between ethnographic policy studies and the mainstream of policy making: are traditional policy researchers more “hooked into the scene” than ethnographers, how do they broker their relationships, do they know how to “talk” to policy people, and should we “find some traditional policy researchers doing a project and see how they operate between the world of practice and the world of policy?” (p.160). Asking if policy ethnographers are justified in their insecurity, Erickson wonders what can be done about it.

There are as well some practical matters to consider. A common critique of educational research is that it is too slow to be useful. Though the ethnographic endeavor is expected to be both time consuming and time intensive as a result of extended engagement and rapport-building, policy making is a seemingly fast process in comparison. Practically speaking, policy makers in need of solutions to educational issues are impatient for readily available current research upon which to base their decisions. Walford (2002) argues, counter-intuitively, for

“compressed ethnography” that squeezes the time needed for study, analysis, and writing to make the research timely, pertinent, and usable for policy-makers.

Demerath (2002) takes a different approach and argues that “one of the reasons academic research has not fulfilled its potential to impact policy is that practitioners and policymakers have not been historically thought of as central constituencies for researchers” (p. 147). He attempts to address this practice-research gap through perspective-taking. The practice-research gap is defined as the perceived lack of connection between research and practice that comes about when theories of researchers fail to line up with theories of the practitioner or policymaker (p. 148). Perspective-taking calls for an understanding of how policymakers and practitioners know their world and how they see the work of academics to gain “the reflexive awareness required to make us valuable partners in the policy dialogue” (p. 147). Through perspective-taking, policy ethnography may become more open to building relationships and conducting “multifocal research” where inquiry is aligned with local concerns and/or originate with local policymakers and practitioners (p. 153). From this position, Demerath sees the possibility for use-inspired research where practitioners and policymakers contribute to the research foci and questions, and researchers contribute new ways of seeing as well as potential solutions to policy and practice (p. 154).

Regardless of probable solutions to bridging the gap, the relationship between ethnographic policy researchers and policy stakeholders is fraught with endless tensions that are political and methodological, and have a great deal to do with the social justice imperative of much qualitative research and the desire to be of use in critical ways. How does the field “develop a rhetoric that will persuade elite policymakers and the professional policy community

(who in their daily practices create and maintain the conventional policy worldview) that what their kind of ethnography has to offer will be of benefit to policy formation and the improvement of education...how (do we) do that without selling out or blunting the critical edge...?” (Erickson, 2002, p. 194). Here in lies the rub.

Yet, Erickson’s question also punctuates educational research’s ongoing romance of data-driven policy formation which as been exacerbated by No Child Left Behind (Hess, 2008, Lather, 2010). The intervention this study attempts to make is to shift efforts to the contributions policy research might make at the micro level. The questions of use that guide this study though are more open: *Of what use* can data be in policy formation? How is data negotiated, appropriated, and put to work by policy actors and to what effects? What can we learn about the effects of policy research at the micro level, how might this disrupt the romance and shift our energies? The contribution of feminist post-critical policy analysis then is to attempt to not only study the micro but locate our usefulness at the micro level. The goal though is to locate spaces to be of use while placing our usability under erasure, simultaneously troubling such desires and the romance of data-driven policy formation at any level. Translation then becomes a contested term, more attuned to the ways in which policy research is negotiated and appropriated and the power relations involved in these practices. Chapter 6 will further address the contributions feminist-post-critical policy analysis offers from this re-positioning.

*Loosening and Tightening Theory: Racing Poststructuralism and Troubling Critical Race  
Theory in Education*

The theoretical goal of this dissertation is toward the permuted use of poststructural theories of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida combined with Critical Race Theory to expand



our understandings of how race is materially experienced through enactments and discursive practices. Critical Race Theory/in Education (CRT) explicitly names and defines practices of racism and white privilege, and holding researchers accountable to consciously addressing racialized practices of schooling theoretically and substantively. While not often combined, such a hybrid theoretical approach tightens up poststructural theory and the tendencies for it to be read, and perhaps used, in relativistic ways . CRT though leaves little wiggle room methodologically for potential moments of resistance, agency, or resignification. Poststructural theory challenges me to loosen up CRT to look at power as a productive force with a full range of possibilities, both *productive and limiting*. It opens up the possibility for resignification, even if just for a moment, of urban student subjectivity through their varied practices and understandings of achievement and success.

### *Critical Race Theory/ in Education*

Critical Race Theory has many points of emergence in scholarship and activism. Richard Delgado (1995, p. xiii as quoted in Ladson-Billings, 2009) locates its emergence in the early 1970's out of the field of critical legal studies (CLS) as a critique of the absence of a racial analysis in CLS scholarship and a response to slow and even stalled pace of successful civil rights litigation and legal reform that legislated the dismantling of racial discrimination practices in housing, schooling, and hiring. As succinctly explained by Edward Taylor (2009, p. 2),

frustrated by this backlash, and the perceived failure of traditional civil rights theories and methods, a group of legal scholars including Derrick A. Bell, Charles Lawrence, Richard Delgado, Lani Guinier, and Kimberle Crenshaw, began to openly criticize the

role of law in the construction and maintenance of racially based social and economic oppression. They also began looking for an explanation of why this seeming retraction occurred, and how to formulate new strategies to affect transformation.

Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas (1995) is identified as the foundational text from those early years. Since then, CRT has developed into a prolific field of pivotal scholarship that focuses on legal theories of race and society, and CRT in education has emerged as a distinct field within this. *Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education* (1995) by Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate stands as one of the earliest conceptual writings that directly interrogates the connection between CRT and educational research. They argue that though race is deeply implicated in US society and educational system, it remains under-theorized in educational research. They offer three propositions from which analysis of social inequity using CRT in education might proceed: 1) Race<sup>7</sup> continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in

---

<sup>7</sup> I use Omi and Winant's conceptualization of race. Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986) conceptualize race "as an unstable and 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle" (p.123) and define it further "*as a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies*" (p. 123, italics theirs). They clarify this contested term by arguing that "although the concept of race invokes biological based human characteristics...selection of these particular human features for purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process" (p. 123).

the US, 2) US society is based on property rights, and 3) The intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social and consequently school inequity (p.48). CRT in education was built on these introductory constructs and developed into a robust body of literature that applies CRT concepts to educational issues beyond desegregation such as the achievement gap, deficit thinking, policy, higher education, school sports, curriculum and instruction, teacher education and has also engaged in important dialogues around the politics of race and qualitative (educational) research. This dissertation utilizes several theories of race from CRT/ in education. The next sections outline the contributions of this literature to this project.

#### *Themes and concepts of CRT in Education*

Though no theory can be reduced to a set of unanimously agreed upon characteristics, CRT is often identified by six unifying themes, and CRT in education also employs these principles. It is asserted that critical race theory:

1. Recognizes racism as endemic to US life and society.
2. Challenges dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy.
3. Argues against ahistoricism and insists that law must be analyzed within history and context.
4. Locates its analysis within the experiential knowledge of people of color and privileges this type of knowledge through the use of narrative and storytelling.
5. Is interdisciplinary.

6. Views activism and social change as requisite components of its work toward the elimination of racial oppression and the larger goal of ending all forms of oppression (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993, quoted in Dixson & Rousseau, 2006, p. 33).

My analysis makes use of three concepts from CRT/in education. These include whiteness as property, interest convergence, and the education debt.

### Whiteness as Property

Whiteness as property (Harris, 1995) is a concept carefully and thoroughly developed by foundational CRT scholar Cheryl Harris and comprises one of the key writings in the field. According to Harris, US society is based on a system of property rights located within racial subordination. “Slavery as a system of property facilitated the merger of white identity and property. Because the system of slavery was contingent on and conflated with racial identity, it became crucial to be ‘white,’ to be identified as white, to have the property of being white. Whiteness was the characteristic, the attribute, the property of free human beings...” (p. 279). Through the slavery of blacks and the seizure of Native American lands whiteness came to be a form of privilege to ownership and a form of protection from being owned:

...Whiteness became a shield from slavery, a highly volatile and unstable form of property...Because whites could not be enslaved or held as slaves, the racial line between white and black was extremely critical; it became a line of threat of commodification, and it determined the allocation of benefits and burdens of this form of property. White identity and whiteness were sources of privilege and protection; their absence meant being an object of property (p. 279).

From this context Harris identifies four property functions or rights ascribed to whiteness which Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995, p. 59-60) define within the context of education:

1. Rights of disposition in which whiteness as property is viewed as alienable or transferrable, such as the transfer of certain forms of white privileges to students who conform to white cultural practices and forms of knowledge production in schools.

2. Rights to use and enjoyment in which whiteness gives students access to the use and enjoyment of facilities, resources, and curriculums; resource disparities between affluent white schools and schools of color are one example.

3. Rights of reputation and status in which positive reputation and status are associated with whiteness; for example the reputations often associated with predominantly white and affluent private and public schools.

4. The absolute right to exclude which follows from the construction of whiteness as that which excludes markers of blackness; segregated schooling is an example of the absolute right to exclude.

I will use the concept of whiteness as property to analyze how a racially stratified enrollment across the three curriculums at OPHS is maintained through racialized power relations that make use of the property values of whiteness.

### Interest Convergence

Derrick Bell's theory of interest convergence posits that the interests of Blacks in gaining racial equality in the US, for example through the declaration of segregated schooling as unconstitutional, have only been accommodated in moments when those interests converge with those of powerful whites (Taylor, 2009, p. 5). Bell (2009, p. 76-77) identifies three reasons for

interest convergence and the passage of Brown. First, it was argued that passage would establish immediate credibility with Cold War countries and repair the tarnished reputation of American democracy due to slavery and segregation on the international front. Second it offered reassurance to Black US soldiers returning from World War II that they had not fought in vein and would not face continued discrimination upon their return. Third, once it was realized that segregation served as a barrier to southern US industrialization, Brown was seen as converging with national economic interests. I will use the concept of interest convergence as an effect of racialized power relations that impact policy practices.

### Education Debt

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that the US preoccupation with the achievement gap and the narrowing of the gap through educational reforms that locate the problem within individual students, teachers, schools, families, and communities, offers merely short-term solutions to long-term inequality. Rather she argues that what the US has accumulated is an educational debt, and that this debt has been shouldered largely by students of color and their communities who have been deprived of educational and other resources leading to educational inequality. She states that, “The cumulative effect of poor education, poor housing, poor health care, and poor government services create a bifurcated society that leaves more than its children behind” (p. 10). It is this cumulative effect that has created the education debt.

She identifies four components of the educational debt. The *historical debt* is based in the legacy of early US slavery, the prohibition of blacks from schooling, the withholding of access to public education and resources, segregated schooling, and other egregious acts that stacked the debt against communities of color. The *economic debt* is the accumulation of funding disparities

and limited opportunities for higher levels of educational attainment that translate into lower wages and income, lower occupational positions, and therefore the continued social disparities that impact education and learning. The *sociopolitical debt* is the degree to which people of color have been excluded from citizenship and the civic process. Political exclusion translates into exclusion from decision-making in the educational arena and a struggle to advocate for rights and resources. Lastly the *moral debt* “reflects the disparity between what we know is right and what we actually do” (p. 8) and asks us to consider our moral obligation to communities of color that have been excluded from social and educational benefits and opportunities (p. 5-8). I will use Ladson-Billings concept of the education debt to trouble our understandings of NCLB policy, the achievement gap, and how OPHS is constructed as a successful school within discourses of achievement. In helping to close the achievement gap, what are its effects on the education debt?

CRT provides this study with the conceptual power to name and trace the way race works in schools. Race is an inescapable problematic that takes shape within the historical, social, and discursive contexts of US education. The acts of schools, parents, and teachers are equally situated within these, and these practices are decentered, dangerous, and productive. Wanting to read these acts with an even hand, critically but not accusingly, I use poststructural theory, particularly Foucault, to take in these complexities and contextualize the racialized power/knowledge relations at work in schools.

#### *Foucaultian Theories of Discourse, Power/Knowledge, Subjectivity, and Genealogy*

As a case study of policy as practice in urban public schooling, this project investigates the re-appropriation of policy in the local context by situating policy analysis as ethnography of

policy as practice. I utilize Foucaultian genealogy and discourse analysis along with Foucaultian theories of power/knowledge and the subject to analyze the effects of policy on practices for insights into how OPHS negotiates policy in ways that appear to contribute to its academic success as an urban school.

Sutton and Levinson's view of policy as a practice of power elicits the use of poststructural theory to break policy studies' traditional focus on quantitative outcomes that situate policy as logical, rational, fixable, and free of power (Marshall, 1997), to instead focus on the relationship between policy and practice in terms of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1977). Michel Foucault's theories of the relationship between power and knowledge assert that "(p)ower produces knowledge; that Power and knowledge directly imply one another that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (Foucault, 1977, p. 27). This notion of power/knowledge as "everywhere...unbalanced, heterogeneous, unstable, and tense..." (Foucault, 1990, p. 93) is utilized to think about the negotiation of achievement and accountability in urban schools within power/knowledge relations, paying particular attention to how practices of urban cachet, curriculum and instruction, and racialized enrollment are produced as the racialized effects of these.

I use Foucault's definitions of discourse and analysis as a framework. According to Sara Mills (1997/2004) Foucault offers three different ways to think of discourse: "utterances or texts which have meaning and which have some effects in the real world...discourses, that is groups of utterances which seem to be regulated in some way and which seem to have a coherence and a force to them in common...(and) the rules and structures which produce particular utterances and



texts” (p. 6). Elizabeth St. Pierre (2000) continues, “Foucault’s theory of discourse illustrates how language gathers itself together according to socially constructed rules and regularities that allow certain statements to be made and not others” (p. 485). Because it looks for historical shifts when people do or say things differently, it also looks at the productive nature of discourse within fields of power/knowledge and possibilities for resistance. In these ways Foucaultian theories become useful for tracing how discourses of urban schooling and students are produced in and through policy and productive of the practices/effects documented in this study.

Foucault defines genealogy as “an insurrection of subjugated knowledge” which “allow us to rediscover the ruptural effects” of history (1972/1980, p. 81-82). I gesture toward a genealogy that traces the construction of urban identity through the historical shifts of both dominant and local discourses and privileges the historically subjugated knowledge of African American education that recognizes the limits and failures of *Brown* and NCLB. I put to work a genealogical tracing of these shifts and effects to offer a radical critique of the urban educational identity by positing a subject “that constitutes itself within history and is constantly established and reestablished by history” to locate the possibilities for seeing urban students on their own terms (Foucault, 2000, p. 3).

I use the terms *subject* and *object* to mark “urban” as a practice of the subject or as a tool for identification of the “urban” object. Catherine Belsey’s (1996) discusses the subject within ideology through Althusser’s concept of interpellation to talk about processes of identity and subjectivity together. In one sense, urban students are “hailed” or acknowledged and named as a particular identity with a particular set of traits or an “identikit” (Spivak, 1999) which makes them instantly categorizable and locates them within subject positions that are culturally and

historically situated. According to Althusser, “individuals are always-already subjects” (quoted in St. Pierre, 2000, p. 502). Subjectivity becomes a site of action, a place where it is “linguistically and discursively constructed and displaced across a range of discourses in which the concrete individual participates” (Belsey, p. 596). Poststructuralism opens up the category of the subject “to the possibility of continual reconstruction and reconfiguration” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 502), and I want to harness this potential for thinking about urban students as agents in their own education.

As made visible in this dissertation, student “agency” happens within the constraints of discourse, but it is through the “subversive repetition” (Butler, 1993) of their material experiences that other ways of living, thinking, and doing become possible. I hope to use genealogy and discourse analysis to locate the places where urban identity categories fall apart in practice, where students work within discourses that produce and are productive of conditions that make possible different ways for us to allow students to claim achievement on their own terms.

### *Deconstruction as an Analytic Ethics*

In Chapter 6 I argue that one of the implications of this dissertation is the possibility to deconstruct what are often privileged terms in studies of urban schools and academic achievement and to assert more complicated and nuanced understandings of how critical schooling actors work within and against policy to create new ways of being and doing in these schools. I am particularly interested in the implications of deconstructing standard notions of

urban student identity to locate the conditions of possibility that promote urban students as educational subjects on their own terms.

I think of deconstruction as both an ethical method of recuperation and reflexivity and also as a product/effect/implication of this study. First it serves as a mechanism to keep this project open to the “anomalies” in the data, the disruptions and complications that shed light on the complex practices of policy in schools (Caputo, 1997, p. 73). Situating the data (i.e. transcripts, field notes, documents) as “texts,” I conduct a “deconstructive” coding of the data, “...a more ‘productive’, fine-grained, distinctly deconstructive reading (coding), which explores the tensions, loose threads, the little ‘openings’ in the text which the classical reading (coding) tends to close over or put off as a problem for another day, which is really just a way to forget them” (p. 76). Rather than put the “problems” off for another day, they are included and foregrounded in the analysis.

In light of the role that social science research has played in the production of the urban identity as pertaining to people of color and the poor who are viewed as “culturally disadvantaged,” “at-risk,” “culturally impoverished,” I use deconstruction as an analytic method to destabilize the potential for this study to re-affirm these essentialized signifiers in uncomplicated ways. I attempt to place the analysis in a deconstructive and hence reflexive mode to be “...acutely sensitive to the contingency of our constructions, to the deeply historical, social, and linguistic ‘constructedness’ of our beliefs and practices” (Caputo, 1997, p. 52). In this way I hope to place privileged terms “under erasure” and locate ways to assert the systemic and institutional disadvantages experienced by minority and poor students living in this low-income metropolitan district.

By being attentive to these issues deconstruction serves as an analytic ethics that also offers other productive or affirmative effects (which I see as benefits to the research) in that it has the potential to keep “thinking and writing alive, keeping them open to surprise” (Caputo, 1997, p. 62). By being open, attentive, and expectant of the anomalies, transgressions, and traces of “difference” this study aims to “do and trouble itself simultaneously” (Lather, 2007), every step of the way, as an ethics of inquiry.

Hence, use of deconstruction as a mode of research requires that some of its privileged terms be unpacked. Let me say first that the concepts themselves are immensely complex and by “nature” evade easy framing or defining. First is the term of deconstruction itself.

Deconstruction can be asserted as a way to structure one’s encounter with knowledge, which involves 1) locating the binary or boundary to be transgressed, 2) engaging or producing “the necessary reversal” of the binary where the privileged term is destabilized by the “other” or through the transgression of a boundary or limit through the previously “unsaid”, and 3) allowing the reversal to give way to the “displacement” of the binary through acknowledgement of the uncontainability and multiplicity of experience and being (Caputo, 1997, p. 104-105).

*Differance* is a Derridean concept used “to explain how the meaning of language shifts depending on social context so that meaning can always be disputed” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 481). It is identified as the “trace or track of all that is not what is being defined or posited” (Spivak, 1999, p. 424) that disrupts the restricted binary formulations and transgresses the imposed boundaries of knowledge. Differance is used as a methodological construct to make room for the “anomalies,” “outliers,” or “negative cases” as foregrounded data points as a way to transgress common constructions of urban educational identity.

*Aporias* serve as places of “non-passage,” “effacement,” or the “experience of the impossible” in research (Spivak, 1999, p. 427). I used deconstruction as a type of ethical persuasion that pushed me toward engaging with the data that was irreconcilable, disruptive, and even emotionally difficult to analyze. I used the aporia as a methodological construct then to require a necessary engagement with these moments as a way to disrupt the taken-for-granted notions about urban education, educational policy, and urban subjectivity already at play.

Now that the key terms, contexts and theories have been laid out, I end this introduction with a historical background for the contemporary iteration of Ohio Public High School by tracing its historical development in relation to desegregation, the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and No Child Left Behind. The goal of beginning with this context is to set the stage for the later analysis of how urban student subjectivity at OPHS gets constructed in specific ways in and through policy and practice and to demonstrate how issues of race are directly and materially implicated in these productions.

### *Historical Context of OPHS*

In *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945-1980* (1983), Diane Ravitch offers a comprehensive, though conservative, account of the struggle for equality and excellence in the US. According to Ravitch, the US system has been beset with the democratic dilemma of universal education: does democracy imply differentiation to be prepared for the myriad of differences that students engender and bring to school, or does it mean access to the same basic materials, resources, and information regardless of ability, need, or interest (p.77)? While Ravitch does not signal it with the same intensity, she also recognizes what I would consider to

be another historic democratic dilemma: the problem of bringing American social practices, like education, into congruence with its democratic ideals of equality, justice, and freedom (p. 21). Segregated schooling continues to be one of many incongruencies in American life that straddles this dilemma. The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision sits at the nexus of law, research, and educational policy and their collaborative effort to resolve these dilemmas and redefine educational goals toward equality. This next section briefly sketches the history of the *Brown* decision and its impact on Columbus City Schools as a way to help frame the historical position within which OPHS sits as an *urban* school.

After *Brown*, the weak and symbolic measures taken by the Columbus school district to integrate while the city continued development and employment practices that perpetuated segregation worked to produce the unequal conditions that stigmatize urban schools today. Yet this history is forgotten, and the implications of race and resistances to *Brown* recede into the background. I start here by looking backward at the history of urban education in Columbus to emphasize that *success*, *excellence*, and *achievement* were *always*, *already* at work in urban public education though they are absent in mainstream talk about urban education. What does it mean to think about the future of urban education today by acknowledging the legacy of African American education and facing the wreckage of public schooling after integration? I think we conceive of urban schools and students differently if we start with traditions of success rather than assumptions of intrinsic failure.

### *Before and After Brown vs. Board of Education*

According to Derrick Bell (1995) the genesis of *Brown* can be traced back to court cases as early as the mid-nineteenth century that brought numerous suits against segregated schooling (p. 6). Beginning in the 1930's the NAACP developed a coordinated legal campaign strategy against segregation, using the courts as a form of redress to challenge the constitutionality of "separate but equal." In 1953 and 1954 they spearheaded a series of direct challenges to the constitutionality of state-enforced segregation in K-12 schooling. Public schooling was chosen as the battle ground, because it "presented a far more compelling symbol of the evils of segregation and a far more vulnerable target than segregated railroad cars, restaurants, restrooms" (Bell, 1995, p. 6). A group of cases from Kansas, South Carolina, Delaware, Virginia, and the District of Columbia, known collectively as *Brown vs. Board of Education* challenged the *Plessey vs. Ferguson* decision that "separate but equal" was indeed legal and just.

Plaintiffs in *Brown* built a portion of the case on social science research into the effects of state-imposed racial segregation on black children. The evidence took a double pronged approach arguing, 1) against scientific racism, making the case that there were no scientific rationales for the classification of children by race, and 2) that black children and their already presumed cultural deficits had been further exacerbated by poverty, racism, and the absence of interracial contact (Ravitch, 1983, p. 126). The plaintiff's also made a color-blind argument that the Fourteenth Amendment precluded state action based on race and color. This combination of argumentation successfully achieved a Supreme Court ruling declaring state-imposed racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. The *Brown* decision represented not only the long sought recognition that American practices of segregation were in opposition to its

egalitarian ideals, but it also represented a potential means to achieving substantive equality (Ravitch, 1983, p. 124-132), but as critical race theorists and historians have demonstrated, the court ruling was in many ineffective in ending segregated schooling.

While the arguments made were instrumental in bringing about the *Brown* decision, both the color-blind argument and the discourse of black inferiority perpetuated the definition of black students as inferior, at-risk, and disadvantaged, and negated the need to address the underlying systemic pathologies of racism and white supremacy both inside and outside of the school system (Ladson-Billings, 2004). James Anderson (2004) argues that “contemporary rationales for educational inequality are linked to a legacy of blaming racial subordination on African American personality traits and cultural norms” (p. 359) and that this “victim blaming” has fostered assumptions of a culture of anti-intellectualism and deprivation that is held primarily responsible for achievement gaps between blacks, and other students of color, and whites in student performance (p. 362). As current research has demonstrated, teacher thinking and practices continue to be informed by deficit beliefs about urban students, their families, and their cultures (Milner IV, 2008; Garcia & Guerra, 2004).

James Anderson (2006) refers to *Brown* as a “troubled legacy” holding both a “time honored place in America’s longstanding pursuit for formal equality under the law and its unfulfilled promises of substantive equality in American public education” (p. 16). Ladson-Billings (2004) notes its “mythic quality” and our tendency to see it as an example of a steady march toward racial progress “that is coupled with a view of America as a nation endowed with inherent ‘goodness’ and exceptionality” (p. 3). And yet, as Bell (2009) argues, though *Brown* has a legacy that cannot be forgotten, “most black children attend public schools that are both



racially isolated and inferior. Demographic patterns, white flight, and the inability of the courts to effect the necessary degree of social reform render further progress in implementing *Brown* almost impossible” (p. 73). Gary Orfield and Chungmei Lee’s (2004) work on patterns of resegregation confirm Bell’s assertion; data collected during the years of their study, 1991 through 2001, showed that segregated schooling had increased rather than decreased 20 years after the landmark legislation (p. 2). Ohio exhibited climbing resegregation rates during this 10-year period, and as a result was ranked as the 14<sup>th</sup> most segregated state for black students in 2001 (p. 27).

OPHS and Columbus City Schools have their own rich histories that must be accounted for to understand how OPHS functions as a successful urban high school. Gregory Jacobs (1998) provides a different historical context from which we might proceed when thinking about the education of African American children in urban schools (and all students from disadvantaged backgrounds), one that emphasizes the history of academic success in the black community before integration.

#### *Columbus City Schools before Brown*

African American public education in Columbus, Ohio was relatively successful before the Supreme Court ruled in favor of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. In *Getting Around Brown: Desegregation, Development and the Columbus Public Schools (1998)*, Gregory Jacobs provides a historical account of the viable social, political, and economic community that thrived in Columbus before attempts at integration began. Black public schooling found ways to thrive in spite of segregation. As Columbus manipulated attendance boundaries and unofficially produced race based school districts, African Americans created all black schools that garnered a highly

qualified staff. They found ways to gain representation on the school board and advocate for their community. Schools that today have poor reputations, such as Linden McKinnely and Champion, then embodied the promise and possibility of (segregated) education (Jacobs, p. 10-19).

*OPHS: a Columbus City School after Brown*

In the wake of *Brown* and the Civil Rights movement, President Lyndon Johnson gathered momentum to persuade the congress to pass, after more than 100 years of debate, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), which sought to remedy inequality through financing and other legislative measure to support education. With desegregation it became more readily apparent to the government and white society that there were wide disparities in opportunity, resources, and achievement between black and white children, suburban, rural, and urban children, and across class differences. Simultaneously, desegregation also brought about concerns from white parents about the lowering of standards as integration proceeded (Ravitch, 1983, p. 148-149).

Gregory Jacobs (1998) chronicles the middle-class abandonment of the Columbus City School district, even after the 1978 *Penick vs. Columbus Board of Education*<sup>8</sup> decision attempted

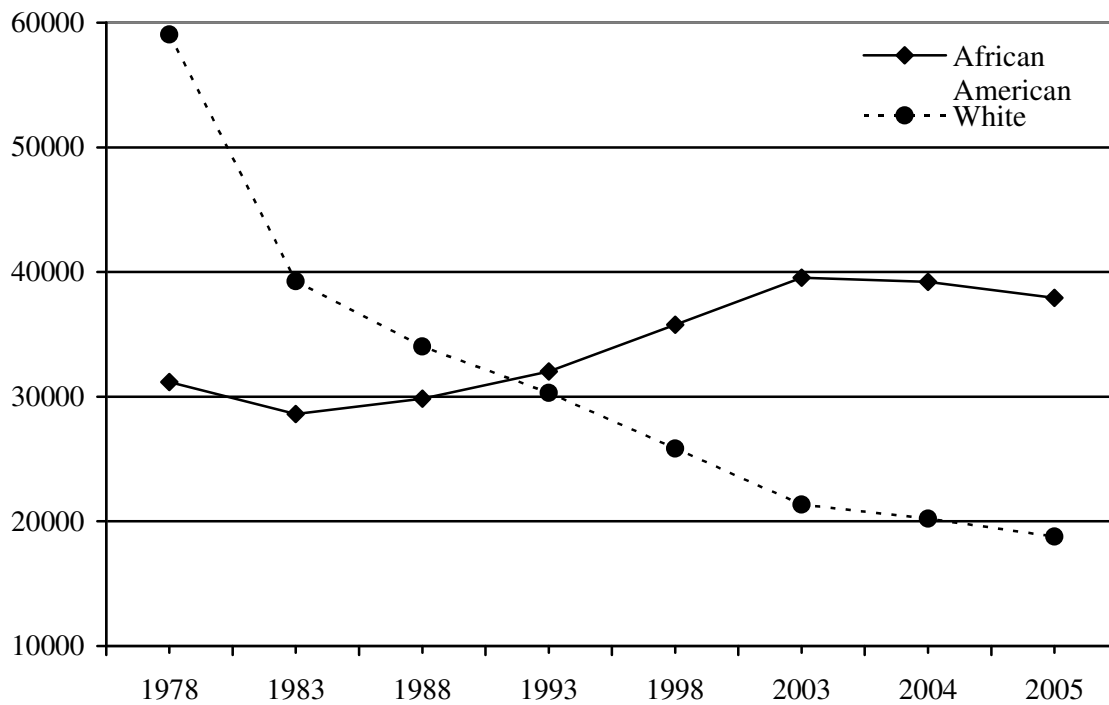
---

<sup>8</sup> With *Penick I* (1977) the Ohio Supreme Court Justice Robert Duncan ruled that Columbus City Schools was guilty of systematically and intentionally maintaining a dual district that was racially segregated and required the district to desegregate; With *Penick II* (1978) Duncan again ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, this time requiring a system-wide plan to desegregate every school in the district.

to bring an end to uneven desegregation practices that Columbus realtors and developers used somewhat successfully to “get around Brown”. It was in the eye of this storm that OPHS was created as one of the first lottery-based magnet schools in the district designed to attract and/or keep (white and middle class) families in the district. As explained to me during an interview with a senior teacher who had been with the school since 1982, OPHS began in 1978 as a predominantly white alternative half-day program that quickly acquired local and national recognition that allowed it to secure full-day operations in 1980. Though OPHS was successful in attracting an academically driven set of predominantly white parents and students, alternative schools like OPHS were not enough to stem the tide of outmigration. As seen in Figure 1<sup>9</sup>, the demographic constituency of the district slowly shifted from predominantly white to majority African American.

---

<sup>9</sup> Data compiled for Figures 1 and 2 was derived from published enrollment tables available through the Ohio Department of Education website. The 1983 data on Figure 2 was estimated from a high school yearbook to establish early enrollment by race as no data existed prior to 1993.



*Figure 1. Columbus City Schools Enrollment by Race for the years 1978-2005.*

In 1985 Justice Robert Duncan released Columbus Public Schools from court-ordered desegregation. Shortly thereafter, the school board pursued a plan to restructure school assignment patterns, add more alternative schools, and reduce bussing. During these years Columbus schools created a policy of racial balancing for the lottery schools which was later abandoned (p. 157-161). OPHS continued to reflect the demographic trends of white outmigration in the district, developing into a predominantly black high school by the mid 1990's (see Figure 2).

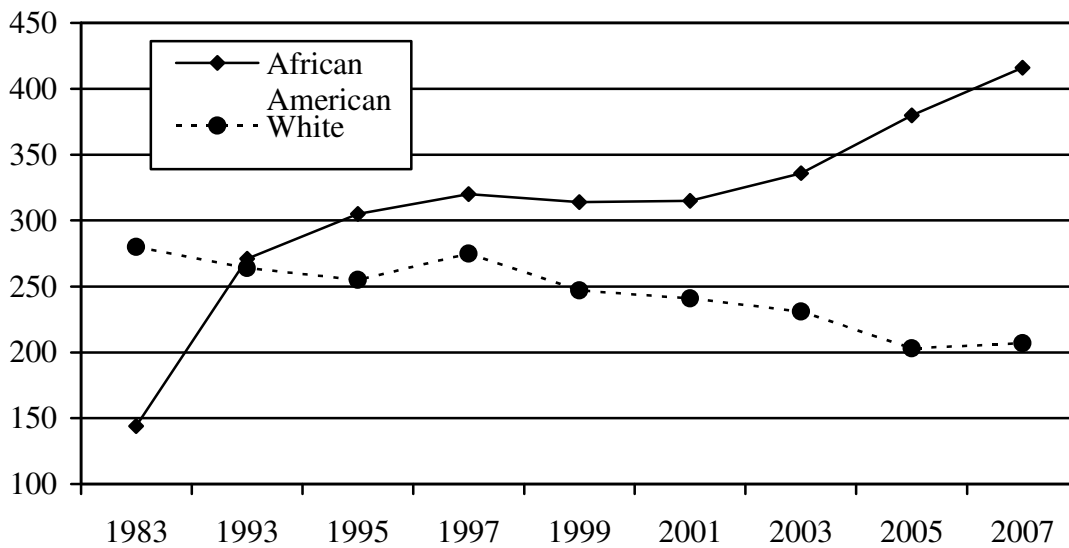


Figure 2. Ohio Public High School Enrollment by Race, 1983 and 1993-2007.

Gregory Jacobs' account of Columbus City Schools demonstrates how court cases like *Brown vs. Board of Education* have had specific implications for formulating education's response to race, its democratic intention to provide access, and the perceived competing tension with preserving excellence. In spite of Supreme Court rulings like *Brown* and *Penick*, segregation was unofficially maintained. The legacy of segregated schooling legislation is encapsulated by the paradox of the discernible gains from Civil Rights and the subtle and insidious reformulation of racism and oppression that maintains inequality and disadvantage in public schooling and society. To understand OPHS we must grasp its location within this history.

It is within the specificity of policy and its articulation of *the achievement gap*, *minority students*, and *the disadvantaged* that the urban-ness of this high achieving alternative high school and its students become important in new ways.

### *Overview of Chapters*

In this chapter I have outlined what I consider to be the political and historical contexts that help shape perceptions of Ohio Public High School as a successful urban school. I have also attempted to foreground the local history of Columbus City Schools and its dance with segregation and integration to punctuate its importance and shift focus *away* from debates about cultural inferiority *to* the legacy of strong African American education and its struggle with systemically perpetuated inequity that continues today. I have also provided the key texts and terms for ethnographic educational research and an analysis of policy as practice. The remainder of the dissertation will proceed as follows:

#### Ethnographic Moments

As this study is heavily ethnographic, I wanted to provide the reader with “ethnographic moments” to contextualize the study and offer more depth. During data collection I was often struck by the way my affective experience of witnessing first hand the successes and contradictions of teaching and learning at OPHS shaped my later analytic work. This witnessing produced the aporias, marked the moments of contradiction, and drove my analysis. After writing and assembling the dissertation, I felt that it did not stylistically capture the materiality of the experience nor did it thoroughly share the richness of the school and its students that propelled me. I therefore use *interludes* between the chapters to attempt convey the richness of

this high school that I experienced during my fieldwork. I have also used *text boxes* within the chapters as sources of interruption and context. I recognize that they may interrupt the ability to read with linearity, but I hope that the interruptions and complexities add to rather than detract from the study. Please keep in mind that I have wrestled throughout the writing of this dissertation with where and how to locate these ethnographic moments that feed my desire to represent research affectively and materially. I admit that I am still searching for the best way to present this data to which I am committed.

### Unraveling Urban Educational Identity: Race, Culture, Sports, and Educational Research

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature pertinent to this study. The data produced in this dissertation could make contributions to many educational projects, but I have chosen to work specifically within and against urban educational studies, tracking research, sports, and ethnographic policy studies. My project struggles within and against social science research which is deeply implicated in the construction of urban students as objects and subjects. My work seeks to challenge the effects of historic and large-scale social science research on our understandings of African American education and work within and against dominant motifs of culture as posited in multicultural education and traditional school ethnographies of African American students. I interrogate the taken-for-granted notion of sports as integral to secondary education. The knotted history of interscholastic high school sports in the US is also untangled to help us understand the profound perceived impact of the *absence* of sports at OPHS and the potentiality of this absence for reconceptualizing urban students. I also aim to stretch traditional tracking literature beyond social reproduction theory to engage with the complexities of power relations that in effect produce the racialization of course enrollment in schools. These

challenges are situated within the subfield of ethnographic studies of educational policy, and specifically, those studies that look at NCLB as policy in practice.

#### Being in Trouble and of Use to Education: A Methodology of Disruption

Chapter 3 provides the research design and methodological framework for this study. I define what I term *feminist post-critical policy ethnography* and how I use it to make critical shifts in the traditional style of educational policy analysis. I discuss how *situated inquiry* (Clarke, 2005) is used to bring grounded theory around the postmodern turn and expand the notion of data to include the situation, history, context, and discourse. I further elaborate on how I systematically approached this ethnographic case-study where everything is potentially a source of data and devised a plan to strategically gather data while maintaining a flexible and emergent project.

#### Subverting and Being Subverted: How OPHS Negotiates District, State, and Federal Policy

The findings for this study have been broken down into two chapters, 4 and 5. Chapter 4 looks specifically at how OPHS subverts the constraining effects of NCLB through its practices of curriculum and instruction. It also looks at how district practices instituted to conform to standards and accountability in many ways undermine and punish the success of OPHS. This chapter ends with the results of a member check that sheds light on current district proposals that could significantly undermine the success of this program.

#### The Concept of The Academic High School: Complicated/ing Excellence and Equity

Chapter 5 interrogates the seemingly foreign concept of the academic high school and how OPHS brings into focus the strange un-expectation of intellectual engagement in US public secondary schools. It exposes the taken-for-granted relationship between sports and secondary



education, how this relationship potentially undermines academic success, and looks at the entangled relationship of race, sports, and achievement. Chapter 5 also addresses more deeply how race works at the interstices of academic success and achievement, producing and appropriating urban student identity within discourses of disadvantage and risk that undermine student access to the very opportunities that make this high school “academic.” I endeavor though to disrupt this fixing of identity by situating students as agents who negotiate success and achievement within the constraints and materialities of their lives to become *urban educational subjects on their own terms*.

#### Bearing Witness to Difficult Knowledge

Chapter 6 will address what it means to bear witness to difficult knowledge, in this case the knowledge of how race works in schools to undermine equity and excellence in spite of our best efforts as educators to provide access and opportunity to all students. As requested by the participants, I offer practical recommendations that critical schooling actors might consider as they think about their practices of curriculum and instruction, the differential impact of these practices on students of color, and how they might continue to negotiate proposed policy changes that will affect their school. I will then revisit the theoretical and methodological implications of the research as well as the substantive and conceptual findings that may be of significant contribution to the field.

#### *Conclusion*

Success and achievement are structured along lines of difference, and this case study helps us to tease out how race in particular continues to work in schools and undermines our

beliefs in the power of educational opportunity that we hold dear. As a top-200 nationally ranked public high school and a nationally recognized high achieving urban school, OPHS may serve as an example of an urban public school making strides toward achieving both *equity*, via expanded access to college preparatory and advanced curriculums for students of color and other disadvantaged populations, and *excellence* by going beyond amelioration of test scores to create opportunities for engaged learning and academic achievement. Research that “translates” across policy and practice offers the opportunity to explore “success” via the connections between federal and local policy, practices of teaching and learning, and specific social and cultural factors like race, socioeconomics, high school sports, and advanced curriculums that construct both limits and possibilities for achievement. This case study foregrounds both the limits and possibilities for equity and excellence in urban education and asks that we reconsider urban students *on their own terms*. The next chapter provides a review of the literatures which begins to unravel the racialized discourses that construct urban students and their access to excellence in public schools.

## Interlude

### *Snapshot of Ohio Public High School*

OPHS is like any other US public school in the sense that it has been equally subjected standards and accountability. However unlike the majority of high schools in its district, its outstanding graduation rates, college acceptance rates, and proficiency scores serve to make it a legitimated example of “what works” in (urban) public education.

Ohio Public High School has a 30-year history as an alternative<sup>10</sup> school deeply invested in academic achievement and is highly lauded for its success. It was most recently recognized as a 2008 “Breakthrough School” by Principal Leadership magazine (Rourke & Mero, 2008). In 2007 Newsweek ranked OPHS at 244 in the top 1200 schools in the nation and the number one school in its county (Mathews, Kaufman, & Brillman, 2007), and it was awarded the Excellence in Education Award by San Diego State University’s National Center for Urban School Transformation (ARAdmin, 2007). Designated by the Ohio Department of Education as a high poverty, high performing college preparatory public high school, it was recognized as an urban “School of Promise” first in 2004-2005 and has received the award each year since. The state conducted a series of case studies to document the effective practices of six urban schools of promise that first year, with an individual case study conducted at OPHS.

---

<sup>10</sup> OPHS is different from the traditional high school and therefore considered an alternative school, because it offers a college preparatory curriculum. It is also well known for its arts program and the lack of interscholastic sports in the school.

The demographics of the student body at OPHS closely mimic the demographics the district; the high rate of academic achievement does not, which is why OPHS is often cited as an example of the success possible in urban schools (see Table 1). Over 70% of the students at OPHS are from African American, Hispanic, and Asian or Pacific Islander backgrounds, but 98.5 % of OPHS students graduated in 2007 as compared to 73.9% of students in the district. Of the 19 high schools in Columbus City Schools, 6 exhibit graduation rates at or below 67.9%, with a lowest graduation rate of 49.6%. OPHS has the highest rate of graduation in the district, and this rate is met by only one other school. According to the school website 96% of its 2007 graduates attended two or four-year colleges and earned nearly \$7 million in scholarships to 50 schools, including top ivy-league institutions.

Table 1

*2008-2009 Demographic Profiles, OPHS and Columbus City Schools (CCS)*

	OPHS	CCS
Student enrollment	687	51963
Grade Levels	9-12	K-12
Economically Disadvantaged Students	55.7%	81.1%
Asian or Pacific Islander	3.0%	1.9%
African American Students	65.5%	60.9%
White Students	27.7%	27.4%
Hispanic Students	2.5%	5.9%
American Indian or Native Alaskan	Not calculated	0.2%
Multi-racial Students	Not calculated	3.7%
Students with disabilities	6.1%	16.9%
2006-2007 Graduation Rates	98.5%	73.9%

*Note:* Data retrieved from <https://reportcard.ohio.gov>.

OPHS is located a low-income eastside neighborhood of Columbus in a building it shared with an elementary school and a welcome center for international students until 2009. It offers

its students an exclusively college-preparatory curriculum with access to general college preparatory, Advanced Placement (AP), and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses. It is well known for its highly successful 9<sup>th</sup> grade Introduction to Humanities course and its overarching humanities program which has served as a curricular model for other schools in the district. Classes run on four 80-minute blocks, known as block scheduling, which allows sustained classroom time<sup>11</sup>. This makes it possible for OPHS to offer full-year courses in one semester, creating opportunities for accelerated learning.

No basic courses or basic diploma are offered at this school. Each student strives and is expected to receive a high school diploma with a certificate of college preparation upon graduation. The school has a strict graduation plan with requirements that exceed even the college preparation requirements for the district (see Table 2). At OPHS students are expected to enroll in a science, math, social studies, and foreign language course each year. If students adhere to the strict graduation plan by the end of their senior year they will have completed College Prep Math, Pre-Calculus or AP Calculus; Physics or AP Biology, Chemistry or Physics; Government or AP Government; and 4 credits in one foreign language, for a total 30.75 credits including electives. They are also required to complete for credit a co-curricular internship in grades 10-12.

---

<sup>11</sup> During member checks I learned that the school was considering incorporating traditional 48-minutes periods and reducing block scheduling to accommodate an increase in their enrollment as proposed by the district.

Table 2

*Graduation Requirements for Certificate of College Preparation at OPHS and CCS*

Core Courses	OPHS	CCS
English	4	4
Social Studies	4	4
Math	4	3
Science	4	3
Foreign Language	4	3
Internship	3	1
Total Credit Hours (including electives)	30.75	22

As one of 4 alternative high schools and the only IB high school in the district, students from all over the Columbus City Schools apply to be admitted via a lottery system, where students are “drawn out of a hat” for enrollment. At the time of the study, OPHS accepted approximately 150 students to the freshman class each year from over 1,000 applicants, there is limited access to this school. In 2008 the Columbus Board of Education approved a selective admission program that holds 50 of the 150 seats for 9<sup>th</sup> graders who apply and are “accepted” based on merit.

### *What makes OPHS “OPHS?”*

OPHS has a certain energy to it, an unmistakable quality that sets it apart from other schools, but this quality is often difficult for people to describe. According to the guidance counselor Mrs. Cowan, “Everybody says that OPHS students just look a certain way... We know that there are certain things, a certain style that it brings, and it brings maturity” [Interview 3/25/09]. The other guidance counselor, Mrs. Altman agrees, “There’s that certain mindset, that certain worldliness that they get here... [Interview, 2/18/09].

As such, the school gathers its energy from a combination of factors that contribute to its success and set it apart from other schools. I do not want to assert that there is a cookbook approach to establishing a high achieving school, but I identified five factors that participants perceived contributed to the OPHS-ness of the school and the academic achievement of its students:

#### 1) Exclusive College Preparatory Curriculum and Instruction

Participants agreed that the focused college preparation environment allowed them to foster an academically-based school characterized by a culture of high expectations and respect, a rigorous curriculum, and intrinsically motivated teachers, students, and parents. It was argued that the environment made students feel “called to excellence” [Parent interview, 1/27/09] and “empowered...like they have a stake in their success” [Interview, Mrs. Cowan, 3/25/09].

#### 2) Committed Teachers and Staff

The teachers too were perceived to have a certain energy about them that set them apart from other teachers in the district. Everyone I interviewed was in agreement that the teachers and administration were passionate, enthusiastic, and hard working to say the least. “They’re all



working over their contractual limits,” the Principal told me during an interview, and “they don’t complain.” When hiring new teachers OPHS was sure to discuss with applicants the culture of high expectations that exist for staff, and as a result some applicants made decisions to take positions at other schools. The teachers spoke on several occasions about the importance of working outside of school and collaboratively with their teams to prepare assignments and field trips because, as the freshman Humanities teacher Mrs. Scott explained, “Our students just deserve that the curriculum be taught the way it is supposed to” [Interview, 2/17/09]. 79% of the teachers hold at least a master’s degree (Ohio Department of, 2008), and several of the teachers and the Principal either hold doctorates or have pursued doctoral studies. They are all considered to be highly trained in their subject areas as well.

But as Mr. Hart explains, there is more to it than just working hard, there is a “certain energy to it” that is hard to characterize. School had recently been cancelled due to snow days before our interview. His experience as a teacher “who comes in on a snow day” helps us to understand this energy:

There were a handful of teachers here, and what I thought was interesting, all the teachers I saw have 25 to 30 years of experience and they were here on sort of their day off, a snow day, and I just thought that... there’s not a sense of complacency. People that have 25 years experience and they’re coming in because they know they have to get prepared and they have a lot of work to do... *How do you recreate a school like this? How do you...recreate who comes in on a snow day? What if you start a school with no teachers that come in on a snow day? Then there has to be a different energy to it.* [Interview, 1/29/09]

### 3) Committed Parents

The parents also contributed to this hard to summarize quality at OPHS. The PTA was often praised and recognized for its strength and ability to “shore up” this under-resourced school. They worked hard to write and win grants to increase their budget. This allowed them to provide back-up funds for the library, theatre, the arts, chorus, and other extra programs, and they have even purchased supplies and provided labor for outdoor improvements. Their fundraising enabled them to provide a staff breakfast each month and to celebrate students that passed the OGT with a cupcake. They have also purchased textbooks in the past for entire classes and for individual students who were unable to purchase their summer reading materials.

The strength of the PTA extended beyond these more typical forms of support into a political identity they assumed in the community. A parent new to the PTA commented on the uncharacteristic involvement, “I have never seen a PTA such as is here. I cannot believe it. I mean sometimes it’s like whoa! But very politically oriented, and they actually make changes in the school. I mean, they’ll go to the school board...I’ve participated in other PTA’s but when I came here I was like WOW, they’re gonna burn the building in a minute” [Parent Focus Group, 1/6/09]. It is this “gonna burn the building” political savvy that is perceived as the difference between the OPHS PTA and other schools.

Though this is the dominant discourse and perception of parents, I found that parents were thought of in contradictory ways and that these contradictory discourses were often racialized. Upcoming sections will focus on how parents, their actions, and engagement are constructed in and through racialized discourses “colored” by whiteness.

### 4) No interscholastic sports program

The lack of interscholastic sports at OPHS was often considered a contributing factor to the focused academic environment. Participants talked at length about the perceived positive impact of the absence of interscholastic sports and how this allowed them to develop a focused academic environment. Students as well discussed both the positive effects and what they perceived as negative outcomes of not having sports in school. An upcoming section will explore this in more detail.

#### 5) Committed Students

The common perception in the media and the community was that OPHS students were extremely committed and academically focused. As the guidance counselors explained there was a maturity and worldliness that was often attributed to them. Yet similar to parents, students were often talked about in contradictory and competing frames and discourses. There was also talk about “those students” who undermined the academic climate. Moving forward we will look at how discursive constructions of academically focused students and “those students” are constructed within racialized discourses, and also how all types of students negotiate urban identity to become educational subjects on their own terms.

#### 6) Re-appropriation of NCLB policy as practice to support student achievement

Based on pre-pilot data and analysis I inferred that by offering only college preparatory courses within a culture of high expectations, OPHS appears to be re-appropriating NCLB policies in ways that undo some of the constraining effects of accountability, like “teaching to the test.” OPHS redefines accountability on its own terms through the higher standards of an all-inclusive college prep curriculum that incorporates AP and International Baccalaureate programs. As indicated by school report cards, students rise to meet this challenge.

The next two chapters will look more deeply at the practices of success and achievement as well as the effects of race on the school's ability to promote academic excellence and equity for all students.

## Ethnographic Moment

### *Salty Taco Chips with Greasy Meat and Runny Cheese: Lunch at OPHS*

*Contrary to what others have told me, the lunch room is mostly segregated by race. A table full of white kids is readily apparent. There is a minor amount of mixing, but for the most part African American students sit with other African American students, white students with white students. It's loud, but not unruly. A plasma TV in the corner is running a video about the arts high school and the anticipated Columbus Downtown High School. Students attend to heavy math books and calculators, while others are just talking.*

*Lunch is disgusting. It doesn't compare to the wide array of choices offered at the suburban schools I worked at while student teaching. There's no pizza or burger line. There's no pudding or fruit or cookies. Just some lunch ladies with paper shower caps over their hair serving salty taco chips topped with greasy meat and runny cheese sauce. They add a salad to a compartment on the tray. I change my mind about purchasing lunch and opt for my apples and some trail mix out of the vending machine.*

*Outside things are different. About 30 students sit at picnic tables in the courtyard. The tables are not segregated, but racially mixed. Are these the "cool" kids? The tables are pressed against the windows so that teachers can monitor them from inside. Three African American girls in the center of the yard talk about doing their homework. "Did you do your homework? Did you understand it? I did it, and I understand it". There's a girl walking the perimeter of the courtyard with her arm across the shoulder of a disheveled young man. She has a strange looking raccoon tale hanging out the back of her shirt. What the heck is that? There is a tall and heavy African American girl walking around the courtyard alone. She wears sneakers, jeans, and a patterned jacket. Her hair is twisted up in the back. She looks tired. I learn later that she has a three-year old son who was ill which explains why she practically falls asleep in Dr. Fisher's class later.*

*When I go back in to find the vending machine, the double doors are opened, and I see students in the parking lot. I find another world. Two Principals are monitoring. Almost all of the students out here are African American. I can probably count the white students on one hand. Students are playing basketball under several old rims on a court in the back of the lot. There are circles of chatting black girls. I overhear one girl loudly wonder who I am. Two sets of boys are playing football in the grass behind the school. I see some loners, particularly a white boy with black airwalk sneakers with bright green stripes sitting with his back against the wall.*

*I wander back inside, hit the bathroom, and stand out in the hall by Dr. Fisher's room to watch people come in from lunch. A group of "loud black girls" pass me in the hall, one cursing, voices raised.*

*[Field Notes, 10/8/08]*

## Chapter 2

### Unraveling Urban Educational Identity: The Productive Effects of Race, Culture, Sports, and Educational Research

#### *Introduction*

Unfixing urban educational identity requires an unraveling and disentangling of the histories, practices, and discourses that situate its current construction. This literature review begins to undertake a genealogy that traces and pulls apart the dominant social discourses and historical framings of race, culture, and sports that create the grid of knowledge for urban identity. Research on tracking that provides a strong critique of the perpetuation of minority overrepresentation in low-level classes, when combined with ethnographic policy studies of NCLB and race, helps frame the practices of urban education as experienced by youth within the failure of NCLB as an equity reform. The hope in unraveling is to open up the discursive field through a reflexive engagement with the failures and (im)possibilities that these literatures bear, and that through this difficult engagement other ways of reading and (re)presenting urban students might be glimpsed.

This literature review looks at how *urban student identity*, situated within *urban education* as one of many locations and points of origin, is transfixed and produced in and through social science research, multicultural education, and ethnographies of African American students and schools. I then present Daniel Yon's concept of *elusive culture* to disrupt the fixing of identity and shift my thinking to an *unfixing* of the urban subject that is open to the messiness

and complications produced when urban students are seen as both agents of education “on their own terms” and on terms constrained by discourse and power.

*Social Science Research on Race: Producing the Urban Child as Other*

Social science research has marked a proliferation of language that continues to be engaged in the American psyche when thinking about urban education and urban students. Studies originating in the 1950’s and 1960’s developed terminology such as “cultural deprivation,” “cultural disadvantage,” and later in the 1980’s “at-risk” and “underprivileged,” to explain the inequalities at hand in urban schools. No Child Left Behind utilizes the terms “disadvantaged” and “minority” to refer to student inequality. Ravitch (1983) points out that “(o)ften, though not always, the terms were used as euphemisms for the black child” (p.150).

The goal of this section is to begin to understand the trajectory of this relationship between language, race, culture, and educational research within and against a science tradition already heavily burdened by racism (Gould, 1981/1996). The studies in this section will help us begin to trace the “conditions of possibility” through which the “invention” of the *urban educational subject* is produced as other.

Concepts and theories of *child saving*, *cultural deprivation*, *culture of poverty*, and *tangle of pathology* will be interrogated here as discourses that are produced by and productive of their iterative manifestations of urban student identity. In a sense these discourses circuitously feed off one another, simultaneously satisfying the conditions for the continual representation of the urban other as defined within their constraints, fixing the limits and therefore their necessary explanatory power. Social science research has a lot to tell us about power and language and

might provide a methodological context for thinking about how to do ethical research in urban schools that is accountable to issues of race and power.

Moving forward I first present a brief historical tracing of black migration to urban centers and the socioeconomic impacts of living in these areas. Next I trace the discourses mentioned above to establish the conditions of possibility for articulations of urban students in research. Following this I review a sampling of ethnographic, case history, and narrative research on African American education that elucidates how well meaning studies work both within and against these discourses and discuss their possibilities and limits for understanding urban students. I will use Yon's theory of elusive culture to help me think my way into the aporias I experienced while attempting to study and write about urban education with a recognition that these aporias afford me the possibility of thinking about urban students differently.

*Towards a history of racial migration, representation, and urban educational identity*

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, European immigration and industrialization contributed to the expansion and growth of urban cities. The surge in population in cities and urban centers encouraged overcrowding, inadequate sanitation and urban services, and the spread of disease. Urban schooling was largely concerned with the assimilation and control of a growing white ethnic population to reduce delinquency, poverty, and crime that seemed inherent to city life (Spring, 1986/2005, p. 206-207).

Over the course of the early twentieth century, white European ethnic groups slowly became homogenized and accepted into dominant white society (Roediger, 2002). At the same time blacks were migrating to the industrial north for jobs and settling in urban areas and cities.



Paula Giddings (1984/1996) notes that between 1915 and 1920 approximately 500,000 black men and women transplanted families to fill the demand for workers in industry and domestic service in the north (p. 141).

Beginning as early as the 1930's, government home ownership programs channeled loan funding toward whites, including newly homogenized white ethnics, and away from communities of color. This gap in resources gave whites capital to move out of the cities and into predominantly white enclaves. It depleted resources needed to improve urban housing and economies and left black Americans with limited opportunities for community investment and improvement. As a result of "white flight" urban areas became predominantly black and poor. Federal highway programs destroyed urban housing to connect the suburbs, and urban renewal and gentrification initiatives actually displaced people of color into further segregated and isolated pockets (Lipsitz, 1998). This manifestation of racially impacted social and economic forces produced the conditions through which urban centers came to be seen and experienced as predominantly black and poor.

### *The Discourse of Childsaving*

Beth Blue Swadener (1995) explains that US "childdaving" social policy has been heavily connected with urban growth and development and arguably has roots as far back as the late 1700's, identifying particular groups of children (i.e. children with handicaps and diseases, orphans, indigents, delinquents, the abused and neglected) as requiring social concern and responsibility. Swadener locates discourses of risk and disadvantage across disciplines of medicine, the social sciences, education, public policy, economics and demography. Discourses

of disadvantage as perpetuated in these disciplines were a part of urban identity construction and childsaving throughout history (p. 17-28).

Luis Laosa (as quoted in Swadener, 1995), argues that the identification of children along lines of race as ‘at risk’ is a recent phenomenon. We can see this shift in discourse as connected in part to the transformation of urban centers from “white to black” that was produced through black migration and white flight. With the demographic shift of urban centers from “white to black” childsaving discourses of disadvantage also shifted referential treatment from white and therefore de-raced children, to the black child, now located in the urban city. In and through these shifts childsaving discourses came to be articulations of concern for urban, African American youth, constructing new limits of representation and processes of othering.

*Discourses of Cultural Deprivation, Culture of Poverty, and Cultural Pathology*

Social science research in education engaged this articulation, promotion, and perpetuation of concerns for the urban black child. Deficit discourses of cultural deprivation, cultural poverty, and risk were put in direct conversation with understandings of educational achievement, interjecting a particular formation of an urban educational identity into the collective American lexicon that bound together underachievement with African American culture.

Recalling *Brown vs. Board of Education*, plaintiffs built a portion of the case on social science research into the effects of state-imposed racial segregation on black children. The evidence took a double pronged approach arguing, 1) against scientific racism, making the case that there were no scientific rationales for the classification of children by race, and 2) that black children had been harmed by poverty, racism, and the absence of interracial contact (Ravitch,

1983, p. 126). While the arguments made were instrumental in bringing about the *Brown* decision, the latter half of the argument set the stage for urban education research and its focus on the cultural deprivation of black children.

Cultural deprivation research argued that poverty and racial prejudice impaired the ability to learn, and that schools were ineffective in adapting methods to the needs of these students. Social scientists argued the root problem to be the home environments of students that did not transmit the cultural knowledge necessary for school success (Ravitch, 1983, p. 152). One of the most influential educational studies was a study published in 1966 by James Coleman entitled *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, also referred to as “The Coleman Report.” The major findings of the report asserted that 1) most students attended schools where the majority of pupils were of the same race, 2) white schools did have advantages in physical resources, but differences were less than anticipated, 3) the academic achievement of black students was typically anywhere from 1-5 years behind whites depending on year in schools, 4) achievement was related to student’s family background rather than school quality, and 5) next to family background, social composition of the school and student’s sense of control over the environment were important factors in success (Ravitch, 1983, p. 168-169). Through these findings lagging achievement in black schools came to be equated with racial isolation, family background, and social composition.

What followed this report and the evidence presented in *Brown* was a discursive stigmatization of black schools, black families, and black culture. Though reports like Coleman’s fueled the integration movement, the coupling of integration and the notion that achievement was more connected to family background than school quality, “actually heightened

the stigma attached to schools attended by minority pupils...” and affirmed that “minority neighborhoods were inferior no matter what their resources or programs” (Ravitch, 1983, p. 173). Racial isolation became identified as the structural problematic that bred cultural deprivation. The power/knowledge effects of these findings articulated *underachievement* with blackness and *achievement* to whiteness. Underachievement became a mark of the educational other. It simultaneously uncoupled student achievement from institutional advantage and school quality.

Forming a response to the cultural deprivation model, anthropologist Oscar Lewis constructed the culture of poverty model as “a counterdiscourse to notions of familial instability and disorganization,” like those notions presented in cultural deprivation theories, “as well as an alternative to biological notions of race and poverty” (Gonzalez, 2004, p. 20). The culture of poverty was assigned a series of traits engendered by the poor that came to be justifications for the academic failure of poor children. Gonzalez argues that “(t)he idea that poor students were shaped by a culture of poverty that was considered to be antithetical to the deferred gratification inherent in school achievement was in large part responsible for the development of cultural deficit models of schooling” (p. 20). Through these lines of logic the cultures of poor and minority students also came to be targeted as the cause of their own educational failure. Rather than serving as a discursive intervention, discourses of cultural deprivation retrace the limits of urban identity, re-satisfy its conditions, and re-substantiate the necessity of the urban other in education.

Another attempt at intervention that was productive of and produced by these discourses is probably the more oft-cited piece of research on the culture of poverty, *The Negro Family: The*

*Case for National Action* (1965). Published by the Office of Policy Planning and Research at the US Department of Labor, it is also referred to as the “Moynihan Report.” Spearheaded by then Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan to draw national attention to the War on Poverty, this report argued that “the fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community” and “of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family” (p. 5). Defined as a matriarchal family structure, it was attributed with the breakdown of urban centers, the dissolution of Negro marriages, the rate of illegitimate births, increased welfare dependency, and an entire “tangle of pathology” blamed for the failure of its youth. The report drew a great deal of fire from the black community, and no one was more surprised than Moynihan who felt he made a painstaking attempt to be racially sensitive and objective (Giddings, 1984/1996, p. 327-328).

Part of the reason for tracing the discourses and conditions that make possible a particular way of seeing urban educational identity is to establish a context for the current representations of urban students and schools. Urban identity formation appears to be contingent upon historic, racial, economic, and social forces that have created the context, or grid of knowledge, fomenting the production of urban student identity as black, poor, and culturally disadvantaged. *Brown* brought race to the forefront of educational research and US consciousness in new ways, and social science research worked within and against discursive constructions of urban identity in telling ways. Simultaneously the term “culture” has worked at the interstices of race and poverty and slowly come to stand in for these. It has permitted the production of referents like urban, inner city, disadvantaged, underprivileged, and at-risk which elide race into culture and has facilitated tacit avoidance of race-specific or racialized issues.

In the current moment the words “urban” and “high poverty,” signifiers for OPHS, also appear to stand in for race. Delineating OPHS as an urban school both identifies it innocuously as a school with specific issues related to its city location, and it simultaneously capitalizes on the hidden discourse of race so tightly tied to historical urban representations. As demonstrated here, despite its best intentions to be otherwise, social research and policy have accumulated their own “troubled legacy” of blaming African American culture for inequality. How has ethnographic, case history, and narrative research in education attempted to respond to the creation of this “tangle of pathology” inherent in social policy and research? The next section reviews qualitative studies of education that focus on African American students.

#### *Qualitative studies of African American education*

Many qualitative studies in education have responded to the representations of urban students and achievement generated through cultural lenses. By no means exhaustive, this next section looks at ethnographic studies of predominantly black schools and communities and studies in the subfield of multicultural education that explicitly rise to the challenge of addressing issues of race, poverty, and inequality in schools<sup>12</sup>. Most of these studies insert

---

<sup>12</sup> Due to time and space I limited my literature review to the most prominent and well-known studies that interrogate and theorize the direct relationship between African American culture and teaching and learning. I reviewed, but did not include studies (such as Adams, 1997; Delpit, 1995; Hayward, 2000; Pedroni, 2007; Seller & Weis, 1997; Siddle Walker, 1993; Wilson, 1996/1997) that were not explicitly studying the relationship between race, culture, and education.

themselves directly into discursive frameworks of cultural inferiority to serve as disruptions and critiques. Those cited here are all well-meaning, but recent critiques have highlighted the effects of *some of these studies* in asserting identities and subject positions for African American students (and other students of color) that continue to engender cultural inferiority as a trait.

*Ethnographic studies of predominantly Black schools and communities*

In the early 1980's John Ogbu became one of the foremost critics of cultural difference theory. He criticized educational anthropologists for producing decontextualized "mismatch" studies of cultural practice that ignored the ecological and historical dimensions of culture. Concerned with minority education, his studies set out to explain the variation in school performance among minority groups and how a group's incorporation in the dominant society and relative social position predicted and explained school performance (Perry, 2003, p. 58-59).

His ethnographic study of a Stockton, California community generated a set of conceptual explanations for the relative failure of African American students versus the academic success of immigrant minorities. His main mode of comparison was between caste-like or involuntary minorities, those incorporated into American society involuntarily through slavery and conquest, and autonomous or immigrant minorities, those entering American society voluntarily. He located the African American community within an *oppositional identity system* which shares a collective identity predicated on a history of resistance to subordination and exploitation. This oppositional identity is maintained through an *oppositional cultural system* of deviant behaviors and *cultural inversion* practices that define those behaviors appropriate to African American identity against white society (Ogbu, 1974, 1987).

In *The Next Generation* (1974) he argues that “the high proportion of school failures among subordinate minorities (involuntary) is both a reaction and an adaptation to the limited opportunity available to them to benefit from education” (p. 12) and these adaptations cannot be understood without questioning the historical foundation of school failure (p. 3). According to Ogbu, within a historical context of racism and discrimination, school failure is understood as an adaptation to the failure of US society to grant equitable opportunities to educated involuntary minorities. As a result, the adult generation passes on, consciously or unconsciously, a poor attitude toward academic engagement and creates a *low effort syndrome* in students that discourages academic energy. Accompanied by an expectation that education is useless for getting ahead, Ogbu argues that it is not that students fail because they cannot do the work, but “because they do not even try to do they work” (p. 97). He therefore attempts to escape cultural deprivation models for failure by providing a historical, psychological, and social explanation of structural forces that shape cultural difference specific to African Americans as an involuntary minority group.

Based on this study, his response to equity and the question of how best to compensate for the failure of schools to educate minority students is to expand the definition of equal educational opportunity to encompass both efforts to build equitable learning conditions and also efforts to provide opportunity after education. “Equal educational opportunity, therefore refers to both equal favorable learning conditions for all children and to the equal enjoyment of the benefits or rewards of education by individuals and segments of the society according to their educational achievement” (p. 258). Over time he hoped that effort will increase as educational opportunity becomes a social reality.



Theresa Perry (2003) argues that though Ogbu should be commended for bringing history to the center of his analysis, his theoretical model contains a serious flaw in relation to the history of African American education. Like educational historian James Anderson (2007, 2006, 2004, 1997), Perry endeavors to resuscitate African American educational history and its development of education for freedom, citizenship, and leadership. She finds problematic Ogbu's definition of African American culture as residing in a purely oppositional framework, and also his failure to recognize the existence of a historically rooted African American academic tradition. As she explains,

What is deeply problematic is Ogbu's reading, knowledge, and interpretation of African American social and educational history and how it has influenced contemporary attitudes. There is simply no evidence to support the claim that African Americans historically developed a deep distrust of school and school people. Ogbu could not have made the assertion that African Americans have not developed an academic tradition if he had known of African Americans' epic historical struggle for literacy and educational opportunity... (p. 62).

According to Perry, Ogbu's historical perspective and its focus on the history of oppression loses sight of the significance of education for freedom for African Americans. I add that though he set out to stand in opposition to negative models of cultural difference, Ogbu's analysis falls short in the sense that it reinforces the perception of African American students as existing within a culture deprived of educational legacy.

*Blacked Out: Dilemmas of Race, Identity, and Success at Capital High* (Fordham, 1996) is an ethnographic study of academic success in a predominantly black high school. Fordham's

four-year study took place at Capital High, a 99% black school located in a historically black district of Washington D.C. Building on of Ogbu's conceptualization of African American oppositional cultural frameworks, Fordham is most well-known for explaining black students' failure and aversion to academic achievement as a refusal of "acting white". "Acting white" at Capital High meant "representing the 'Other' in the presence of black people" (p. 22), upholding the system of white power, a deflection of identity, an impersonation, and the inevitable oppression of the black self (1999, p. 279). Fordham further defines it as "...a metaphor for power relationships that addresses the historical exclusion of Black Americans from the core of US life through the institutionalization of what the larger society unabashedly terms "all-American norms" (Fordham, 1999, p. 279). "Acting white" serves as an oppositional response to the cognitive dissonance created by attempting to live effectively within a white culture of oppression (p. 48). Fordham conceives of "successful failure" (1999, p. 280) as a strategy of active resistance and avoidance of academic success used by students to retain a sense of power, agency, and control over identity. Though parents in Fordham's study taught their children the value of education to resist society's low expectations of blacks, students were not achieving (p. 39-40). She was concerned with changing student peer culture so that academic achievement would be seen as a part of black student identity.

In comparison to John Ogbu's failure to recognize the educational heritage of African Americans, Fordham is troubled by the failure of parents' beliefs in the value of schooling, and the long history attached to it, to translate into academic success for students. Perry's criticism of "acting white" argues that rather than attributing low achievement to an oppositional cultural framework and peer culture, Fordham's data could have also strongly supported the claim that

the culture and organization of Capital High required students as achievers to distance themselves from African American culture and feel as if they were in the process becoming “white” (p. 62). I argue that by locating the responsibility for failure in the hands of black student culture, Fordham is also perpetuating the re-affirmation of the dichotomy between black as underachievement and white as achievement, this time through a lens that emphasizes the black student’s psychologically and socially oppositional nature to success as a white behavior.

The research of Ogbu and Fordham are extremely significant contributions to the understanding of black student culture, the black community, and the ways in which particular groups see themselves as actors in educational systems. They provide a framework for conducting culturally specific ethnographic studies that interrogate the role that social history plays in the development of culture, community, and educational success. I want to emphasize though that despite their intentions to promote African American education, both studies serve to constrain and delimit African American student identity by reinforcing the notions of cultural opposition, deprivation, and underachievement as specific to African American student experiences of schooling. These studies further emphasize the need for work that is attentive to history, power relations, and discourse in seeking to disrupt and reconceptualize our understandings of academic achievement for African Americans, and also other students of color.

#### *Studies in Multicultural Education*

Daniel Yon (1999) identifies three pedagogical positions relating to multiculturalism and anti-racism in education. He delineates multiculturalism based on its tendency towards a focus on cultural diversity and difference between groups; antiracism is different from multiculturalism

in the sense that it focuses more on life chances and institutional barriers as opposed to identity specific cultural practices and experiences; the third position borrows from both and has generated what he labels as a “new” or “critical” multiculturalism (p. 624). The following two studies fall under the first category of multiculturalism by using the recognition and valuation of difference between groups to disrupt negative cultural models.

Shirley Brice Heath’s (1983) *Ways with words: language, life, and work in communities and classrooms* is the result of a ten-year ethnographic study of language and communication and the implications of desegregation on racially integrated classrooms in a small community located in the Piedmont Carolinas. The study focuses on the communication styles that Trackton and Roadville students brought to school, and how the learning of these styles in preschool and home environments impacted their ability to acquire the dominant language structures for work and school (p. 2). Trackton, a predominantly African American community, and Roadville, a predominantly white community, were compared with the Townspeople, middle class black and white locals who had the most familiarity with the dominant language structure of the community.

As a study of unequal opportunity, Heath is concerned with “leveling the field” and building on the skills that Trackton students bring to learning. Heath argues that the issue is not that Trackton children come to school without the necessary skills, but that the process of socialization and language development before school starts them at a different place. Their well-developed contextualization abilities are not compatible with the schools use of decontextualization as a foundation for reading and writing. Their “failure” can be attributed to this misalignment or “mismatch,” and Heath argues recognizing this difference can be used to

restructure curriculum to capitalize on students' capabilities and equalize their learning opportunities (p. 353).

History is important to Heath's study. She emphasizes that the differences that are comparatively exhibited between Trackton and Roadville residents should not be contributed to race, but specifically to the historical forces that have shaped their uses of language. She argues that language use is "dependent on the ways in which each community structured their families, defined the roles that community members could assume, and played out their concepts of childhood that guided child socialization...any reader who tries to explain the community contrasts on the basis of race will miss the central point of the focus on culture as learned behavior and on language habits as part of shared learning" (p. 11).

This study takes a multicultural approach, recognizing the importance and value of intergroup cultural skills and their role in the classroom. Heath rejects biological or scientific conceptions of race and emphasizes the roll of social history on the development of black cultural community. She disrupts models of inferiority and deprivation by identifying the language skills of Trackton students that are important to learning dominant communication styles and locates the responsibility of utilizing these skills with the schools.

*The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (Ladon-Billings, 1994) is based on a case study of successful teachers of African American students and their teaching practices. Ladson-Billings defines and creates a blueprint for "culturally relevant teaching" that she hopes "will find broad applicability and be seen as useful for teaching students of any race or ethnicity" (p. 14). Culturally relevant teaching engenders a repertoire of practices and understandings, but in general she articulates its primary aim "to assist in the development of

a ‘relevant black personality’ that allows African American students to choose academic excellence yet still identify with African and African American culture” (p. 17).

Her study is a critically theorized response to negative cultural explanations for school failure. She argues that though the language of deprivation changed by the 1980’s, the negative connotations continued to explain low academic achievement as resting with the child, the family, or the community. Remedial interventions continued to serve as attempts to help students compensate for their inherent deficiencies, life of poverty, and lack of opportunity. She believes that it is necessary to recognize African Americans as a distinct cultural, not racial, group and the distinct educational needs of African American children as a part of this group (p. 9). She is also concerned with what she sees as the association between academic achievement and loss of African American identity and the importance of creating positive experiences with academic achievement that affirm identity (p. 11).

Like *Ways with Words*, *Dreamkeepers* acknowledges a distinctive set of culturally relevant skills that African American students specifically bring to the classrooms and transfers the responsibility of academic success to schools and teachers. What distinguishes Ladson-Billings is her concern for recuperating African American student identity and building a culturally affirming Afrocentric curriculum, but both she and Heath serve as strong critiques of cultural deprivation models for educational failure by privileging cultural difference.

Offering a critique of multiculturalism in education and research, Daniel Yon (1999) argues that one of the dangers of multiculturalism is its turn toward a rigid fixity and assertion of group and community as stable, bounded, and easily represented. Both Heath and Ladson Billings assert African American culture as bounded by a set of language rules, customs,

knowledge beliefs, and teaching practices that define black community, identity, and therefore appropriate schooling. He argues that this kind of thinking weakly, if at all, recognizes the role of power in defining and policing the boundaries of cultural identity. Without a reflexive critique, multiculturalism then privileges a “discourse of inclusivity... that may run contrary to the more contradictory and messy ways by which culture is lived” (p. 625). Yon finds this dominant trope of culture and its constraint on representation at work in multiculturalism problematic for the field of educational research (p. 624).

My study might fit within what Yon refers to as the “new” in multicultural and anti-racist studies. I would like to trouble the idea of the “new,” and argue that the work I do here harbors both the tensions and limits of work on race, and though critical it offers no solution. I try to sit uncomfortably at the interstices of multicultural education and anti-racist projects, and take into the folds of my methodology the problematics of thinking and doing race work simultaneously. Wrestling with productions of racialized identity by being attentive to both the limits and possibilities is the (not)new, but maybe using poststructural theory with Critical Race Theory is a different way of moving forward. Yon’s theory of elusive culture as a response to “the problem of culture” in research signals a different approach to qualitative studies of race and schooling.

*A different approach to qualitative studies of race and schooling*

Daniel Yon’s book, *Elusive Culture: Schooling, Race, and Identity in Global Times* (2000) is an ethnography of how race, culture, and identity are understood by urban youth. “The problem of culture,” as Daniel Yon (1999) suggests, is haunted by its own ghost. In spite of the “crisis of representation,” “culture” continues to stand in for fixed identities, knowable

properties, and a distinct way of being and seeing that belongs to a particular group of people, bound somehow by lived experience. Yon posits the concept of *elusive culture* as a way to divest oneself from the dominant trope of culture to see it more significantly as an on-going process that has the capacity to exceed and complicate what is considered to be “given” and “known” (p. 4-5). He situates race as a product of discourse fluidly constructed through relations of knowledge and power that are both historically and structurally (macro) and locally and specifically (micro) contingent. This gives way to the possibility to see race as a relational experience as opposed to a phenotypically driven and commonly held phenomenon (p. 131).

Elusive culture for Yon is a question of becoming and not just being (p. 625). This moves the direction of analysis toward thinking about not only how identity is formed, but also how students are subjects in the making, remaking, and resisting of identity. Culture then is revised as both a product and a process (p. 626), discursively situated within the grid of power and knowledge, but permeable to the complicated ways students live their lives. Yon’s conception of race and culture as elusive and fluid lends itself well to thinking about how students are agents in refashioning urban educational identity on their own terms.

Because urban education identifies its populations as predominantly students of color and/or of poverty living in city settings, it is important to understand how representations of urban student identity are also entangled with the discourse of sports as integral to high school achievement in urban schools.



### *Towards a History of Interscholastic High School Sports in the US*

More so than not, sports is a standardized, normalized, and unquestioned part of the US high school experience, not only for students, but for parents and community. During the course of interviews at OPHS students, teachers, parents, and administrators talked at length about the perceived benefits of not having an interscholastic sports program at their school. These comments forced me to give attention to some very different questions in terms of thinking about how sports and schooling have developed a naturalized relationship and the role of this relationship in producing culturally constructed expectations for secondary education. Fredrick Erickson (1986) encourages us to make the familiar strange. Sport as a necessary part of the high school curriculum is so familiar, but maybe this taken-for-granted notion is rather strange and deserves some troubling. This next section will begin to draw connections between the history of the US high school, the development of interscholastic sports in secondary education, and the role of sports in urban education. Moving forward it might be helpful to keep the following questions in mind: What historically situated cultural, social, and political contexts have made it possible for competitive sports to be a normative and taken-for-granted part of the US educational experience? What are the effects of untying the tangled laces of sports and schooling? What is the connection between sports, urban schooling, and academic success?

#### *The US high school and interscholastic sports*

Anthony Laker (2002) asserts that sport and schooling form an inevitable and symbiotic link in culture. Sport historians and sociologists have produced a moderate literature on the history of US sport and physical education (PE), with limited attention to the rise of competitive interscholastic high school sports. These historical discussions of sports and schooling tend to

blur interscholastic sports into PE, often defining interscholastic sports as an assumed and required part of the PE curriculum (See Baker, 2007; Coakley and Donnelly, 1999; Dunning, 1999; Miracle & Rees, 1994; Rader, 1999; Shepard and Jamerson, 1953; Welch, 1996; Zeigler, 2005).

Rather than a naturalized and historically static relationship, what appear in these accounts are what Foucault would refer to as historically and culturally situated “conditions of possibility” (1970, p. xxii) that create the context within which the US is able to conceive of sports and schooling as an inseparable pair. I would like to begin to untie this knot of discursively entangled conceptions of gender and masculinity, Americanization, industrialization, and democracy, among others that do the work of producing the idea of interscholastic sports as natural, integral, and even imperative to the public school mission.

#### *Untying the knot: Towards a history of interscholastic sports*

According to Joel Spring (1986/2005, p. 91), the first public high school opened in Boston in 1821 as an alternative to the established private academy system already in existence. The growth of the public high school was intimately tied to the growth of urban centers, and began to originate as an extension of the public elementary school. During the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as urban cities and centers grew due to immigration and industrialization, the public high school replaced the academy as the leading secondary institution (Spring, p. 206-207).

Even though the public generally accepted the idea of public financial support for the common elementary school, most were severely opposed to publicly funding high schools. Prior to 1850, Karier explains that it was difficult to identify youth as separate from the adult culture. Due to economic conditions, youth were rapidly absorbed into the frontier labor force, and at a time of limited or lax compulsory schooling laws, public high schools were not well attended.

With the expectation that high schools would always be poorly attended and that the classical high school curriculum was more of benefit to the individual rather than society as a whole, the public high school seemed like a luxury that did not deserve public support (Karier, 1967/1986, p. 68-71). But the effects of immigration, industrialization, and black migration on US society transformed the high school, like the common elementary school, into an agency of reform and mechanism of social control. By 1923, compulsory schooling laws were being successfully implemented on a nationwide scale (Tyack, 1993, p. 8-15). Between 1870 and 1940 the high school population increased 90 times (Karier, 1967/1986, p. 72-74).

An important contributor to the formal installation of sports into the US high school was the growth of community-based sports programs and physical education curriculums in the public elementary school. As schools came to serve as rehabilitative sites for urban children, educators saw children's play as another method of urban reform that could extend the socializing influence of the school beyond its walls and into the after-school time dominated by home and environment. In 1903 in Chicago the playground movement funded the building of 10 parks with sandlots, playgrounds, field houses and gymnasiums. Professional physical educators were hired and a new system of organized athletic leagues was developed. This form of recreation organized by municipal governments eventually proved unable to extend their control over youth and spare time activities. This seems to be where public school athletics succeeded in taking over the social reform mission and formalizing control over youth activities. In 1903, Dr. Luther Gulick was instrumental in founding New York City's Public School Athletic League (PSAL), which promoted sports teams and divided schools into districts for competition. By 1910 the PSAL concept of faculty-directed athletics had been accepted by 17 other cities, and

total PSAL membership grew to be over 150,000 participants (Spring, 1986/2005, p. 219-221; Welch, 1996).

Sport historians concur that with the early advent of public schools the educational system was opposed to the idea of a sport and physical education program as part of the schooling experience. According to Davanzo (1991), as competitive sports gained more popular acceptance after the Civil War, high school students, predominantly male, began to participate in their own unofficial sporting events by the early 1900's. Students formed unofficial teams, chose captains, and elected managers to arrange games between high schools. Sports were not supported by administration or teachers, and as unmonitored interscholastic sports grew through 1910, it drew a great deal of criticism. The malignant growth of gambling, older, non-high school participants, and drugs, along with severe sports-related injuries and deaths were among the gravest concerns. The demand for high school sports rose from male student initiative which eventually required adults to step in and eliminate the abuses to preserve what they considered to be the moral image of the public school. As the public school removed control from students and assumed formal responsibility, athletic programs quickly spread. Rader (1999) adds that by 1923 only three states were without statewide interscholastic sport organizations.

Much of the history on the rise of interscholastic sports discusses the production of sports in schools and society within a gendered construction of the need for sport to recuperate the lost sense of masculinity that resulted from industrialization, country to city migration, compulsory schooling, and war. Rader asserts that one socio-cultural shift that led to the development of "boys' sports" and the "boy workers" (i.e. YMCA, Boy Scouts) was the shift in participation of adolescents from the labor economy to compulsory schooling. Sport became situated as a forum to transmit manliness and cultivate courage and perseverance.

Shepard and Jamerson (1953) suggest that development of athletics was a revolt against formal discipline and curriculum in schools. Some progressive educators in the comprehensive school movement held beliefs similar to those of the boy workers and argued that activity, such as sports, was a far more valuable way to learn than through a traditional curriculum. They advocated for high school sports as a way to curb adolescent sexuality, control rebellion, and encourage attendance.

Athletics was seen as a way to retain a disaffected student body resistant to compulsory education. Rader states that most students attended school largely out of parental or legal compulsion, and rarely found adequate means of identification with the high school, “But varsity sports could rally the student body in a common cause...” (1999, p. 111). He also admits that this investment of school and community in interscholastic sport as a means of student engagement tended to subvert the ideals of the comprehensive high school (p. 112). Athletic success came to be glorified over academic achievement as means to get students in attendance with hopes that learning would follow.

Paula Welch’s (1996) account of sports and PE in the US demonstrates that war and military training also have a historical entanglement with interscholastic sports. She explains that Americans began to engage in *organized sports* in the late 1860’s and 1870’s. Sport was a part of Civil War life for soldiers as a form of combat training and entertainment. They encouraged the continuation of this form of activity in American culture once the war ended. As sports became a part of American life, government officials came to see athletics as a training ground for the military. The number of men rejected from the WWI draft for health and fitness reasons contributed to a post-war consciousness that strengthened the ideological connection between physical fitness, competitive sports, contact sports in particular, and training for war.

Athletics imbued with a sense of democratic purpose took on another use as a tool for Americanization. Proponents argued that sports could reduce juvenile delinquency in immigrant youth and help them adapt to and internalize US culture (Radar, 1999). Athletics was utilized to transmit a sanctioned and homogenized American sense of identity, purpose, and collective goals to the immigrant other. Sports as cultural domination was further masked by the democratic notion of “athletics for all” (Zeigler, 2005) that began to take hold in the 1920’s and 1930’s which glorified sport as a cultural equalizer.

These discourses pieced together from textbook accounts of sport and physical education form a more complicated picture of sports and schooling. Interscholastic sports becomes what Foucault might call a “discursive formation” (Foucault) produced and producing of competitive high school sports as a necessary and normalized curricular practice. Once we begin to interrogate the history of sports in schooling we begin to see a practice of culture that does other kinds of work, a practice that functions to overcompensate for the public rejection of compulsory schooling, to preserve and transmit the US prescription masculinity, and to serve as a tool of assimilation of the immigrant other at a time historically when this influx of new cultures was perceived as a threat to “American” identity. Rather than taken-for-granted, natural, and inextricably tied this coupling of sports and schooling is contingent upon a historical set of moments, fears, and tensions in the US.

Urban educational identity is also invested with a belief that sports are integral to motivating students and getting them to college. It is important to understand how representations of urban student identity are also entangled with the discourse of sports as integral to high school achievement in urban schools.

### *Sports, academic achievement, and urban education*

Another piece of the historical context for this relationship between competitive sports and schooling has been the assumed positive impact of sports on student achievement. Largely absent from these accounts are discussions of race, specifically the role of sports in African American, Native American, and Latino American education during these times; yet in the contemporary moment sports is ascribed particular importance as to its influence on academic achievement and opportunity for urban youth, particularly students of color. Melnick, Sabo, & Vanfossen (1992) argue that though there has been a strong interest in and hundreds of studies on the social and educational effects of interscholastic sports, we still do not understand the impact of sports on students. More specifically, though there are strong beliefs in the important role sports plays in the lives of minority youths, there have been limited studies on the effects of sports on students of color. The implications of these findings for thinking about the relationship between sports and urban student success have yet to be thoroughly interrogated.

The following section compares both confirming and negative case studies of the role of interscholastic sport participation on various facets of school success, and will also look at the treatment of race and gender and the effects of these indicators on study findings. It will be used to begin thinking about the current context within which sports and perceptions of urban student success are shaped and produced.

### *Quantitative studies of interscholastic sports and school success*

According to Naomi Fejgin (1994), social science research has predominantly theorized the social significance of high school sports within two frameworks: developmental theory, which emphasizes the positive character building effects of athletic participation, and zero-sum

or conflict theory which emphasizes the negative potential of sports in diverting time and energy away from academics. Researchers from competing perspectives have often used the same data sets to offer competing analysis within this fixed either/or binary of sports as contributing to success or failure. Fejgin asserts the vast range of studies in this area contain serious methodological flaws, are based on old data sets, and are therefore inconclusive (p. 212). It is from this position that recent researchers have attempted to address these limitations, generate new data sets, and make more conclusive arguments.

While some studies have been cautious in attributing causality to sport participation as a predictive indicator, other studies have drawn more aggressive conclusions. Bonnie Barber and Jacquelynne Eccles (Barber, Eccles, Stone, 2001; Eccles, & Barber, 1999) conducted a now highly cited longitudinal study of the effect of identity choice and pro-social behavior on various aspects of adolescent development. They conclude that identity choice, like that of jock, athlete, or brain, were predictive of patterns of substance abuse, educational and occupational attainment, and psychological adjustment. They found that involvement in team sports was a positive predictor for liking school, higher than expected GPA, full-time college enrollment and attendance, and occupational attainment, but they also found that students involved in team sports were more likely to be involved in risky behaviors like drinking. Dobosz & Beaty (1999) similarly found that athletic participation increases the potential ability for student leadership and produces higher levels of self esteem. The data for these studies were comprised mainly of students of white European descent, and this homogeneity challenges the application of these findings. If these studies take differences like race, class, and gender into account, do the



findings continue to hold or does it create a more complicated critique of social perceptions of sports and academic success?

Studies that do take race and gender into account have more varied and nuanced results. Fejgin (1994) confirmed that sport participation is not an equally distributed opportunity across groups (p. 218). Males were shown to participate in sports more than females, students from higher socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds more than students from lower SES backgrounds, private and catholic schools more than public schools, suburban schools more than urban schools, smaller schools more than larger schools (p. 220). Race was not determined by Fejgin to be a statistically significant indicator, Still, Fejgin permits a “cautious causal interpretation” (p. 218) of the positive impact of sports on grades, self-concept, educational aspirations, and disciplinary problems, but the finding of unequal distribution is significant for rethinking the perceived positive impact of sports on urban students.

Will Jordan’s (1999) study of African American males and the effect of sport participation on engagement and achievement further complicates the unequal distribution of sport participation. His findings indicate that high percentages of high school students do not participate in sports, with African Americans participating the least with no more than 18% of the sample in team or individual sports. He questions the role of self-selection and factors that might determine sport participation.

Miller et al. (2005) argue that sport participation studies cannot universally or causally contribute positive academic outcomes to sports, because research has demonstrated that athletes from higher SES backgrounds and those with higher grades tend to self-select into sports programs. Their study attempted to control for the tendency of “good” students to self-select

into sports. It suggests that the finding that sports participation predicts positive academic outcomes may not be as robust as studies have attempted to show, and that results should be considered in relation to gender and race. Their findings show that female athletes reported higher grades than female non-athletes, while male athletes showed lower grades than their counterparts. Black “jocks” reported lower grades than non-black jocks, though jock identity had not effected the grades of white students. Athletic participation was also not a significant predictor of misconduct. Their findings suggest that the impact of sport participation on academic outcomes “appear to be contingent upon the gender and race of the adolescent” (p. 187), and that rather than demonstrating a relationship between sports and achievement as monolithic, they indicate that it may prove to be more selective and context-specific in determining its effects.

Melnick, Sabo, & Vanfossen (1992), responding to the race gap focused on the effects of interscholastic sport participation on African American and Hispanic youth. Their review of previous studies shows that research on black male youth produced mixed results; sport participation seemed to have a positive effect on educational aspirations, college enrollment, and graduation for this group, but showed mixed effects on grades, and no effect on membership in leading crowds, choice of high school program, or occupational status as other studies have attributed. For black female youth findings were either mixed or negative in all areas; and at the time of this publication Hispanic youth and athletic participation had not been directly studied. The results of their study confirm Miller et al’s assertion that sport participation cannot be seen as having a universal or monolithic effect on achievement. Their data proved to be contingent on group variation across combinations of race, gender, or enrollment in urban, rural, or suburban

schools. In sum, their study demonstrates that “sports participants were more likely to see themselves as popular...These benefits accrued to girls and boys, and to blacks and Hispanics alike. However, there were few effects of sport participation on grade point average, achievement test scores, dropout rates or educational expectations” (Discussion and Conclusions section, ¶ 1). Based on a review of the research and their follow-up study, they draw a significant conclusion as it relates to the relationship between minority students and athletic participation, stating that

It is clear...that the potential impact of high school athletic participation on life opportunities of minority youth has been overestimated. To ascribe to sport more influence than these findings suggest is to run the risk of oversimplifying and overstating the educational effects of interscholastic athletic participation” (Discussion and Conclusions section, ¶ 10).

These studies raise questions regarding the link between sports and urban student success. Eccles & Barber (1999) and Barber, Eccles, & Stone (2001) provide support for the assertion of the monolithic value of sport participation on urban student success. Studies that begin to account for differences like SES, gender, and/or race produce more complicated findings that demonstrate how context-specific and materially weighted the affects of sports may be on all students. At what historical moments did sports become implicated in representations of minority youth and urban education? How might the relationship between sports and schooling be interrogated within the racialized contexts?

*Sport, race, and representation*

In *The Last Shot: City Streets, Basketball Dreams* (1994/2004) Darcy Frey chronicles the lives of four high school basketball players at Lincoln High, an overcrowded predominantly black high school in the Coney Island projects. From most perspectives a journalistic account, Frey describes Lincoln High as a school suffering the general malaise perceived of as common to most urban schools - violence, drugs, prostitution, poverty, and inadequate educational opportunity. Hitting the glass ceiling after graduation, most students stay in the neighborhood taking low paying jobs no better than those of their parents, if they have jobs at all. With such dire prospects, Frey speculates that “the opportunities presented to those kids who make the school’s varsity basketball team are stunningly vast – a door in a constricted room suddenly flung open on the wider world” (p. 15). Lincoln has a strong reputation as one of New York’s best public school teams, and each year college recruitment coaches descend on Lincoln holding out the possibility for four-year athletic scholarships to prestigious schools. With particular optimism Frey seems to believe that basketball gives these kids a rare chance, “...so rare under any circumstances, but especially rare in a place like Coney Island – to change irrevocably the course of their lives just as they are coming into adulthood” (p. 17). In *The Last Shot* we see an example of the “overestimated” perception of the importance of sports for minority youth.

For the players, grades and SAT scores are intricately connected to making this dream a reality. Eligibility for participation in sports is a strong driver of academics; one player in this story is a test score away from losing his. Others are just above the 70% average and the 700 SAT combined score to be eligible for recruitment into division one college sports (p. 19-24). Frey’s book plays well into some of the predominant assumptions about African American students, sports, and academics. His portrayal exists within and produces the discourses of

cultural deprivation, the absence of an urban educational history for students of color, and the notion that sports is a necessary mechanism of control and academic acculturation for urban students. By constructing urban youth as academically deficient, disadvantaged, and intellectually disinterested, sports are put to work to fill these deficiencies – to curtail delinquent behavior, to encourage attendance and discourage dropping out, to provide motivation for academic achievement, to provide access to college, etc. Interscholastic sports in urban school contexts continue to function as a formation that does specific work in relation to race, work that delimits the perceivable possibilities for seeing public schools and urban students as capable of success on their own terms.

John Hoberman (1997) argues that black athleticism is a form of entrapment that stymies the potential for addressing relevant social issues around race. In *Darwin's Athletes: How Sport has damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race*, Hoberman interrogates how athleticism has come to stand in for black intelligence and why physical prowess has substituted verbal and intellectual skills as black traits of intelligence. He theorizes that “traumatic aspects of African American experience have prompted black people to regard athletic proficiency as a comprehensive representation of all proficiencies, including intellectual skills” and that “channeling effort into athletics was a natural consequence of the intellectual starvation of black Americans during and after slavery” (p. 53).

He uses the representation of Joe Louis to examine the cultural process of resignifying black intelligence. Looking across black newspaper and magazine articles Hoberman demonstrates how this process served to counter biological theories of racial intelligence, by fusing black athletic stereotypes with the intellectual dignity attributed to whites. For example in

these articles, rhetorical comparisons were signaled. Louis was noted as “the model for the physician”, “a human replica of Rodin’s thinker”, whose fighting reflexes moved as rapidly “as an Einstein calculates cause and effect in cosmic theory” (p. 53). In looking at the later *Bell Curve* debate, what Hoberman finds questionable is why researchers on both sides were willing to see “physical aptitude as a reliable index of intellectual ability” (p. 55) and why the black athlete came to be seen by both as an appropriate evidence of this (p. 56).

The significance of this process is apparent in public school debates about culturally relevant pedagogy. Athleticism as a symbol of intelligence has been utilized to re-evaluate the “hyperactivity” of the black child as “verve” and “kinesthetic potential.” Learning styles of black children were associated with the black body, movement, and physicality, and the need for a culturally distinct learning environment (p. 56-57; see Gordon, 1982 and Ladon-Billings, 1994).

In Hoberman’s view, rather than countering arguments for racial and biological intelligence, the reliance on athleticism and physicality to provide intellectual capability only confirms such theories. The positing of innate racial traits as symbols of learning becomes a form of self-sabotage and entrapment that maintains the black potential within less threatening models of physical achievement rather than countering myths and establishing new discourses (p. 59). This final quote demonstrates the dangers that lie in the “risky strategy” of finding racial identity in difference:

The perverse logic of this development suggests that racial biology cannot rehabilitate the black image in Western society. Efforts to convert black physicality into intelligence

cannot overcome the racist tradition that has always made the body the essence of black humanity and a sign of its inferior status (p. 60).

Putting Hoberman in conversation with *The Last Shot* we begin to see the “perverse logic” where the black body is implicated in delimiting the opportunities for academic achievement in urban settings. Sports serves as an acceptable substitute for intelligence; the importance of education is redefined as a necessary means of maintaining eligibility to play sports; physical prowess serves to make black students who show limited academic achievement differently desirable as they function to maintain the school’s athletic reputation. Their physical knowledge on the court becomes a hidden and differentially applied requirement, a skill that substitutes for grades and test scores as substitutable criteria for entry into colleges and universities.

Because urban education identifies its populations as predominantly students of color and/or of poverty living in city settings, the body of research on urban schools and its educational history are of particular importance to understanding the connections between sports, race, and urban education. Interscholastic sports in urban school contexts continue to function as a discursive formation that does specific work in relation to race, work that delimits the perceivable possibilities for seeing public schools and urban students as capable of success on their own terms. Perceptions of educational achievement, opportunity, and excellence are intricately tied to the unique role of sports in US high school culture. The historical context for the rise of interscholastic sports is an important framework for thinking about representations of urban student identity and conceptions of equality and excellence to be made possible in urban schools.

## *Tracking*

Because tracking literature is so vast, this next section provides a synopsis of the foundational research conducted by Jeannie Oakes. I will also look at more recent literature that addresses how tracking currently manifests itself in US schools in relation to federal educational policy. Lastly I will look at the implications for detracking literature on my study.

### *Tracking defined*

*Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality* (Oakes, 1985/2005a) is the foremost piece of research on tracking in US secondary schools. Though one would hope that the inequality inherent in tracking would dissipate, my study continues to be relevant to contemporary manifestations of tracking in current discriminatory practices of schooling against poor and minority students. Oakes' study is an analysis of a subset of data from a larger 1970's study known as *The Study of Schooling* which set out to assess in a very detailed and careful way, what exactly was going on in and around elementary and secondary schools across the nation. In this initial study over 150 researchers and data collectors worked with 38 schools that represented geographic, economic, and racial diversity. Tracking was one theme that emerged from this study and garnered a great deal of attention (p. 43).

*Keeping Track* focuses on the practices of tracking in 25 high schools and middle schools from the sample, and Oakes uses quantitative, survey, and interview data to offer us a very detailed view of what she identified as the characteristic assumptions used to justify tracking and the resulting patterns of discrimination against low-income and minority students that occur predictably across the school sites through the process of tracking. *Keeping Track* intervenes in



the common line of reasoning often used by schools by bringing to the surface deep-seated beliefs and assumptions upon which this deeply engrained “habit”<sup>13</sup> rests (p. 3-5). The main goal of this intervention is to demonstrate how our taken-for-granted values of educational equality and meritocracy are “unwittingly subverted by tracking in schools” (p. 4). Oakes does this by identifying predictable characteristics and effects of tracking that cut across schools regardless of demographic make-up and produce very similar results that privilege white and affluent students over low-income and minority students. Much of the research discussed in this section is derived from the Oakes study.

Tracking is a process that most people are familiar with by virtue of being a student in a US school. Oakes defines it as a process whereby students are divided into categories so that they can be assigned in groups to various kinds of classes (p. 3). It is also referred to as sorting or ability grouping. Oakes found that tracking was not an orderly, transparent, or consistently practiced phenomenon across schools or within schools; only two schools in her study had explicit documents explaining tracking policies. Most schools had more informal means of tracking. And in schools that argued they did not track, it was clear that an informal tracking system existed. According to Oakes the effects of tracking are the same regardless of whether the tracking system was formal or informal, overt or covert, intentional or circumstantial. Schools either track or they do not, and they most always do, and when they do, no matter how they do it the results are remarkably similar and predictable (p. 43-60)

---

<sup>13</sup> For a history of tracking in the US see Oakes, 1985/2005b.

Based on her findings Oakes asserts seven common components of tracking. Tracking presumes that:

- 1) Students' related past achievements and potential for learning can be accurately and fairly measured by tests or judgments of school people that are considered objective.
- 2) By dividing students according to the results of criteria or measures, groups of similar learners will be formed.
- 3) By grouping like students together individual learning needs will be met and group instruction is adequate for the major part of this task.
- 4) By arranging students in groups to meet their needs with common learning goals, activities, and materials teaching will be more manageable for teachers and create a more positive and affirming experience for students.

But contrary to these assumptions and goals, research shows that:

- 5) Students are publicly labeled and categorized according to the schools estimation of their potential as learners, and this process is determined through subjective and biased mechanisms like standardized testing, teacher and counselor recommendations, and student choice.
- 6) The classification process is neither neutral nor equal, and groups are accorded value based on their location in the hierarchy.
- 7) Tracking results in different and not always equal educational treatments being given to various groups of students (p. 60).

These assumptions are quickly compromised by the mountains of research conducted on tracking. Based on over 60 years of research and hundreds of studies looking at the effects of ability groupings on different types of students, the results resoundingly assert that *no group of*

*students has been found to benefit consistently from being in a homogeneous group.* Contrary to popularly held views, bright students are not held back in mixed ability classrooms, slow students are not more easily mediated when grouped together, and students of similar capabilities do not learn better together. Students do not feel more positive about themselves. Research shows that the tracking process actually fosters low self esteem, negative self perceptions, low aspirations, feelings of alienation, increased drop out rates, and less school involvement in low-track students. Research has also shown that the means by which students are assessed and placed are subjective and biased (these means include standardized test scores, teacher and counselor recommendations, and student choice). The last assumption that teaching is easier in homogenous groups is not as easy to refute, because it is based on experiences teachers themselves have as practitioners (p. 7-13). *Keeping Track* attempts to interrupt this assumption by challenging teachers to see that even if tracking appears to make teaching easier, the discriminatory impact it has on low-income and minority students “is not worth the educational and social price we pay for it” (p. 14).

*Classroom climate, content knowledge, and teaching practices*

Oakes argues that the type of learning experienced in high-track classrooms is consistent with social values and behaviors associated with high-level occupations, like independence and critical thinking, and that low-track behaviors, like conformity and rule-following, carry no prestige and are characteristic of low level occupational jobs (p. 92).

Oakes found that students in high-track classes have the advantage of more time and opportunity to learn, whereas in low-track classes, instruction time was less and often involved more time spent on classroom management. High-track students experienced a more overall

positive school climate evidenced by more positive student-teacher relationships, higher degrees of affiliation and friendship between students, and higher levels of perceived student involvement. They also had more positive attitudes about themselves, their abilities, and their aspirations. Low-track students on the other hand experienced teacher-student relationships as more punitive, reported higher degrees of apathy toward school and feelings of alienation, and experienced student relationships as more hostile. They had the most negative views of themselves, their abilities, and their futures (p. 92-132).

### *Tracking and race*

Traditional tracking studies also iterate how race is implicated in course placement practices. In multiracial schools, minority students were found in disproportionately smaller percentages in high-track classes and disproportionately higher concentrations in low-track classes. Because poor and minority students were found to most likely be placed at the lowest levels of the school's sorting system, they had differential access to kinds of knowledge and learning experiences that were directly related to track level. Therefore higher track students more often had access to high status knowledge and skills. Interestingly, classes categorized as average were considered watered down versions of high track classes, reducing access to high status knowledge as well. Also low-track placements and the omission of certain types of knowledge and skills from the curriculum made it difficult for students cross into higher tracks, because the omission usually included pre-requisite material therefore limiting their opportunities (p. 67-78).

In the 2005 edition of *Keeping Track* Oakes does a thorough review of recent literature that addresses how student's race influences track placement. These studies also show that race

and ethnicity are important factors in determining the probability of participation in high-track courses over student achievement. Minorities who meet the criteria for admission into high-track classes have been shown to more often be placed in low-track courses. Studies found that discrimination against high achieving minorities skewed the racial composition of classes beyond what would have been the case had track placements been made by an unfailingly strict adherence to achievement as a criterion. As such, though tracked classes produced considerable racial homogeneity, *they demonstrated little ability homogeneity* once measured according to stated criteria (p. 226-236). Rather than achieving groupings of students with similar academic ability, tracking appears to produce groupings of students *based more on race than achievement*.

### *Tracking and choice*

Oakes agrees though that tracking has changed and incorporated new mechanisms that at first glance appear to reconcile some of the issues of access to high status knowledge and skills, mobility across tracks, and the need for broader mechanisms to determine placement. New features of tracking include personal choice, independent movement across tracks by subject, narrowed curricular differences, college preparation in low-level courses, and frequent renegotiations of student placement. I want to address the main features at work in OPHS – choice and college preparation.

Research reviewed by Oakes has shown that personal “choice” also bears the marks of inequality. Studies find low-income and minority students know less about course options, how those course options prepare them (or do not) for college, and which courses carry college credit.

These students require more intervention by counselors and teachers and typically have less family involvement in their decision-making (p. 240-241).

Studies have documented how teachers and administrators beliefs about the fairness of student choice impacts course enrollment. In one study, faculty members justified the disproportionate enrollment of white students in high level classes with the assumption that student choice drove the pattern. When school staff did recognize that student choice was influenced by peer culture and social background, they continued to use student choice as a way to deflect responsibility away from the school and back to the individual student, their culture, and their family (p. 242-243). In a study on teacher inquiry groups, Maika Watanabe (2006) also found that teachers believed that student choice in course selection prevented tracking.

Watanabe (2007) found that teachers who viewed their school as not tracked perceived that student choice in class selection precluded the existence of a tracking structure. Teachers who did recognize constraints on student choice, like scheduling conflicts, perceptions of student preparation, lack of knowledge about higher level courses, and different types of gatekeeping strategies (i.e. grade point average cut-offs), continued to place responsibility for the choices made on students. Watanabe found that choice worked to keep students in their place within the social hierarchy of this high achieving school, maintaining a disproportionate number of students of color in low-achieving courses while giving other students opportunity to pursue social mobility through higher level courses. Watanabe argues that teachers' in her study found it easier to negotiate the contradiction between offering a more rigorous education at standards higher than others in the district with the perpetuation of race and class-based educational inequality through their course structure by shifting responsibility back to students. An

adherence to student choice as either precluding tracking or leveling tracking effects allowed teachers to ignore “the school’s complicity in limiting student opportunity through constraints on student choice” (p. 260).

A more recent phenomenon has been the inclusion of new and more exclusive routes to post-secondary education, like the relative advantages of AP and IB courses over general college-preparatory courses. Studies found that higher status courses, like AP and IB, were accelerated, covered higher-level content, and had more instruction time. This differentiation creates separate and distinct programs, even within exclusive college preparation programs like OPHS, “that position students for different post-secondary chances, such as preparation for high status four-year universities versus lower-status or two-year colleges...” (Oakes, 2005, p. 243).

Evidence since *Keeping Track* supports the argument that tracking fails to foster the outcomes US schools contend to value most – academic excellence and educational equity. Studies reviewed by Oakes show that grouping affects student outcomes and that tracking *widens inequality rather than closes the achievement gap*. Contrary to the commonly held tracking assumption that groupings are homogeneous by ability, high track classes were shown to have heterogeneous ability groupings. Studies have traced how achievement benefits accrue over time from higher track placements and *shape a students access to later opportunities*; these benefits are shown to be the result of differences in learning opportunities, availability of resources, and supports that usually accompany high-track placements rather than effects of homogeneous ability groupings (p. 236-238). Based on these findings, it is fair to assert that tracking can and does produce a differential set of schooling experiences for students and that these experiences are stratified by socioeconomic and racial status. It is also fair to argue that course placement

and enrollment decisions have social and educational consequences for students that impact their educational lives in both the short and long term.

*New tracking research: tracking and detracking in the era of accountability*

Recent tracking research has begun to broaden the field by looking at tracking patterns within the context of state and federal policies, particularly in relation to high stakes testing and accountability. Detracking studies, which focus on explicit attempts to untrack students either within subjects or within the schools overarching framework, focus more broadly on issues of curriculum and instruction and teacher education with less attention paid to the policy context. This next section will review a selection of new tracking and detracking studies that focus specifically on policy contexts.

A recent study by Mickelson and Everett (2008) looks at how high schools in North Carolina reproduce race and class based course stratification through a process they've defined as *neotracking*. Neotracking is important, because it looks at current reformulations of tracking in response to NCLB accountability and how these new forms create resegregation patterns in public schools. Neotracking combines older versions of rigid, comprehensive tracking through the resedimentation of general academic, vocational, and college preparatory courses of study, or three overarching tracks. This more traditional form of tracking is coupled with recent opportunities for flexible and mobile within-subject curricular differentiation to form a more layered and highly structured framework for curriculum and instruction. It essentially produces two tracking systems that work together, with the goal of improving meritocratic opportunities for students.



Mickelson and Everett found that the neotracking framework stratified educational opportunities by race and class in traditional ways and that “the nesting of within-subject curricular differentiation” within an overarching framework produced “a deeper, more complicated institutional structure of educational inequality” (p. 537).

The neotracking study in North Carolina shares some common denominators with OPHS. First, the North Carolina school system struggled with issues of segregated schooling, equity, excellence. The 1997 *Leandro* decision of the North Carolina Supreme Court acknowledged that segregation of resources away from urban schools created a climate of “academic genocide” for low income and minority children (p. 538-539). The new overarching structure of course frameworks was revised to hold schools accountable for meeting educational requirements that would prepare students for the workforce or college, and to later meet federal standards implemented under NCLB. Second, in principal within-subject area course differentiation, for example offering AP, IB, and general college prep courses in individual subjects like history, English, math, or science, was created to allow students the flexibility to move within and between programs, therefore breaking the tracks. What was found in the study however was that neotracking reproduced existing social inequalities and stratified access to educational opportunity by race and class (i.e. more affluent students were more likely to be enrolled in college-prep courses than less affluent ones. White and Asian students were more likely to be enrolled in academically oriented tracks).

They make a connection between their findings and the effects of educational policy. What I view as an example of policy in practice, they state that the overarching Course of Study framework in North Carolina “is an explicit policy manifestation of the standards and

accountability push. Yet the structure of neotacking implicitly undermines the twin goals of excellence and equity by sorting and selecting students...” into the larger Course of Study Framework and within-subject tracks that reproduce race and class based inequality. Explicit attempts through policy and practice to improve student opportunity regardless of race or class continued to undermine federal and state mandates for equity and excellence in educational opportunity.

Maika Watanabe (2008) conducted a qualitative study on the nature of classroom instruction for “gifted” and “regular” (disproportionately populated by student of color from low socioeconomic backgrounds) students where she assesses how teachers negotiate classroom practice within the context of accountability reform. She found five key differences in instruction across the tracks that favored “gifted” classes which included less explicit high stakes test preparation, more opportunities to practice a wider range of skills, more challenging assignments, and more immediate feedback on assignments. These examples of hierarchical instructional practices demonstrated that students in regular classes who are disproportionately students of color and economically disadvantaged are being “shortchanged in opportunities” to be engaged in higher level thinking and challenging curricula (p. 522). Accountability measures, rather than narrowing the achievement gap and equalizing student access to knowledge, widened the gap and influenced teachers to practice more explicit test preparation in their low track classes.

Yonezawa and Jones (2006) study of student perspectives of tracking and detracking found that students thought critically about curriculum structures in their schools and were aware of the potential impacts of tracking and detracking on their academic futures. Most students felt

that course placement and tracking practices and forms of assessment were unfair. They believed tracking structures offered struggling students less challenging and engaging teachers and curriculums, and they perceived a gap in instructional opportunities between advanced and regular students. The authors argued that students' ability to critique tracking and their place within school curriculum structures offers a powerful tool for understanding inequitable practices and shaping reform.

### *Detracking*

During the 1980's and coinciding with the publication of *Keeping Track* concerns about tracking entered into popular public discourse. Tracking became identified as a second-generation segregation issue and was taken seriously by the courts as lawsuits were filed against school districts across the country for discriminatory tracking practices. Detracking is defined as "a reform that intentionally places students into mixed-ability classes, is an attempt to remedy the negative effects of tracking...the reform generally entails an attempt to group students heterogeneously as a means of ensuring that all students, regardless of their race or class background, perceived academic ability, or previous school performance have access to high quality curriculum, teachers, and material resources" (Rubin, 2008, p. 647). Detracking studies and organizations gained momentum, and educators began to detrack their own schools and offered positive results (see Wheelock, 1992 for one of the earliest examinations of detracking efforts in schools across the US).

As detracking gained momentum, tracking did continue to have proponents and supporters. Tom Loveless (1999) argued that there was limited research into the risks and benefits of detracking to adequately support the claim that low-achieving, poor, and urban

students benefited from mixed-ability grouping. His study determined that detracking was disproportionately undertaken by urban schools, low SES schools, and under-achieving schools, further exploiting an already burdened segment of the educational population through participation in “an educational experiment” with unknown results (p. 155). He also argued that detracking held negative effects for high achieving students. Gifted and talented educators formed the loudest and most highly organized group of objectors to detracking ( Oakes, 2005, p. 216-221). Since Loveless’ critique there have been several studies on detracking and its effects. All of the research reviewed in what follows offered a positive view of detracking, with recognition that making such changes is not easy and requires support for both staff and students.

Detracking might offer a complicated but potentially promising resolution to the failures of NCLB. Burris, Wiley, Welner, and Murphy (2008) argue that standards-based accountability reforms under NCLB and the pressures placed on teachers and schools to raise test scores has forced a continued reliance on tracking and grade retention as means to meet standards. Rather than closing the achievement gap, these practices are exacerbating the gap and undermining any potential for gains in achievement through policy. In their study of the successful district-wide detracking of Rockville Centre Schools that resulted in closing the achievement gap by race and SES in attainment of the state’s Regent’s Diploma, they demonstrated that detracking had the potential to recuperate NCLB as an equity-minded policy. They assert based on this study that detracking offers “...the most successful response to the pressures of standards-based accountability policies” by fully operationalizing the realization that a challenging curriculum is a universal good and benefit to all students (p. 573).

The Rockville study demonstrates that such reform requires many levels of support, from the district level down to the students. Rubin (2006) concludes that successful detracking efforts “combine deep structural reform with thoughtful pedagogical change, and are undergirded with students and teachers beliefs around notions of ability and achievement. When these facets converge, the results for students are startling” (p. 7). Both high and low-achieving students agreed in a separate study that detracking required teachers to believe in all students, to teach equitably and differently, and offer all students more rigor (Yonezawa & Jones, 2006). It is important to note, that beliefs about ability and achievement are intimately tied to beliefs about race, class, and culture, and it is the interrogations of these entrenched beliefs that arguably complicate reform efforts.

In sum, more recent studies of tracking build on the foundational work of Jeannie Oakes and others. They expand our understanding of tracking frameworks, take into account the effects of educational policy, and turn to teachers and students for an understanding of tracking from their perspective. Together they make us aware of the paradox that tracking frameworks in their multiple forms continued to undermine federal and state mandates for equity and excellence in educational opportunity regardless of explicit attempts through policy and practice to improve student opportunity regardless of race or class. Detracking appears to be an opportunity with the most potential for moving forward with this effort.

Though in doing this project I did not set out to study tracking of students at OPHS, what would be typified as patterns of tracking emerged in the data collection which led me to theorize the role that educational policy plays in structuring practices of racialized course enrollment. I choose to use the term racialized course enrollment to signal my intent to theorize these practices

through a post-critical lens. I hesitate to see this project as part of the larger conversation on tracking in US schools, but tracking research “speaks” to this study by providing support and explanation for some of its findings.

As such, it is important to locate these connections as well as note that I make some departures in terms of analytic framework and analysis. I aim to explore these practices as raced and classed effects of discourse, power, and knowledge that are socioculturally and historically contingent. Traditional tracking literature works under a critical lens, looking at the social reproduction of racial and class inequality that tracking produces in and out of schools. My goal here is to stretch the way we view tracking to contextualize the tracking process at OPHS with history, policy, power, discourse, and local context, to make room for the moments of resistance to tracking and for effects that produce ruptures in our understandings of tracking. I also want to take seriously the critique that a direct relationship between policy and tracking was not established in traditional tracking research (Watanabe, 2008). In this dissertation I use NCLB and district policy as a power/knowledge framework for understanding racialized course enrollment as a form of policy in practice. I include a review of detracking literature here to support the recommendation that detracking reform might offer OPHS the opportunity to further expand on its success as both an excellent and equitable college preparatory program.

### *Ethnographic Policy Studies of NCLB and Minority Students*

In a recent special issues of *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* (Valenzuela, Prieto, & Hamilton, 2007), the editors discuss the challenges they faced in finding articles to meet their call for *ethnographic* studies of the impact of No Child Left Behind on minority youth and

schools. They speculate on the conditions that produce this gap: do schools and districts fear ethnography and its ability to expose them? Is there a lack of funding for long-term qualitative studies? Are ethnographers somehow disconnected from the larger social field of NCLB? Is the time intensity of ethnography ill-suited to the needs of policy? It is important to emphasize that this search was for ethnographic policy studies of NCLB in a *US context*. Ethnographic policy studies in comparative and international contexts appear to have experienced a fertility and growth that US studies have not (see Sutton & Levinson, 2001; Levinson, Cade, Padawer, & Elvir, 2002; Walford, 2001; Reimers, 2000). I also do not want to be exclusionary here; I think recent ethnographic research on tracking and NCLB as discussed earlier in this chapter could fit very neatly into this category as well.

I had difficulty locating recent ethnographic studies of policy in practice. If I loosen the desire for ethnography, I get a slightly broader cross-section of research that is concerned with policy as practice, but has chosen to investigate it through other methods. I include some of those studies below along with ethnographic research.

#### *The (constraining) effects of NCLB*

In 2004, Lance Fusarelli wrote a futuristic article of sorts where he assessed the potential outcomes of NCLB for equity and diversity in the US educational system. Strangely enough, Fusarelli's article is a Nostradamus-like prophecy that comes true. His predictions align quite perfectly with the findings of those who studied the effects of NCLB after some years of implementation. Through analysis of the legislation and evidence from early programs, he had the foresight to gather that NCLB would fail itself, fail children, and fail society. What is it that

allows the educational system and its agents to ignore the fact that NCLB was expected to fail the very students it tended to support and perpetuate their inequality and oppression?

Though the intentions of NCLB were to raise overall achievement of all students and close the achievement gap between minority and high-poverty students and their white, affluent counterparts, the policy appears to constrain its very intentions and negatively harm those disadvantaged and minority students it intended to help the most. While I refer to the effects of NCLB as constraining, others aggressively refer to them as “intrusive and non-negotiable” policy guidelines that have lead to “fall-out effects” (Gay, 2007) and unintended negative consequences (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Bizarre ironies, paradoxes, and contradictions characterize the current state of US education under NCLB. Testing culture promotes a narrowed curriculum, focused on low-level skills and high-stakes test “training”. Rich critical inquiry and maximum potential have been replaced with rote memorization and minimum expectations governed by the testing regime which undermines teachers, students, and schools. Testing and accountability provide strong incentives to exclude or ignore low-performing students and have led to an increase, rather than decrease, in the drop out rate. Schools that serve the most disadvantaged students lose access to funding when they fail to improve or meet targets. This “diversity penalty” encourages them to push out, keep out, or drop out low-scoring students. Some of the neediest students, like English language learners and special needs students, are held to inappropriate standards and expectations, and they simultaneously suffer from a lack of appropriate support to make academic progress, leading to increased dropping out. Public shaming, intimidation, and punishment experienced through the labeling of failing schools and the resulting reduction in



funding and incentives to these needy programs not only demoralizes the teachers themselves but also reduces ability of schools and districts to attract and retain high-quality educators, another intended goal of the bill (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Gay, 2007; Hursh, 2007).

*Being more explicit about race and NCLB*

In a special issue of *Race Ethnicity and Education* (Leonardo, 2007b) contributors center and emphasize No Child Left Behind policy in and of it self as a racial project, not merely a set of policies aimed at closing the achievement gap, but policies heavily invested in the larger racial system of the US. The editor boldly asserts, “Overtly, it implicates improvements for students of color in its four targeted subgroups. Implicitly, NCLB is part of a racial project since it is enacted within a racialized nation-state. As part of the racialized state apparatuses, schools bear the markings and carry the anxieties of US race relations” (p. 241). By ignoring race, these theorists and analysts assert that NCLB ignores the structural inequalities of the education system perpetuated in and through the racial system of the US.

Darling-Hammond and Gay make clear the paradox of No Child Left Behind and how its implementation undermines its stated attempts to improve educational equity and achievement for all students. Gay interrogates the subtext of the policy to uncover the “the most troubling contradictions between the rhetoric and reality of NCLB” (p. 281). The claim to *high-quality education for all* is deeply undermined by the legislated implementation strategies of NCLB, like high stakes testing. Though rhetorically NCLB appeals to be built on lofty and noble goals of ensuring equity and intellectual excellence, its practices for achieving quality are “anchored in distrust, threat, intimidation, sanctions, punishment, and brute physical force” (p. 284). The second contradiction is located in the claim that *school choice fosters educational opportunity*

*for disadvantaged students* to escape their substandard schools for high-quality ones. Gay argues that this claim implies to racist possibilities: 1) that poor and racially diverse schools are *not worth redeeming*, and 2) that it is of more benefit for students of color and high-poverty to attend with white, middle class and affluent students who disproportionately have access to high-achieving schools (p. 286-287). NCLB overlooks the treatment of minority and high-poverty students in choice schools that may continue to undermine their education and the leaving behind of failing schools that still educate the children who cannot or do not want to leave their community school. The third contradiction is the claim *to honoring diversity*. Gay argues that the pressure of high-stakes accountability undermines any ability to thoroughly consider the diversity of knowledge and learning styles that students bring to schools. The homogenization of testing and disaggregation of results continues to compare diverse student populations against the set of standards based on dominant culture and measures of intelligence (p. 289). Rather than protecting and promoting the achievement of the disadvantaged, “the neediest children are benefiting the least and suffering the most from its promised reforms” (p. 290).

Zeus Leonardo (2007a) argues that “NCLB is whiteness turned into policy” (p. 275) and traces how NCLB is invested with, perpetuates, and reifies an educational system of white privilege. NCLB promotes a color-blind ideology that attempts to obliterate race. NCLB as a color-blind discourse provides a system of power and knowledge that helps explain away racialized structural inequality that has led to the systematic disadvantaging of students of color and high-poverty. It is characterized by a belief in the declining significance of race and racism that occurs, situating them as isolated incidences perpetuated by individuals that are ignorant, irrational, and pathological. It also individualizes success and failure, and blames people of

color for the failures attributed to them. It downplays institutional racism and emphasizes racial progress, and downplays, ignores, or finds outdated the history of US slavery and genocide as important for understanding the US as a raced society (p. 267).

As such, Leonardo helps us understand how NCLB as a mechanism of color-blindness recreates, retraces, and fences in achievement as whiteness and white property. The impression of de-raced standards under NCLB bear the absent marker of whiteness that dominates accountability (Demerath, 2009). Race is both meaningless and meaningful – failure of minority and disadvantaged students is blamed on individual and culture, but long-standing white achievement is based solely on merit. Achievement as a deracialized term carries with it this absent white marker, while failure is racialized and individualized. As such, minority students *can fail on their own terms, but they cannot achieve on their own terms.*

#### *Ethnographic studies of NCLB*

Kris Sloan (2007) argues that little of the discourse concerning the effects of NCLB-style accountability on minority youth has been generated through ethnographic inquiry. In a review of the literature he established three useful categories of findings in the literature.

The first category of findings addressed the *effects of NCLB on teachers of minority youth*. Teachers were found to experience increased stress and surveillance as a result of high stakes accountability and reported that they considered leaving the profession as a result. The pressure to get youth to pass the test was found to alter teachers' goals and definitions of learning, and teachers' expectations of minority students were found to decrease along with quality classroom instruction.

Sloan reviewed not only negative, but also perceived positive impacts of NCLB on minority youth in terms of *curriculum and instruction*. Some early studies found that high stakes accountability produced better instruction for minority students. Other studies argued that accountability led to a narrowing of the curriculum to test-based skills and knowledge, a loss of instruction time to test preparation, administration, and recuperation, and a loss of more constructivist forms of pedagogy and knowledge production to the pressure and the push of standardized testing. Sloan found in his own work that several accountability related mandates improved quality and equity in the classroom practices of teachers he studied.

Valli and Chambliss (2007) in an ethnographic study that compares how one teacher teaches the same lesson in a regular reading class versus a reading intervention class geared toward the high-stakes test found that the demands of accountability had an adverse effect on the curriculum and instruction in the reading intervention class. They confirmed that NCLB pressed the teacher in their study to spend less time on literacy activities and discussion and more time on test preparation, narrowing of the curriculum and separating low-level students from higher-level literacy skills.

The third category of findings looks at *the effects directly on minority youth and their schooling*. Studies reviewed by Sloan found that accountability policies continued to stratify students by race and magnified inequality. These studies also highlighted the absence of the voices of students from NCLB policy research. Wiggan (2007) presses for not only voice, but student-based inquiry that is driven by students and explores their perspectives on school and achievement.

Fine et al. (2007) conducted a multi-sited ethnography of high-achieving Internationals, or small schools for Immigrant English Language Learner (ELL) in New York City, that have managed to successfully re-appropriate and negotiate NCLB to support the academic achievement of students with unprecedented results. Researchers found “ripples of resistance” in their negotiations of policy (p. 91). In a lawsuit, the Internationals were among 28 public high schools that won the right to waive high-stakes tests for their students and develop a rigorous performance assessment in their place. Educators contended with “externally imposed accountability pressures while maintaining classrooms dedicated to deep inquiry-based learning” and developed integrated systems of support that put the student and critical inquiry at the center of teaching and learning (p. 90). As a result, rather than pushing out or dropping out ELL Students that struggle with high stakes tests due to language barriers, both graduation and college-going rates for their students far surpass the citywide averages.

In an ethnographic study of how 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade black and Latin@<sup>14</sup> working class youth negotiate high stakes testing culture and college-admission, Knight (2003) focuses on their daily lived experiences to understand how NCLB policy effects college-going success. She found that youth must challenge negative perceptions and expectations of urban youth for academic success. They must also discover how to pass academic coursework while preparing for high-stakes and college entrance tests, and make sense out of the competing expectations of high school and college-testing cultures.

---

<sup>14</sup> The spelling “Latin@” is often used to signify both Latino and Latina simultaneously.

### *Conclusion*

This study is connected to a tangled set of literatures. As delineated in Chapter 1, this project is centered within ethnographic policy studies in education. In this chapter I begin to undertake a genealogical inquiry to trace the invention of urban educational identity in the US. In a similar vein I reviewed the literature on US interscholastic high school sports to untangle the discourses that construct sports as integral to the educational experience. The large literature of tracking was summarized and important new research on tracking, de-tracking, and neotracking was discussed in relation to the impact of NCLB minority students. Each of these literatures bears witness to the difficult knowledge of how race works in US society and schools. In Chapter 3 I discuss how I put methodological practices to work to keep discourses untangled, unraveled, and circulating in an attempt to hold my feet to the fire while conducting research at an urban school.

## Interlude

### *Can I get into Trouble: Negotiating the Terms of Research*

*I have a contact at the high school, a teacher I'll call Dr. Fisher, who has been extremely helpful in gaining access to the site. He asked me to meet him at a 50's style donut shop by the university on what turns out to be one of those crisp spring Ohio mornings. He has offered to pad the way for my formal entry into the school for data collection and wants to have a better understanding of my project.*

*We get cups of the worlds strongest coffee and warm donuts. I don't do caffeine and decaf doesn't exist in this place; between the sugar and coffee I feel like I'm on crack, but it shakes the morning cobwebs out of my brain. He's friendly and gruff at the same time, so we practically forego the formalities and how are you's. I outline my project: I'm interested in how schools negotiate policy in the face of No Child Left Behind to promote academic achievement and engagement when other schools are complaining about teaching to the test; the impact of race on social constructions of achievement, namely why we are so surprised when students of color achieve; and the impact of high school sports on academic success since this school has no sports program.*

*He's straightforward and I learn some useful things about language: don't say ethnography, say case study; don't say reappropriate or negotiate, say impact or effect. Then I also learn that just about everything about my project will turn most people off to talking to me and that I will have to learn how to ask without asking. Policy and race are big issues at the school, but they will shut people down. Sports on the other hand will get people going a mile a minute. We talk for 45 minutes. He mentions that he always had a slight crush on the lovely Greek woman behind the counter and commences to engage in innocent conversation. I leave wondering where methodology intersects with my practice, this idea I have of getting into trouble, and whether that will actually play out in the field or only when I'm sitting at my desk.*

[Field Notes, Late Spring 2008]

## Chapter 3

### Being in Trouble and of Use to Education: A Methodology of Disruption

#### *Introduction*

Methodology is important. It bears a heavy burden. It has a practical function of assembling suitable methods, and it has a political function of trying to guide the researcher to do right by her participants and/or to be useful to her field. In the course of fieldwork I was immediately struck with the competing tension between being “in trouble” and “of use” - using this study as a vehicle to represent the important and useful story of how this school subverts the constraining effects of NCLB, while simultaneously telling the troubling (and troublesome) yet equally useful story of the inescapability of the effects of race on schools. The research design presented in this chapter is guided by a methodology that foregrounds disruption and theorizes feminist post-critical policy ethnography as the methodological tool to push limits, make interventions, and thrive on the tensions, disruptions, and losses – the trouble – of research.

#### *Feminist Post-Critical Policy Ethnography*

Margaret Sutton & Bradley A. U. Levinson (2001) argue that traditional policy analysis in education has a history of viewing policy as a state-driven top-down process of policy-making and implementation. Within the environment of rational planning and administrative efficiency, traditional policy analysis continues to focus on policy as a series of lock-step procedures of development, adoption, implementation, and evaluation. Researchers such as Carol Weiss have argued that “...policy-relevant research must extend beyond policy evaluation and help



policymakers fully understand the costs, benefits, possible unanticipated consequences, and implementation challenges” (Hess, 2008, p. 5). Recent scholars have expanded this idea to argue for a “translational approach” to policy analysis (Brabeck, 2008; Hess, 2008), meaning one that spans the gap between policy-making and how policy is practiced. The goal is to translate the effects back to policy-makers and practitioners by analyzing the “on-the-ground” educational practices of schools.

I endeavor to make five shifts within policy analysis that might serve as methodological interventions to push its positivist limits and think about the potentialities for policy research.

*1<sup>st</sup> Shift – Feminist critical policy analysis and the critique of power*

Educational policy analysis in the critical tradition pays specific attention to the facets of the policy process that mainstream research tends to ignore, for example the role that power plays in defining what come to be considered “problems” and “solutions” and how power impacts social justice. Critical policy researchers in education, such as Catherine Marshall (1997) critique traditional policy studies for its positivist framework that focuses on measurable and tangible outcomes that situate policy as logical, rational, fixable, and free of power. She argues that policy work is governed by power relations that traditional policy research fails to incorporate into its analysis.

My thinking around ethnographic policy studies is influenced by the field of feminist policy analysis (see Bacchi, 1999; Griffith, 1992; Hawkesworth, 1994, Lief Palley, 1974; Marshall, 1997; Mazur, 2002; Pascall, 1997), which is characterized by its explicit attention to gender, counter-public issues and the role of the state, rhetoric and symbolic policy, historical and comparative perspectives, and complexity and subjectivity (Marshall, 1997). Arguably these

feminist theorists opened the door to more critical perspectives of social policy and laid the groundwork for the “poststructural,” “post-positivist,” and “embodied” policy work that is being done today.

My conception departs though at what some might see as one key element of feminist policy studies, and feminist research in general, that being the location of gender at the center of analysis. According to Amy Mazur (2002) feminist policy analysis aligns itself in some way with a desire for social justice for women, the elimination of gender-based oppression for both men and women, a focus on the public and private, and the recognition of women’s policy issues in both national and global contexts (p. 31). According to Nancy Campbell (2000) through policy “feminists are dedicated to discerning, defining, and changing structures of exclusion, marginalization, social isolation, and subordination based on gender wherever and however they occur” (p. 37). Post-critical practices come out of feminist wrestlings with the complexities of researching others. In conducting my study I recognize the historical role of feminist policy research to the field and my alignment with its commitment to understanding a more materially weighted conception of policy, be it through the bodies of women or otherwise.

But in not doing research on women I am in no way signaling any sort of “post-gender” lens that attempts to move past the role of gender in our understandings of society and schooling. Rather I argue that feminism is a theorizing lens and necessary methodological tool that I “cannot not” think with. As a political feminist with academic training in feminist theory and research, it serves as a way of seeing the world that takes into account the intersections of race and ethnicity, class and socioeconomics, gender, sexuality, and nuanced categories that make up

our “identikits” (Spivak, 2003) and subjectivities. It serves as a methodology that is “in my bones” and infiltrates and complicates my research and analysis.

*2<sup>nd</sup> Shift – Discourse and the body*

Poststructural policy analysis similarly “troubles” the policy process paying close attention to the conditions and effects that are produced by and productive of policy as a series of discursive formations and materials practices. Jim Scheurich’s “policy archeology” and Wanda Pillow’s “embodied analysis” are two examples of poststructural policy work that looks at how “problems” and “solutions” are produced historically in and through policy relations, and how these relations discursively construct policy actors as embodied subjects.

James Scheurich’s (1994, 1997) conception of “policy archeology” utilizes foucaultian interpretations to study the social construction of policy problems, policy studies, and policy solutions. Scheurich is not concerned with finding solutions, but rather interrogating the cultural context that makes particular problems and solutions seeable. He argues that policy archeology “takes a radically different approach to policy studies in virtually all aspects including definitions of problems and problem groups, discussions of policies and policy alternatives, and presumptions about policy studies in the social order” (1994, p. 299).

Wanda Pillow (1997, 2003, 2004) in her study of pregnant teenagers uses what she terms *feminist genealogy*<sup>15</sup> as a policy studies methodology. Her feminist genealogy utilizes a foucaultian framework to analyze how policy discursively constructs teen pregnancy and the teen

---

<sup>15</sup> For an in-depth discussion of genealogy as a foucaultian methodological practice see Meadmore, Hatcher, & McWilliam, 2000.

body as raced, gendered, and sexed in particular ways (2003, p. 150). This “embodied analysis” becomes a form of policy analysis to make suspicious truth claims and assumptions that policies construct in attempting to resolve the “social problem” of pregnant teens in school.

In similar ways, I am interested in how policy discourse constructs “urban” students and their academic achievement and how “urban” identity comes to be embodied by students at OPHS. A shift to discourse and the body in policy analysis makes explicit the role that both history and policy play in discursive constructions of urban students and their academic success.

### *3<sup>rd</sup> Shift – Theorizing race*

I think it is important to complicate and push this preliminary foucaultian analysis to ask more explicitly what power relations produce these effects, subject positions, and silences. I think it is here than Critical Race Theory becomes a necessary critique and analytic mode. In *Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education* (1995) Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate argue that though race is deeply implicated in US society and educational system, it remains under-theorized in educational research. Furthermore, David Tyack argues that “...policy talk about questions of diversity in education today often ignores a long history of the social and political constructions of difference in American society and public schools” (Tyack, 1993, p. 8). Therefore, to understand the process of policy negotiation at the local level, a historical foundation is necessary to the process of policy analysis. This project utilizes CRT as an analytic tool to bring issues of race to bear on policy as practice.

### *4<sup>th</sup> Shift - Ethnography*

I am also interested in how critical policy actors negotiate and re-appropriate federal and district policies in ways that contribute to the academic achievement of urban students. I’m

particularly interested in how policy plays out in the lives of these critical actors, and how students as subjects negotiate their own achievement in a high performing, high poverty school. It is here that I need to rely on a different kind of policy work to get at the messiness and complexity of policy as lived experience and cultural practice.

Sutton and Levinson (2001) call for a socio-cultural approach to educational policy that elucidates the “richness and complexity of the policy process” to see the way policy works as a cultural practice (p. 4), with particular attention paid to “*policy as a practice of power*” (p. 1). This work shifts the analysis from the macro-process of policy development and implementation planning to policy-on-the ground, the micro-level engagements of schooling actors with institutional policies, and the effects of these local practices of policy appropriation on “success” in urban schooling.

This is the place where ethnography becomes integral to policy analysis. Kathleen Hall (1999) notes the trend that “education researchers have turned to anthropology and to ethnographic methods in their efforts to find more powerful tools for understanding and improving educational processes” (p. 127). Anthropology as a methodology, and not just a set of methods, provides, as Frederick Erickson (1986) best articulates, a lens through which to “make the familiar strange” and therefore has conceptual ability to re-think the complexities of urban education in the US. Ethnography brings to the forefront of policy analysis Clifford Geertz’ (1973) “thick description,” participant observation, and prolonged engagement to get at policy as a ground-up socio-cultural set of practices that make up the everyday lives of people in schools.

Anthropology also carries its own set of limitations and dangers. James Clifford's (1988) concept of "Ethnographic authority," once a taken-for-granted strategy of anthropological science, is troubled by the materiality of research and its effects on the written production of knowledge. Comaroff and Comaroff (1992) argue that there is a tension between the assumption of ethnographic authority to translate the observable world empirically and the recognition that objectivity is illusory and representations unreliable. As the writing up of fieldwork data is a process of meaning-making and representation on the part of the researcher, a socio-cultural understanding of policy analysis is one of empirical interpretation. As John Van Maanen (1988) explains, fieldwork then is subject to the contingent conditions of the field and the role that power, theory, and writing play in productions of understanding culture.

It is within this space of limits and possibilities that an ethnographic study of policy becomes messy, contingent, and full of tension. Ethnography puts policy studies on shaky ground moving from a notion of policy as knowable and rational, to policy as having a broad range of illusory effects and constraints that are unreliable and unpredictable. This space of ethnographic discomfort about what we can know about the lives of others becomes fruitful ground for expanding the analytical eye and taking into account the complexities at work in doing socio-cultural policy studies.

#### *5<sup>th</sup> Shift – Post-critical methodology*

Both feminist studies and anthropology have been caught in the "crisis of representation" that "arises from the uncertainty of adequate means for describing social reality" (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, p. 8). Authority, voice, empathy, emancipatory aims, consciousness, and agency

all are at stake in doing work with/about/for “others.” These methodological dilemmas complicated the research and representation of policy as lived experience.

My understanding of post-critical methodology is based on Patti Lather’s (2007) concept of “getting lost” as a methodological move in research. Post-critical methodologies serve as tools for moving through what Lather (1998) calls “stuck places” and what Gayatri Spivak (1999) via Derrida refers to as “aporias,” places of doubt, non-passage, and effacement. Lather defines post-critical methodology as that which moves beyond constructions of the essentialized, romanticized subject in need of emancipation from some type of social oppression via the intervention of some liberatory researcher (i.e. me) to problematize emancipatory space and aims in research.

This post-critical methodology is hinged on self-reflexive “double(d) practices of representation” that work to neither assume transparent access to participants and their experiences nor override their participation and data they contribute to the research. Getting out of stuck places and moving through aporias means performing research as a double(d) move of doing and troubling itself simultaneously, or maybe put another way, performing research that is both useful and troubling at the same time. The post-critical here privileges loss and a failure to know over knowing and sets up research as a practice with “disappointment as a rubric” and a consequence of the necessary failure of trying to tell other people’s stories (Lather, 2007, p. 47).

Scheurich (1994) argues that both traditional and post-positivist policy studies presume a liberal democratic commitment to improving society and see their role as important to this endeavor. I use a post-critical lens to trouble this desire to be “of use” to education with an ethics invested in a more tentative analysis that sees emancipatory goals as problematic. I aim

to see the possibilities *always, already* at work in urban schools and to avoid the liberal desire to construct and then emancipate some sort of romanticized urban subject through policy research. In working with voice and the representations of participants and experiences, I used post-critical theory to challenge any desire for easy romantic readings or equally easy critical readings of participants and their practices.

Yet, I recognize that I am (secretly) committed to somehow recuperating the democratic aims of education by studying a school that provides *access to excellence* for disadvantaged students. In conducting this study, I found I had three choices in (re)presenting the research and analysis: 1) an uncritical representation of equity and excellence that focused solely on the positive policy practices at OPHS which were benefiting students immensely, 2) a critical representation of inequity that took the school to task for the overrepresentation of African American students in college preparation courses and the racialized practices at work in the school, or 3) a post-critical engagement that struggled to adequately represent the complications of equity and excellence, one that acknowledged both the successes and the failures, and the productive effects of race, history, policy, and practice. It is in the space of these anxieties and dilemmas that post-critical methodologies and theories can be useful for moving between being “in trouble” and “of use” in education research.

### *Research Design*

#### *Pre-Pilot*

In the Spring of 2006, I began conversations with Dr. Fisher, a faculty member at Ohio Public High School (OPHS), while conducting a project for a qualitative research class.



Eventually these conversations grew into a pre-pilot that included a small sample of five interviews with one former and one current student, a parent, a teacher, and a counselor, and document analysis. It was immediately apparent that this school would be an engaging site for dissertation research. Based on pre-pilot data, I developed a methods package that looked at how policy was practiced at the school level to gain a better understanding of how schools negotiate policies to support students. My project developed into a year-long ethnographic case study of the school that included observation, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis.

#### *Access and Research Plan*

This dissertation study began in September 2008 and ran through December 2009. Gaining access to OPHS was an arduous process. After rather quickly receiving Institutional Review Board approval from Ohio State University in April 2008, it took several months to get school district approval due to the hiring of a new principal. During those months I conducted background research and gathered policy documents for preliminary analysis.

The school was very willing to allow me into their lives and classrooms. Both the principal, Dr. Davis, and my teacher liaison, Dr. Fisher, held doctorates, found me to be sincerely interested in the good work of the school (which I was), and were therefore research friendly. They also had other interests and expectations. Dr. Fisher expressed that he wanted “to have time to reflect, and being prompted to discuss the school and/or my practice forced me to set time aside to self examine.” There was an admitted interest in “showing off” the good work of the school and the teachers, particularly because of the negative attention teachers and teaching

receive in the current climate of accountability. They were also very interested in how the findings could support their work and how they might serve as a model for other schools.

Upon gaining approval, I was heavily immersed in the field the first 12 weeks of research through December 2009, sometimes visiting the school 3 or 4 days a week and spending anywhere from three to six hours observing bus arrivals, hallways, lunches, and classrooms. After this initial immersion into the culture of the school, I focused my participant observation on a cross section of courses in the humanities program and continued observations through the end of the school year, June 2009, visiting the school at least twice a week for interviews and observations. Interviews and focus groups were on-going throughout the study.

Field notes, transcriptions, and data analysis occurred simultaneously while collecting data, and during the month of February I took time off from the field to focus specifically on data analysis and fine tune my data collection plans for the remainder of the year. The data analysis phase of the project began in July 2009 with member checks conducted February 2010. Since the start of this project I have logged over 100 hours in the field, including 75 hours of observation and 20 hours of interviewing, along with hours of document collection and analysis and background research.

### *Grounded Theory and Situated Inquiry*

Glaser and Strauss (1967/2006) define grounded theory very simply as a general method of comparative analysis for “the discovery of theory from data.” Adele Clarke (2005) revises grounded theory, “pushing and pulling” it around the postmodern turn into a method she refers to as situational analysis. Clarke proposes “to supplement basic grounded theory with a situation-

centered approach that in addition to studying action also explicitly includes the analysis of the full situation, including discourses - narrative, visual, and historical” (p. xxxii). She argues that grounded theory is in some ways already positioned around the postmodern turn and in some aspects resistant. She critiques it for a lack of reflexivity, an oversimplification of the data that strains towards coherence, a singular rather than multiple process, a view of variation as “negative case,” and its reliance on positivist objectivity (p. 11-18). Situated analysis “regrounds” grounded theory around the postmodern turn and recuperates its positivist leanings by 1) explicitly acknowledging the embodiment and situatedness of all knowledge producers and assuming the multiplicity of knowledges; 2) grounding the phenomenon of study in the broader *situation*;<sup>16</sup> 3) Shifting from assumptions of normativity and homogeneity to complexities, differences, and heterogeneities; 4) focusing on the process of theorizing and the development of sensitizing concepts as opposed to the pursuit of a formal theory; and 5) turning to discourses to expand the sites of inquiry (p. 19).

Clarke proposes a very systematic data process that uses situational mapping to document the connections between situational elements as the main strategy of analysis. I did not formally deploy her mapping method. While I sketched out situational, social world, and positional maps to move discursive, historical, social, and material contexts from background to foreground, I did not use them strictly as my main analytic strategy, and I do not supply those maps here. Clarke’s

---

<sup>16</sup> Clarke defines the situation as both ecological and relational. It includes all the major human, non-human, discursive and other elements of relation and the on-going negotiations and positions taken and not taken in the situation of inquiry (p. xxii, 21-23).

methods package served as a resource for “postmodernizing” grounded theory and provides justification for a multi-sited ethnography that brings traditional data sources with it around the turn.

#### *Data Sources: Slicing up a Case Study*

In his article, *The five misunderstandings of case-study research*, Flyvbjerg (2006) establishes a set of validity criteria offered by the case-study approach, refuting the critique that a single example study produces unreliable research. He argues that case-studies are valid forms of inquiry in their own right, particularly in the social sciences, because they offer concrete, context-dependent knowledge, a specificity and depth that carries with it the “force of example” and can broaden inquiry, the ability to interrogate strong representative cases, a tendency toward falsification as opposed to verification, and complex narrative inquiries rich with description (p. 221-238).

I chose the case-study method for several reasons that line up with the above argument. As Flyvberg (2006) states, “(T)he choice of method should clearly depend on the problem under study and its circumstances” (p. 226). The pre-pilot data collection and analysis determined the need for a case-study approach. The *problem of study*, or what Clarke might refer to as *the situation*, this question of “how do critical schooling actors at this successful school negotiate and re-appropriate school policy,” was context-dependent and offered the opportunity for in-depth study of how policy is socioculturally practiced. The high-profile circumstances of the school due to its amazing success also contributed. The pre-pilot made it apparent that OPHS was both an *extreme case* of success at an urban school and also a *critical case* of success at an

urban school. OPHS is an *extreme or atypical* case of how schooling actors negotiate and re-appropriate federal and district policies in ways that appear to actively promote the academic success of its students while averting the constraining effects of NCLB. The success of the school is dramatic and studying it reveals a great depth of information about how this negotiation process occurs. OPHS is also a *critical* case of urban student success in a struggling district. Because its student population resembles the populations of other struggling schools in the area, studying how it promotes the academic success of urban students is of strategic importance to schools inside and outside the district that work to educate students from similar backgrounds (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

How does one manage a case study with its endless possibilities for data collection? In order to answer my question, I used various sampling strategies and methods of data collection to create “slices of data” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2006) and multiple views of the policy appropriation process. I sliced out of the case multiple data sources creating a corpus that consisted of field notes, interview and focus group transcripts, email correspondences, and an archive of educational policy documents, print articles, high school yearbooks, and school and PTA websites. I broke the case study down into smaller samples of events or *situations* that I wanted to observe, critical actors that I wanted to interview, and policies and documents that I wanted to review.

### *Sampling strategies*

*1<sup>st</sup> Slice: Stratified purposeful sampling* - My first goal was to sample schooling actors and situations across the three academic programs (general college prep, advanced placement, and international baccalaureate), across all four grades 9-12, and across the largest racial

demographic categories, white and African American. Stratified purposeful sampling, a way to delineate the major classifications of participants in a study to illustrate characteristics and facilitate comparison (Patton, 2002, p. 240, 244) was the initial slicing method used in classroom selection along with some snowball sampling (Patton, 2002, p. 237). The humanities program served as purposeful sample selected from which to start, because all students were required to take one social studies course each year. Courses were offered at the college prep, AP, and IB level, giving me access to students across the three curriculums and four grades.

*Another Slice: Snowball Sampling* - With knowledge of these initial criteria Dr. Fisher and Dr. Davis identified three teachers in humanities whom they thought would be good participants and sources of information developing into a purposive sample. I used this small group of teachers to build my teacher and classroom pool through snowball sampling. The student sample was taken from those classrooms that I observed.

*Another Slice: Purposeful Random Sampling as an Ethical Move* - As an ethical move it was important to me to provide as much open access as possible to the study. Purposeful random sampling (Patton, 2002, p. 245) is a procedure for selecting participants often used to ensure credibility of small samples. I purposefully used random sampling, not to ensure credibility, but to try and democratize the research process. I made efforts to randomize opportunities for participation in my study, for example, by meeting teachers not identified in the snowball sample, often by approaching a strange face in the hallway. I used multiple venues to publicize the study to parents in hopes of getting both PTA and non-PTA parents. I used purposeful random sampling first, allowing students to volunteer to participate, and then snowball sampling and theoretical sampling to fill in demographic gaps.

*Another Slice: Theoretical Sampling* - Clarke (2005, p. xxxi) defines theoretical sampling as driven by theoretical concerns that have emerged in the provisional analysis, focused on finding new data sources that best address specific emerging facets of on-going analysis. As fieldwork proceeded I identified a major and unexpected phenomenon at the school, that being the racial stratification of enrollment across the humanities curriculum. This line of inquiry led me to ask a more general questions about how race works on practices of teaching and learning in a high-achieving school and more specific questions about the meaning of race in defining urban identity and enacting student subjectivity and the role of this process in policy appropriation. Theoretical sampling was used to broaden the student sample to increase the participation of African American students, students of color, and students in the general college prep curriculum, as their experiences with course selection and enrollment were pertinent to understanding how curriculum and instructional practices were racialized.

#### *Units of analysis*

*Situations* – As I engaged with the high school, I determined early on situations that I felt were critical to understanding the school. These included observations of the hallway, lunch time, bus arrival and departure, and humanities classrooms across the three tracks and four high school grades. Situations continued to emerge during participant observation and early interviews with Dr. Davis and Dr. Fisher leading me to science, art, and special education classrooms, the library, teacher's lounge, PTA meetings, the winter formal assembly, a play, the senior breakfast, and other events as they occurred.

*Schooling Actors* - I designated *schooling actors* (i.e. parents, teachers, students, and administrators) as a significant unit of analysis and used stratified purposeful sampling, snowball

sampling, purposeful random sampling, and theoretical sampling to develop an information rich case study that was representative, offered depth, and encouraged diverse accounts.

*Teachers and classrooms* – I interviewed and/or observed nine teachers. Five of the nine teachers taught social studies like Dr. Fisher at different levels and in different curriculum tracks. I chose to broaden this sample by observing and/or interviewing a Spanish teacher, the librarian, a special education teacher, and the Art teacher. I observed an AP chemistry class taught by the IB Theory of Knowledge teacher already in my sample. I also intentionally sought out the only two African American teachers at the school.

*Students* – Student participants were gathered via snowball sampling, theoretical sampling, and ethical sampling. Teachers that I observed allowed me to inform students of my study and hand out consent forms during class. Food and a five dollar gift card to a local book store served as incentives. Students then self-selected to participate, and I scheduled individual interviews and focus groups during their lunch periods or after school. 18 students returned consent forms, and 13 students were interviewed (see Appendix A). Within a few weeks of conducting interviews I determined that I needed to recruit more students of color, particularly African American males, advanced placement, and international baccalaureate students for both theoretical sampling reasons and to fill general gaps in the demographic make-up of the sample. Dr. Fisher helped me to identify students in his first period study hall that met the criteria, and four more students agreed to be interviewed during this time. Though I did interview two male students, one African American and one white, African American males in particular and males in general represent a gap in my sample.



*Parents* – I interviewed eleven parents individually or via focus groups, eight white females, one African American female, and two African American males (see Appendix A). They were parents of both male and female students in different grade levels and programs. Because I could not identify parents who met particular criteria, I utilized a variety of strategies to contact parents about the study to generate a purposeful random sample. I attended and spoke at a PTA meeting and collected the contact information of parents who were interested in participating. The PTA included information about my study in a newsletter that goes out to all dues-paying members and some parents contacted me after reading this. The Parent Consultant also published on three occasions a solicitation for my study along with the schedule of upcoming focus groups in the weekly email newsletter sent to all parents at the school.

Based on interest, I scheduled three focus groups to take place before evening PTA meetings that were held at different locations in the city to maximize participation. Seven parents were interviewed in focus groups. Three also took me up on my offer to interview them individually at a time and location convenient to them. One focus group had three registered participants but only one attended therefore shifting from a focus group to an interview. The entire parent sample is comprised of parents who are actively involved in the PTA, with the exception of one parent who is a dues-paying member but does not attend meetings. Solicitations in the weekly newsletter failed to generate the participation of parents not in the PTA. I also used the student consent form as an opportunity to encourage participation from this demographic. Four parents indicated their interest, but they did not respond to requests to set up interviews.

*Administrators* – I endeavored to interview all administrators and non-teaching academic staff. My sample includes the principal, one of the two assistant principals, both guidance counselors, the school police officer, and one parent consultant (see Appendix A). I had informal contact with several special education aids and the school security officer during the year. Due to time constraints and availability I did not interview the internship coordinator or any external program representatives that had limited contact with the school. I also excluded non-academic staff such as custodians, cafeteria workers, and office staff.

*“The ones that got away”* – In spite of my best efforts, there were participants that proved elusive and who’s interviews were (im)possible for me to capture during the course of the study. Boys served a sizable gap, and AP and IB students proved disinterested in participating. There were several individual students I wished to interview. For example, Esther and Cody, two students in a split class, are prevalent in my field notes, but I could not get interviews with them. I experienced this data as both a loss and lost; a loss of important voices and stories and lost opportunities to further explore, expand, and add nuance to this project. In recognition of this absence and failure, the interludes in this dissertation serve to gesture toward representing this loss, not in an effort to capture the ones that got away, but to allow the data to provide texture to the study and attempt to represent the experiences I witnessed that fed my analysis.

*Document Archive* – The document archive is comprised of fifty policy and non-policy documents. In the early stages of my project I did a great deal of research on federal, state, and district policy and OPHS. These documents were key in compiling data tables and locating key policies that framed practice. I also reviewed yearbooks and collected newspaper and magazine articles, editorials, and related media that discussed the school, its awards, or its impact on the

community and provided sources of social, historical, and discursive data. School and PTA websites were also used as documents to map activities and practices. Throughout the data collection I built an archive of curriculum materials, district pacing guides, and scheduling guides that were included in the analysis.

### *Methods of Data Collection*

#### *Ethnographic methods*

Educational ethnographies might be characterized as “research on and in educational institutions based on participant observation and/or permanent recordings of everyday life” (Delamont and Atkinson, 1995, p. 15, quoted in Gordon, Holland, & Lahelma, 2001). Participant observation is typically defined as the core activity of ethnography and involves pro-longed engagement with the field site and immersion of the researcher into the “strange” social world of one’s subjects. Field notes serve as a written production of representation that is contemporaneous, selective, descriptive, and cumulative (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001). For the purposes of this dissertation I attempted to stay within these definitions, acknowledging that I was more observer than participant in most instances and that my version of prolonged engagement did not measure up to the yard stick of more traditional anthropological studies.<sup>17</sup> I

---

<sup>17</sup> By more traditional anthropological studies I am referring to the research of Margaret Mead, Hortense Powdermaker, Franz Boas, or Bronislaw Malinowski for example which represent this archetype, an archetype which is arguably a simulacrum, or a copy of an ideal anthropology that does not really exist.

also resist being completely “disciplined” by the discipline of traditional ethnography (Gonzalez, 2004), and assert an “ethnography of ruins” (Lather, 2001) that is suspicious of reified notions of culture, subject/object, researcher, field, representation, and knowledge production through ethnography.

I consider the field to be not only the material school location experienced by participants and myself, but also a “product” of my interaction and writing that is constructed in and through the inscription and transcription process. I also consider the field to be multi-sited and include “discursive textual, visual, and archival historical materials and documents, as well as ethnographic (interview and observational) transcripts and field notes to more fully take into account the complexities of postmodern life” (Clarke, 2005, p.xxxiii). The school itself served as the primary location, but the field expanded beyond the walls of the school into offices, libraries, parking lots, and coffee shops and also accounts for documents and materials that expand the situation of inquiry.

I always carried a steno notebook with me and openly recorded field notes during my observations and interviews. By the end of the year I filled four of these notebooks which were elaborated on and typed up daily. There were occasions when conversations with teachers or students turned into informal interviews. Rather than interrupt the conversation by digging around in my bag for my journal or asking if I could turn on my digital recorder, these were privately recorded by hand in my journal once the conversations were over.

My field journal is also a reflexive journal, gesturing toward a “subversive repetition” of autoethnography. One definition of autoethnography constructs it as a first-person account of the research experience by the author to disrupt the dichotomy of self and other and to trouble

conventions of representing culture (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003). The reflexive journal component of ethnography, while considered important, is often situated as outside the genre of ethnography or relegated to the appendix of studies. Writers like Laurel Richardson, Ruth Behar, and Carolyn Ellis (Behar, 1993; Ellis, 2004; Richardson, 1997) write the researcher and the process of representation at the center of ethnographic projects. Conversely, Van Maanen (1988) warns of the dangers of “vanity ethnography” and confessional tales that stall the original intent of research, that of describing and interpreting the happenings of others (p. 93). Shulamit Reinharz’ *On Becoming a Social Scientist* (1993) and Patti Lather’s *Getting Lost* (2007) serve as (post) autoethnographic models. These two books demonstrate a “subversive repetition” of autoethnography, one where “the research experience constitutes not only the site but also the data for an engaged critique and articulation of practice” (Childers, 2008, p. 300). Experiences and ethical wrestlings that served as fertile fodder for the methodological and theoretical decisions made during my project are therefore not excluded to a disenfranchised location in my hard drive.

#### *Data management*

I use Nvivo 8 computer-assisted data management software to store and analyze the data. I also codeD transcripts and documents by hand. Every effort has been made to protect the confidentiality of the school and subjects in the study. Pseudonyms were used when referring to the school and participants. All printed transcripts and field journals are kept in a locked file drawer in my home office, computer files are password protected, and only I have access to these files. All audio files will be destroyed three years after the study ends.

### *Data Analysis: Ethics of Disruption*

The goal here is to ethically ground the findings in a methodological and epistemological practice that equally privileges the complications and discontinuities with the concurrencies in making claims about how policy is articulated as practices of success in this urban school. I establish the criteria of my study through an ethics of disruption. This project views the representations of study participants and data as situated, (sometimes) subjugated, and embodied (Haraway, 2004); complicated, unknowable, non-innocent, and uncomfortable (Lather, 2007); and produced by and productive of the matrices of power embedded in the discursive history of social and institutional relations (Foucault, 1970, 1972/1980, 2000). As such, it is about discourse, history, and the material experiences of students in an urban school. It simultaneously recognizes “the crisis of representation” and holds onto a theory of knowledge that confronts rather than solidifies romanticized visions of urban students by using the varied and often divergent accounts of schooling actors to destabilize and disrupt what we think we know about urban students as subjects and agents in their own education. In this project, divergence, disruption, destabilization, and deconstructions are the marks of an ethical practice.

### *On-going Data Collection and Analysis*

This project was designed to be flexible and emergent. While the initial question entailed understanding how this successful school operates under NCLB, data collection significantly expanded the field on knowledge and complicated this question. Using a constant comparative approach, on-going data collection was meshed with the simultaneous comparative analysis of data as it was collected into the data corpus. This initial question developed layers of

understanding when being analyzed from different methodological vantage points and therefore required a further elaborated theoretical sampling based on these generative categories. This grounded and situational approach allowed for emergent themes and questions, identified saturation points, and brought attention to gaps. As such this process was invaluable to not only delimiting the scope of the project, but also served to broaden the project by exposing it to new situations, possibilities, and unknowns (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001; Clarke, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2006).

### *Discourse Analysis*

I use foucaultian-poststructural analysis to code ethnographic data to look at how official policies structure discourses that define success, achievement, and urban school; how practices are produced in relation to these official discourses; how schooling actors work within and against policy discourses through their practices; and how urban student identity and subjectivity are enacted through these processes.

Ball (1997) sees the power of discourse analysis for policy studies, stating that, Discourse provides a particular and pertinent way of understanding policy formation, for policies are, pre-eminently, statements about practice – the way things could or should be – which rest upon, derive from, statements about the world – the way things are...Policies embody claims to speak with authority, they legitimate and initiate practices in the world, and they privilege certain visions and interests. They are power/knowledge configurations *par excellence* (p. 22).

He also sees discourse analysis as empirical work, stating that, “The test of the discourse is its effectiveness, not its coherence: what it does, not what it says. The extent to which the possibilities of policy making have been captured by and through this discourse is finally an empirical question” (p. 59).

### *Disruptive Validity*

Validity is a contested term to say the least (Lather, 1997). This project establishes its credibility through what would be considered more regulatory validity practices but with a twist. I utilize these practices to privilege disruptions and emphasize complications in the data as a form of ethical and therefore valid inquiry. There are also *validity moments* that transpired as a result of the research process, but not of my own purposeful doing, that demonstrate the transformative and reciprocal potential in research. The validity here is produced through “a space of relational practices in situated contexts of inquiry” (Lather, 1997) and with a desire to practice some sort of *disruptive validity* as the mark of its legitimacy.

### *Triangulation as an Ethics of Disruption*

In a move to correct the recalcitrancies of traditional grounded theory Clarke calls for researchers to:

...complicate our stories, represent not only difference(s) but even contradictions and incoherencies in the data, note other possible readings, and at least note some of anxieties and omissions...find ways of discussing that which we have in the past scraped or trimmed off or somehow left behind in our research process while still telling coherent



analytic tales. We need to address head-on the inconsistencies, irregularities, and downright messiness of the empirical world (p.15).

I quote Clarke at length because I am interested in what it would mean to not leave behind, scrape, or trim off inconsistencies for future reflexive engagement, but to utilize this messiness as the very energy and product of research.

Triangulation is typically defined as a marker of credibility that uses a variety of methods, data sets, theories, or researchers to assure the believability and trustworthiness of findings. I use triangulation of methods and data sets to elucidate the concurrencies and complications simultaneously and use their tensions as the force of inquiry.

#### *Consent/Confidentiality/Rapport*

I gained consent through normal methods, ensuring parental consent forms were signed for minors and reviewing the parameters of consent with both adults and students before beginning interviews (see Appendix B). I presented myself as an outsider, a university student interested in conducting a study about the success of Ohio Public High School. The school was used to receiving accolades and praise, therefore making my presence acceptable and welcomed. I think being short, female, and relatively young lent to the unassuming nature of me and my study. I was careful with my dress to ensure my credibility with staff. I purchased two pairs of dress pants and a few shirts that mimicked the style of dress worn by female teachers and was sometimes asked if I was a substitute for a class I was observing. On a few occasions though I was mistaken as a student by other students, and I used these as opportunities for informal interviews or to make students aware of my study.

I maintained this form of rapport throughout the year. Students who agreed to be interviewed were most always eager to talk and were forthcoming. Teachers and staff likewise were at least willing to answer my questions, even those about race and enrollment. Towards the end of my study, after sharing with Dr. Fisher a piece of an interview with a student that indicated possible discrimination by the school through course scheduling, the tenor of contact with administration changed. The vice principal and I had a somewhat heated exchange about the reason and nature of my questions about the stratification of enrollment that I observed at the school, and he was very clear that he found my line of inquiry to be off base, but he was still none the less willing to complete his interview with some sense of amicability after that discussion. The principal, who offered continuous support for my project and suggested multiple venues for observation that she felt were important, was less enthusiastic in June when I talked with her briefly about attending the senior banquet and graduation.

When I returned to the school for member checks, I was greeted with a renewed interest in the project by the PTA and the principal. I attribute this to a series of district policy changes that school staff and parents perceived to put their strong and successful program at risk.

#### *Member Check and Reciprocity*

Member checks proved difficult to set up, but by mid-January 2010 some issues began to arise between the school and the district that prompted parents to contact me. After getting caught in the political crossfire between parents and the school, I was granted a meeting with the principal and assistant principal, a coordinator who was not at OPHS during my study, four PTA parents, and one teacher. It proved to be a very successful member check, both in terms of

feedback and further access. I shared a preliminary report (see Appendix B) of my findings which produced ample discussions about changes that have occurred at the school since last year, their reactions to my project, and their generous comments and critique about my take on their school. I was invited back to the school to share my report with teachers at a staff meeting in February.

Three parents whose students have since graduated contacted me to review my findings.<sup>18</sup> We met at a local restaurant, and they shared their renewed concerns for the school and what the impending changes would mean for the program. They also asked for suggestions and recommendations. They encouraged me to offer the principal the opportunity to continue working with me in a professional development capacity and the former president asked if she could speak with someone at the district level regarding their potential interest in my research. As a result of this meeting, I was encouraged to think about continuing my research here if it would serve useful to the school.

I presented the preliminary report to approximately forty teachers, counselors, and administrators at the principal's request. The staff focused most intently on the data about racialized enrollment, asking for concrete suggestions and recommendations, as well as wrestling with the implications of the findings for their teaching. Dr. Davis was instrumental in supporting

---

<sup>18</sup> One of these parents, a previous PTA president who had originally contacted me about sharing my findings, had met with me during the pre-pilot and had been very forthcoming about political issues the school had with the district.

my data and raising important questions during the meeting. I have not been able to contact students for member checks. An analysis of these member checks is included in Chapter 4.

Throughout the course of my study I was troubled by the lack of reciprocity. I delivered cookies at Christmas, provided refreshments for focus groups, brought pizza or donuts to student interviews, and always offered Dr. Fisher the leftovers. On occasion I brought him a cup of coffee. Once I made photocopies, but other than that my presence was of little use during fieldwork. When parents began contacting me in January there was a renewed sense that my research could be useful to them in their discussions with the district. The principal also expressed after the first meeting how important she thought it was for her staff to hear what I had to say, particularly about issues of race, so that she could continue to move them forward in addressing the issue. She talked about how during her dissertation study on teacher beliefs she learned how engrained their beliefs can be and how they impact teaching. I definitely sensed from her that the race issue had been a struggle, and that by explicitly addressing racialized enrollment in my study I was opening a door for her that possibly she did not feel she could open as an African American woman and new principal.

### *Conclusion*

The methodological approach laid out in this chapter was developed as a preemptive response to the expectation that a *qualitative* study of *policy as practice* in an *urban* high school would engender many tensions not often attended to in traditional policy research. Analyzing policies: 1) through social, cultural, and historical foundations; 2) through the prisms of race, socioeconomics, and difference; 3) in, on, and through the material body; and 4) as produced by

and productive of power/knowledge and discourse required a different set of methodologies and epistemologies. The goal of this framework was to support a research design that accommodated these tensions and laid the groundwork for an analysis that privileges complications and disruptions in the data as a form of valid and ethical inquiry. Chapters 4 and 5 offer an analysis of how OPHS struggles within and against educational policy, conceptualizations and commitments to academic achievement, and the racialization of success.

## Chapter 4

### Subverting and Being Subverted: How OPHS Negotiates District, State, and Federal Policy

#### *Introduction*

This chapter documents policy as practice at OPHS. It looks at how this high school successfully negotiates or subverts the constraints of federal and district policies in way that support the achievement of their students. It also assesses how its success is *punished* by district specific district policies and programs instituted to meet the terms of NCLB that undermine the successful curriculum and instruction practices at OPHS.

#### *Curriculum and Instruction as Policy as/in Practice*

*“State Standards are the Minimum of What We Do:” Curriculum and Instruction Practices That Subvert the Constraining Effects of NCLB and Support Student Success*

The Humanities program, an integrated social studies and English curriculum created and piloted by a teacher at OPHS in 1985, is considered a cornerstone of the OPHS experience and has served as a model for other schools in the district looking to institute an innovative and challenging program. During my time at OPHS, they offered the core humanities courses along with AP and IB offerings that would also fulfill the English and Social Studies requirements for graduation. Each year students had more curricular options, and with these options came more stratification of enrollment, but their freshman year was dedicated to the Introduction to Humanities course.

Freshmen Humanities is the only course that all students are required to take creating a commonality amongst them and a shared experience. It was often referred to as the “bootcamp,”

because the class is in part designed to acclimate students to the culture of high expectations and familiarize them with the skills needed to be successful in this school. Mrs. Scott and Mr. Springer were part of the humanities team and team-taught Intro to Humanities. They discussed with me the ideas and cultural expectations transmitted through the curriculum that help students to learn “why it’s a privilege to be here...There’s a certain responsibility that they have to have as a student here – to be respectful of others, to accept others, to respectfully question, to not just be satisfied by just doing the minimum...That its ok to stand alone as long as you’re very convicted, and you’re not inappropriate or rude by standing alone” [Interview, 2/17/09].

OPHS was also notorious for its summer reading assignments. Beginning the summer before freshman year, all students are required to read two books each summer and complete an essay assignment in preparation for the year. The assignment was worth approximately 250 points, half of their first semester grade, and this was often a point of contention. Summer reading texts served as the foundation of the humanities curriculum each year and also re-emphasized the academic mission and goals of the school. Many of the texts chosen, even that first year, were college-level. Students I interviewed spoke with a sense of pride and accomplishment about reading Homer’s *The Odyssey* their freshman year whereas other students in their eyes may not have access to such works until senior year or even college.

I observed the first block Introduction to Humanities course that was taught in the red trailer next to the school that served as the “humanities annex.” During the year of my fieldwork, a small section of the main building had also been sectioned off from upper classmen and designated the “Freshman Academy” to give first year students more time to adjust to high school. The annex was the size of a long double-wide trailer. The back half was set up for the

Socratic Seminar with tables arranged in a block O to allow for discussion. The front half of the room was filled with approximately 50 tightly packed desks.

During my observations I made note of explicit skills and behaviors that the students learned during class to prepare them for the next four years as well as for college. Each 9<sup>th</sup> grader carried around a large 3-inch binder with their last name on the spine. This binder was designed to hold all their notes, handouts, and materials for the course as well as important information for 9<sup>th</sup> grade. It was to serve as a reference for their entire academic career while at OPHS, something they could go back to if they needed to refresh their memory about history of early man, the poetry of Ralph Waldo Emerson, or the procedures for the Socratic Seminar used in the majority of the social studies courses.

The following excerpt from my field notes gives an indication of what I observed on a typical morning in humanities. School had been in session for roughly one month, and I was immediately impressed with by the level of discussion being generated in the classroom so early in the year, the ability of the students to sustain engagement through multiple tasks, the ease at which college preparation skills were being taught to such a large group, and the expectations and responsibilities assumed by the students to prepare for class:

*I walk in a few minutes late and take a seat in the back of the class. The long rows of kids obediently face the teacher at the front. Mrs. Scott is talking about the PSAT to be given next Wednesday, the X period, and Project Mentor. I learn that the students have Chinese, theater, band, chorus, and other co-curricular courses as options during their X period, and that there will be 2 shadowing days to help them start thinking about internships.*

*The week's homework is posted on a large sticky note on the wall:  
Monday: Discuss Ishmael. Read chapter 1 of history.  
Tuesday: Textbook due; Early Hominid notes; Chapters 1 & 2 notes due  
Wednesday: Big Bang Timeline & Begin Packet; Notes for homework*



*Thursday: Begin Hominid History in class. Notes for homework*

*Friday: Finish Hominid Notes; Read and annotate article for homework. Inherit the Wind due 10/23.*

*Ms.. Riley, who typically teaches upper classman but is filling in for Mrs. Scott, takes over as Mrs. Scott disappears to the other side of the classroom and then leaves. Ms. Riley instructs everyone to take all things off their desks and then walks them through taping together a timeline made from three worksheets. They pass tape dispensers back through the rows with little to no disruption. She asks them to think about “What is history?” and “Where did history begin?”*

*I count 45 students, 17 male and 26 female, racially mixed. The room is decorated with posters of Shakespeare, Plato, Aristotle, a bulletin board about early man, Davinci, student art and masks. There are dictionaries under each student desk and everyone has a 3 inch binder with their name slid into the side.*

*The students are asked to get out their highlighters and pencils. The timeline of early man is coupled with a packet of articles about discovering early human remains. She asks, “What is history to you?” and “when does history begin?” She is learning their names as hands go up to answer. They respond with answers like “when it started being recorded”, “(history has) always been – not always recorded”, “...everything that has happened in the past.” It’s unbelievably easy to generate discussion. At least 5 hands go up each time she asks for responses. Everyone seems engaged; there is no talking or disruption. The second teacher, Mr. Springer, remains at the back of the students wearing a sweatshirt and jeans. He interjects questions and makes additional points.*

*They are learning to take notes. Students volunteer to read passages out of the packet and she guides them to highlight appropriate information and define terms as they go. It’s a very good lesson in not only how to study at OPHS, but it also prepares them for college. Looking at this class I wonder who in here is of that top 10%. They all look like they are today. I am very impressed by some of the discussion about time and other questions that get asked in relation to the texts. I do notice though that an African American boy sitting up against the wall has his hand up constantly, but is never called on. He doesn’t draw a lot of attention to himself. The bell rings and kids go to the other side of the trailer to pick up their backpacks. Both teachers also head back to the main building.*

[Field Notes, 10/8/08]

Each day I observed the class took on a similar process involving a great deal of discussion and independent thinking coupled with practical college preparatory skills and a

foundational knowledge base. The OGT test was never discussed while I was in the classroom, and the 9<sup>th</sup> grade history curriculum appeared to provide little tested information on the OGT.

During an interview I asked Mrs. Scott and Mr. Springer to talk about how they negotiate state social studies standards and preparation for the Ohio Graduation Test with their specialized curriculum. It was their successful re-appropriation of standards-based accountability policy through their humanities format that subverted the constraining effects of NCLB while still supporting student achievement on standardized tests through meaningful and relevant learning opportunities.

Humanities teachers at OPHS perceive state standards as having limited to no impact on their classrooms. Mr. Jones candidly explains,

I can't quote state standards. I know what they are, but I couldn't recite them to you, but I think all the standards are built in (to the curriculum)...*State standards are the minimum of what (we do).* (We do) a lot of higher level thinking and analyzing of literature and also discuss history, so the standards are in there, *if anything what we do is probably exceed even what the standards are asking.* It's not like we have a certain standard in mind when we are looking at Mesopotamia or Ancient Rome...Standards don't drive what we do, and I think the test scores show that the kids are still getting that (the standards) even without emphasizing standard this, standard that.

[Interview, 2/17/09, italics mine]

These teachers also perceive that NCLB and high stakes testing have had limited impact on their teaching, because the school's self-imposed and long-term overarching mission to

prepare students for college already had them meeting and exceeding these standards. Mrs. Scott makes clear that the high stakes testing has historically had limited impact in the school,

...So when tests like the Ohio Proficiency Test came along in the 90's and then the Ohio Graduation Test, the only thing we've done in the humanities is look at the standards the first year that the test comes out and we make sure that we already do what is asked. If there appears to be a hole somewhere that we miss then we incorporate it into our curriculum as part of our embedded curriculum. And then we don't discuss it anymore, it just becomes part of what we do. Students don't hear us say anything about the OGT hardly ever, because our goal is not to scare them about the fact that they have to remember on Wednesday October 13 that this will be on the OGT. We want them to understand the cause and effect of history and analysis of literature and historiography. If they're getting the skills that we think are preparing them for college we believe we've set the curriculum to where it's embedded for the OGT standards.

[Interview, 2/17/09]

When asked why OPHS students do so well on the OGT, in comparison to the majority of other schools in the district that are perceived to be intently focused on the test, they argue that the strict adherence to the benchmarks and the pressure of the OGT undermines other students and other schools. OGT preparation, characterized by a lack of context for knowledge and its dislocation from meaning and understanding, has limited ability to prepare student for the OGT and is perceived as "losing" students rather than capturing their attention and supporting learning. Mrs. Scott explains,

I can tell you from experience at other schools and working with the social studies curriculum coordinator that (OGT test preparation) is all that is being taught. ...so if all that's being taught are GLI's (guided learning indicators) and benchmarks for the OGT then somewhere along the way those students aren't understanding why its important to know it. When they walk into class in many high schools in this district, students will see on the board the actual indicator they're supposed to be learning today. So it gets lost, because it's not relevant, and it's definitely not interesting and meaningful.

[Interview, 2/17/09]

Another interesting paradox is that American History, which is tested on the OGT, is not explicitly covered by freshman humanities and in a very limited way during the sophomore year. Students do not actually take an American History course until their junior year, but they continue to do exceptionally well on the OGT their 10<sup>th</sup> grade year. Mrs. Scott again believes that is the relevance that is instilled in the curriculum and instruction at OPHS that allows students to do well even without specifically being exposed to the material:

They have a whole year of American History and of World History in other high schools, and our students do not...We embed as much as we can of the American History that is required on the OGT, as strange as its sounds, to the Ancient course as well as World...if we're looking at the development of the government in Athens for democracy then we're going to study the types of government systems and economic systems which are OGT requirements...We just remind them that America, coming after these great civilizations, has mirrored many of the practices of these civilizations... *And it's meaningful. They understand it that way. And I can't speak to why they* (students at other schools) *are not*

*doing well on tests, because they're exposed to the material...My assumption however is that it's just not relevant, the way it's being presented.*

[Interview, 2/17/09, italics mine]

Other teachers at OPHS also agree that “No Child Left Behind sets a bottom level.” Mr. Hart, who teaches 10<sup>th</sup> grade world history, 11<sup>th</sup> grade split, and AP US History talks at length in our interview about the limited effect of NCLB on his curricular and instructional practices:

Sara: Can you talk how NCLB affects your teaching?

Mr. Hart: Yes. Not at all (with a laugh). I don't think that there has been a tremendous impact on what we do here...But in terms of my daily day to day practice *No Child Left Behind sets a bottom level*. Maybe, I don't know the relationship between NCLB and the OGT, because we gear some of our curriculum to the OGT but not a tremendous amount...if NCLB and the OGT are the bottom level we're really shootin' at a much higher level. *On a daily basis very little impact on my teaching.*

[Interview, 1/21/09]

Mr. Hart's content and instructional decisions are made with a great sense of autonomy and independence, and are not perceived to be at all driven by NCLB:

Sara: Is the content based on state standards? Is that how you decided what to teach?

Mr. Hart: Not really.

Sara: and there's no testing you have to worry about?

Mr. Hart: For lack of a better pattern, it's driven somewhat by the textbook, what I have there (he points to a bookcase filled with ringed binders that he has assembled on

different historical topics) that would be meaningful for them, and what I can do... You have to make choices.

Sara: You have a binder that says civil rights and desegregation. So are those your choices or are they driven by something external?

Mr. Hart: *No those are my choices.*

Sara: What makes you decide you want to teach that material? The type of students you're working with...what you think is important?

Mr. Hart: Certainly what I think is important. I know so much more history than I ever did, yet when I look at any particularly thing I think I don't know enough. That leads me to constantly go back and re-write it and if possible spend time on things that I think are important. *But it's all sort of self driven.*

I spent a great deal of time in Mr. Hart's 11<sup>th</sup> grade split course. I was always intrigued and impressed by his ability to deliver content in the often disruptive classroom. In comparison to the seemingly calm and academically engaged Freshman Humanities, AP, and IB classes I observed, Mr. Hart appeared to have his work cut out for him when teaching the split. In an upcoming section I will spend more time discussing Mr. Hart's classroom in terms race works in practices of enrollment at OPHS.

In sum, there is a great deal of research and critical analysis of how NCLB narrows the curriculum, promotes "teaching to the test," undermines teacher morale and efficacy, and perpetuates the achievement gap rather than closing it. In this analysis, policy is viewed as lived behaviors, or practices, that are part of the social context and fabric of OPHS. They are both constrained and enabled by existing structures, but through negotiation actors may find

opportunities for resistance, refashioning, or reifying existing policy structures. I identify NCLB and state accountability measures as the existing structures that actors work within and against.

The practices of curriculum and instruction as evidenced in the humanities classrooms provide examples of *policy appropriation* and *policy (as) practice* that help us to see how critical actors negotiate the constraints of policy in the context of everyday teaching and learning. As a form of *policy negotiation*, teachers determine the meaning of NCLB for their classrooms, and in this case, NCLB means little to how they shape their practices. This meaning is socially contingent on the context of OPHS. If it were not for its longstanding reputation as a high achieving school and the test scores, graduation rates, and college attendance rates to support this reputation, teachers would not have the power to negotiate policy in ways that preserve the humanities curriculum and college preparation focus of the school. Their student success has afforded them a luxury of having some local control over their curriculum and their teaching.

Teachers serve as creative agents that take NCLB policy and meld it, or *appropriate* it, to meet the needs of their school. Their practices are examples of the pedagogical agency possible when teachers and schools make local decisions about how to best meet the needs of students within the constraints of state requirements. As a practice, state accountability standards set a minimum benchmark for student achievement at OPHS. College preparation and the expectations of the humanities curriculum supercede federal guidelines. Through their advanced coursework the school sets its own standards that both prepare students for standardized testing and graduation requirements and subvert the constraining effects of NCLB by holding themselves accountable to college preparation standards that require more than “teaching to the test”. In this case, NCLB policy is requirement that must be met and the OGT is a test that must

be passed, but they are otherwise insignificant to teachers or students. OPHS measures its accountability based on college preparation, high expectations, and the meaningfulness and relevance of the curriculum to its students.



*Ethnographic Moment*

We'll have "The Bomb" Seminar: 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Humanities Socratic Seminar

One of the points of pride for teachers and hallmarks of the Humanities program was the Socratic Seminar. I was very impressed with students' ability to rise to the challenge of preparing and participating in a formal, student-lead discussion. This ethnographic moment shares students' excitement and engagement through seminar.

*Cheering and clapping about the election of Barak Obama as President erupts from the huge class of between 40 and 50 students. After a short discussion, they proceed to seminar. They need their name tags, seminar notes and copy of the book. He reviews the seminar protocol – calling each other by Mr., Ms., or Miss and last name, do not interrupt, do not a shout out. Since this class is team taught they are split in half, and I follow Dr. Fisher's group into the seminar room next door.*

*I sit at a small desk belonging to an English teacher. I can tell based on the paraphernalia. There's a bumper sticker on the wall that says "reading is sexy". I agree. Once an autoshop, the seminar room also has wooden cubicles built into the perimeter to serve as tiny office spaces. Most are crammed with books, and desks overflow with lesson plans and stacks of papers.*

*There are no long silences. The seminar is student directed, they are well prepared, and I can see that most of them have their notes and quotes ready. The discussion is dominated by the girls, and the same students carry the majority of the conversation. Not to belittle them, but their discussion is cute. The umm's and likes are mixed with citations of Kant and Hobbes as they reference secondary sources to construct their arguments.*

*There are nine African American females, six African American males, four white females, and one white male. All the boys sit together. A tall thin white female with braces starts the discussion using the guide sheet, but no one responds to her. Another African American girl continues. Two African American girls enthusiastically carry on a fun-spirited discussion. Eventually some of the African American males join. I notice the thick urban accent of a third white female.*

*The class moves back together, and they are asked to take out notes about pre-writing their essay. "Keep it down, we're not done," Dr. Fisher shouts over the loud talking and laughing. A boy is pulling on a girl's bra strap in the back of the class. The teachers are checking notes. Dr. Fisher calls up a girl that did not participate in the seminar. "You have all these notes and you didn't say a thing...I don't understand why you don't talk in seminar." He gives the class his public speaking lecture. One of the two enthusiastic girls says excitedly, "We'll have the bomb seminar" if they can get 100% participation...*

*[Field Notes, 11/6/08]*

As we will see in the next section, OPHS did not escape the standards and accountability game unscathed. OGT preparation in past years was perceived by many to be a thorn in the side of the school's curriculum. Similarly the district's focus on graduation rates under NCLB and the implementation of credit recovery to boost these rates was viewed by participants as undermining the academic climate of the school and their ability to propel students toward educational success.

*Standards and Accountability: How to Punish What Really Works*

*District NCLB Policy Practices That Undermine Success at OPHS: OGT Preparation and Credit Recovery*

As seen in data just presented, the OPHS worked within and against NCLB to promote student achievement on its own terms. Under the rhetoric of standards and accountability, what worked at this school might appear counterintuitive – a humanities based curriculum that eschewed guided learning indicators and benchmarks for meaningful teaching and learning, college preparation as a substitute for test preparation, and high expectations for all rather than for just some students. OPHS is but one school in a large urban district that was placed on Academic Emergency in 1998 and has struggled since to increase its graduation rates and test scores. Two of the ways the district has attempted to do this is through OGT preparation and Credit Recovery. The idea that the state and the district inflict punishment on OPHS through these policies and programs might seem harsh, but as we shall see, participants described their experiences in punishing ways.

### *OGT preparation*

Though OPHS does exceedingly well on state tests, for faculty and staff, the OGT did cause some concern. For staff there was an internal pressure to always do better, as Dr. Fisher explains, “We tend to get higher passages on standardized tests. But here its not just passing, it has to be superlative. So if we’re at a 91, they why aren’t we at a 92? If we’re at a 92, how dare we go back to 90” [Interview, 1/21/09].

When I asked the counselor Mrs. Altman if the school was concerned about test scores, she said “of course” [Interview, 2/18/09]. She explained how they broke up into groups at the start of the school year to look at the test score data and discuss improving particular sections of the OGT. The idea was that all staff would come together to address the issue. “I understand you’re an art teacher, but the discussion today is how are we going to improve this section of the OGT. We’re not hitting it for some reason. Why do you think we’re not hitting it? What can we do?” In spite of the school’s Excellent rating, accountability stood outside the doors of everyone’s classroom.

She goes on to clarify that it is not just about test scores. The OGT as a measure of accountability produced a set of demands for basic accountability and measurable success that had to be balanced against desires to ensure that students avoid the “heartbreak” of failing high school:

We want them to be well prepared. If it ain’t broke don’t fix it. We do very well on reading and writing especially. Do they look at factoring in things for OGT? Of course they do, but that’s not necessarily what I’ve heard a lot of discussion about. Do we

maybe want to address math/science in a different way? Yeah. And they have. And will they continue to look at how things have worked when they tweak it? Yeah. *You want the kids to have the basics. You want your program to do well. And you want as many kids, because if they don't pass the OGT they could conceivably not graduate* for now, of course, those benchmarks may be changing. *You don't want (that), none of us wants (that), that's heartbreaking and stressful.*

Test scores indicated struggling students at risk for not graduating if they failed to pass the required OGT. According to Mr. Westfall, test scores competed with concerns for students:

We talk about it some, because there's still some kids that haven't passed. Those half a dozen kids that haven't passed the science OGT are still an issue, particularly as they get older and it's time for them to start thinking about graduating. Yes it is, and we try to put some informal support systems in place, extra tutoring that kind of stuff. But it's not an enormous problem here like it is for some of our sister schools. We do want everybody to pass just like they do. *If two kids haven't passed it's an issue.*

Sara: Are you concerned about your scores or the students?

Mr. Westfall: I guess I would say probably both. *The thing that gets our attention is the scores.* For example, in the courses that I teach I don't even know these kids (the ones that do not pass the OGT) so I'm not going to be concerned about them as individuals. That's not my impetus, because I don't even know them. The thing that identifies them...you know we get memos that say "here's the list. They haven't passed". So that's more about the system as opposed to the individual. When you get to know the

kids, you start tutoring with them, particularly the ones that want to partner with you and learn some stuff, then yes it does become about the individual kids. For teachers that know the kids it may be about them.

[Interview, 3/11/09]

The data above demonstrates a shift in language brought on by the pressures of accountability. The shift brings into a sharp relief how test scores can dominate discussions at even the most successful schools and suck time and energy away from the curriculum and instruction practices that this school deemed effective and meaningful. It lowered discussion back to what Mr. Springer referred to earlier as “the bottom level” or “the minimum of what we do.”

Teachers discussed how in early years of the OGT OPHS did attempt different strategies to help fully prepare students coming from the different middle schools with different academic backgrounds. Early on the humanities program tried to supplement the curriculum with direct OGT preparation. Mr. Hart talked about how, in spite of the fact that students always scored well in social studies, the school sacrificed a unique Wednesday curriculum to OGT preparation which he found to be a “dreadful” and difficult experience for teachers and students alike:

Sara: Are you under the gun to generate tests scores?

Mr. Hart: For whatever reason our OGT test scores have been really good. We’ve worked on improving them, and we’ve worked on coming up with new ways of using particularly the Wednesdays. When I first came here Wednesday class used to be your area of interest. People made up all kinds of really fun classes – propaganda,

mythology... I did a class on Journalism, which I won't do again. *People did all these really interesting classes based on their own interests.* Once OGT became an issue we were faced with (that) our freshmen and sophomore curriculums don't teach American History. They're tested basically on American History. We had to find a way to prepare them for that test. ...we took the components and tried to work it into the regular curriculum and then we used the Wednesday class to teach the things that were left over. So basically we would teach American History from the industrial age to WWI, through the progressive era and a few topics. *It was dreadful.*

Sara: Dreadful...painful?

Mr. Hart: *Painful.* It would start out that the first few weeks were ok. The freshman were still figuring out what this Wednesday thing was, *but by the middle of the school year, the curriculum is completely different from the rest of the week and it was like 'you have to remember American History again now.'* Just a lot of pressure all to meet the OGT. This year we ended up just teaching the regular curriculum. We'll take those pieces and work them in. But if you take a look at the test scores on the OGT the reason we can do that is our test scores are so much better than the district.

[Interview, 1/21/09]

Even though Mr. Hart did not feel he was “under the gun” to produce test scores, he still experienced the “dreadful” and “painful” toll of accountability on his classroom and his teaching. This discussion stands in stark contrast to his comments in the first section of this chapter where he talks about the personal choice and freedom he experienced as a teacher at OPHS. When the

school attempted to take on NCLB *on the state's terms*, teachers and staff experienced the punishing, painful, and dreadful effects of accountability.

Dr. Steele, the parent of a sophomore, described her daughter's experience with OGT preparation. Like Mr. Hart, she characterized this diversion from the normal OPHS curriculum as painful:

In their freshman year, last year, since the freshman are the only ones not having internships, Wednesday was OGT prep day. They had these classes in every subject that were designed to cover the things were on the OGT that are not part of the OPHS normal curriculum, because OPHS' curriculum is different from all the other high schools. *My daughter found it excruciating.* They'd have sessions on statistics, certain aspects of American History that don't get taught until later. They did try to do this in a sort of logical way working through history. I have no idea. The kids are very stressed about it, I know.

[Interview, 12/3/08]

What Mr. Hart and this parent found painful and punishing was the interruption of interesting and meaningful curricula for test preparation "that is completely different from the rest of the week", made up of "leftovers" and lacking context. Both students and teachers found this appropriation of NCLB policy to be punishing to their curriculum and interests, creating a source of stress for teachers and students.

Dr. Steele further indicated throughout the interview that she was disgusted by the impact of NCLB on public schools and leveraged the failure of schools back on the system itself:

But the system is insane. It (OGT) just seems like this stupid hurdle that obviously if the classes are sufficiently rigorous, and the kids are getting graded, and they weren't doing credit recovery then we wouldn't have graduation tests. Then you would simply have to have passed a certain number of courses. *The fact that we have to even have such a test just goes to show that the system itself is failing.*

In this data teachers and staff talk about moments when they embraced NCLB on the state's terms and the effects of playing the standards and accountability game. We see a shift in concerns from talk of meaningful curriculum and relevant pedagogy to the "basics", test scores, and graduation rates. It created tension in the faculty, forcing those teachers and subjects outside of the constraints of standards to be held accountable to finding solutions for increasing student scores, particularly in science. It drove a school already successful in getting students to college to question its trusted curriculum and sacrifice it momentarily to test-driven outcomes.

Participants including parents and students found the experience to be excruciating, painful, dreadful, and therefore punishing. NCLB at times sucked the joy out of this school. If we read this section against the first section we see the complicated negotiations schools face under NCLB. OPHS worked within and against educational policies to attempt to both meet standards and recuperate from the losses it experienced from the "insanity" of the system. It is through these continuous struggles to refashion and re-appropriate policy on its own terms that OPHS has retained some of the joy of teaching and learning.

In the following section we will look at how another punishing district policy to increase graduate rates was negotiated and to what effects.

#### *Credit Recovery*



Credit Recovery, a computer-assisted program used by Columbus City Schools to allow students to “recovery” failed courses and increase graduation rates, was identified by many parents, teachers, and staff as a source of contention between the school and the district. It is quite difficult to find information about credit recovery on the Columbus City School website. The year I was at OPHS, credit recovery provided students with an on-line version of traditional high school courses that students could take for credit if they failed to pass in the classroom. It was available after school in a computer lab at the school to students who were eligible. As Dr. Fisher explained, the district instituted credit recovery to meet a bottom-line goal of increasing graduation rates as dictated by NCLB:

Whatever boosts the graduation rate, because that’s our (the district) number one goal. So if that’s your number one goal everything else falls in line with that. And if credit recovery is approved and let’s you (the student) do that then that’s what they are going to do. That’s been a whole other can of worms.

[Interview, 1/21/09]

He felt the district and schools fell “in line” behind this goal, and that students too fell in line with these lowered expectations. As Mrs. Altman explained, credit recovery lessened their ability to promote academic engagement:

For a while there we felt like credit recovery undermined our program somewhat, because things that were rights of passage that you had to get through you don’t have to get through to stay here anymore. If there’s a path of least resistance, there’s always been a path of least resistance. They could fail and go to North Adult, but they had to pay \$100 bucks and go to night classes and be there every night as opposed to staying here

after school for a free program on the computer. *But if kids are at risk for any reason they have a greater likelihood of choosing that path of least resistance. And kind of hand in hand with that, our ability to put their feet to the fire has diminished somewhat.* But kids are kids are kids, and they've always been kids.

[Interview, 2/18/09]

By "rights of passage" she was referring to the humanities program and the skills and high expectations students learned in that classroom. She also talked about how credit recovery undermined graduation rates and failed students by creating the illusion that students could put "passing" off until they were near graduation. As a result less, rather than more, less students were graduating at OPHS:

In the past, you get tired of going to night school or summer school, you get so far behind that it hits you in the face. *What credit recovery does is it gives you the idea, sometimes the illusion, that you can make this stuff up, that time is on your side, that you can make it up.* That's not true. *That's affected our graduation rates, because kids put it off.* This year especially, it's gotten more difficult, it's gotten more rigorous, so they're not flying through it.

[Interview, 2/18/09]

A parent agreed that credit recovery served as a mechanism to inflate graduation rates that undermined the excellence of OPHS:

It has something to do with the greater culture in the city of Columbus which doesn't expect excellence and doesn't seem to particularly value excellence. They value

achievement, and even at OPHS, and it's an issue where graduation rates I think are inflated because of credit recovery.

[Interview, 12/3/08]

Parents were extremely agitated, because at the time of my study the student report cards failed to reflect which grades were received through credit recovery and which through regular coursework. If a student passed a course using credit recovery it was not indicated on the report card. Parents were angered by the possibility that a student could graduate from OPHS, possibly with credit recovery, and that their report card would be valued in the same way as a student who passed 9<sup>th</sup> grade humanities or senior Government in the classroom. Parents perceived that credit recovery ruined the integrity of the program and weakened the merit of an OPHS diploma in the eyes of colleges and universities. They fought the district to have credit recovery removed from OPHS.

Dr. Steele was one of many parents who shared with me her disdain for the program. She argued credit recovery was experienced more intensely at OPHS as a negative influence, because it undermined the climate of high expectations. Like OGT preparation, it was punishing to students and teachers:

At OPHS it's a worse problem than most because since the courses are really demanding, I know there are kids if they can get credit recovery for that course, who just accept from the beginning their going to fail. Just sit there and put their feet up, get through the course, fail the course, and then take it through credit recovery and pass it. *It's disruptive. It's not good in the classroom. It's demoralizing for the kids. It's tremendously demoralizing for the teachers.*

She felt that credit recovery failed students, because it “shunted them through the system” without concern for actual learning:

I think it’s been a disaster. I understand the district’s position on it, which is we’ve got kids at the school, they want the kids to pass, and they want the kids to graduate...

It’s very easy to pass courses through credit recovery. In general I think that they shouldn’t be doing it. If a kid fails a course the kids should take the course again and pass it. *The idea is not to shunt them through the system so we can say this many kids has graduated but to make sure they’ve actually learned enough to function in the world.*

[Interview, 12/3/08]

According to parents that I spoke with, the district often argued that OPHS needed credit recovery to provide those students coming in less prepared with other options if they continued to struggle at the school. They balked at tutoring programs, because of cost. But Dr. Steele argued that if the district was truly concerned they would be willing to pay for tutoring programs that the school sorely needed. During my year humanities teachers offered tutoring before and after school and talked about how little time they had to help students who needed it. Dr. Steele shift responsibility back to the district and criticized them for their failure to serve the school appropriately:

Now it seems to me that if the district is really concerned about kids who are flailing at OPHS, rather than offering credit recovery, tutoring help should be coming from central administration since these are the people who are so concerned that we have kids coming into OPHS that are not academic prepared for it and are failing courses...

[Interview, 12/3/08]

But she also felt, like others, that credit recovery made it unnecessary for students who did not want to be at OPHS to leave, and that their disruptive attitude impacted the academic climate of OPHS:

You see it with the foreign language classes, because there's no credit recovery for foreign language classes. You see those kids take Spanish II again and again and again. Finally getting a teacher who's easy enough to pass them. My own position would be that we simply shouldn't allow it. Offering kids support, offering kids tutoring, contextualizing why the courses are so hard, and *then accepting the fact that some people are going to transfer out after freshman year to give them the support they need so that if they want to lottery into another school they can do it*. And if the numbers are down at OPHS then the numbers are down at OPHS. You've definitely got, I can see it when I drop the kid off in the morning, there are kids that waltz into the building with no books. And I don't understand it, because I see my kid being weighed down. She just looks at me, well those are the kids that aren't really at OPHS. They're just sitting through the day and doing credit recovery. Makes no sense.

[Interview, 12/3/08]

Credit recovery was another district program instigated by the need to meet graduation rates under NCLB. It was a form of macro-level *policy as practice* that engaged the power/knowledge relations that constructed the terms of the state within the constraints of accountability. As a local practice that OPHS had difficulty subverting, it was perceived to greatly impede the curriculum and instruction practices and deeply undermine the climate of high expectations by offering "a path of least resistance." Rather than increasing graduation

rates, the policy in practice decreased graduation rates by creating for students the illusion that they could fail and quickly make-up their classes towards the end of their high school career. This path of least resistance was perceived to undermine the climate of high expectations and the college preparation that served students so well. Credit recovery was a practice utilized by the district to “shunt” students through the system rather than attend to their academic needs in the classroom and ensure they are adequately prepared for life after high school, which at OPHS meant college.

As I mentioned earlier, it is quite difficult to locate information about credit recovery through Columbus City Schools. However Plato Learning, the company which supplies Columbus City Schools with its credit recovery software, highlighted the district in an August 2009 report (Plato Learning, 2009). In this efficacy report, PLATO cites CCS as one of 5 large districts that have used their course completion and credit recovery software to improve their graduation rates and status under NCLB.

PLATO Secondary Solutions touts itself as “an evidence-based, technology mediated tool” that “power student performance gains” (Plato Learning, 2009, p.15). The company attributes the “success” of CCS to the use of its program, and success is defined in terms of standards and accountability. CCS began using PLATO in 1999 while rated in Academic Emergency by the Ohio Department of Education. In 2003, CCS piloted credit recovery in 10 high schools and then expanded to all 18. PLATO asserts that as a result of using their program:

By 2003, the district’s report card status improved from “Academic Emergency” to “Academic Watch.” Following that success, Columbus City Schools implemented the Columbus Virtual High School, Credit Recovery Program, and various summer

programs. In four years, graduation rates increased from 56% to 73.9%. In 2006-2007, the district's report card status advanced to "Continuous Improvement." The district aspires to exact a 90% graduation rate by 2012.

(PLATO Learning, 2009, p. 13-14)

NCLB and credit recovery shifted definitions of success to the terms of the state, graduation rates and test scores. Under NCLB, it is the numbers that matter, the ends, and the means of getting to these numbers are of little concern. How students get to graduation and what they leave high school with, whether it is college preparedness and a sense of empowerment or a passing score and a diploma, are of no consequence. Whether or not they have "learned enough to function in the world," what matters are the numbers and the district rating. OPHS was deeply concerned about the means of their students' education, and credit recovery also shifted the terms of educational engagement for students at this school. Some students engaged on the state's terms and measured their educational success with minimal standards, i.e. a passing score and a diploma. This undermined the terms OPHS had laid out for its students. What mattered at OPHS was that students were adequately prepared for college, empowered, and engaged. These were the terms of success at Ohio Public High School.

*Another way to punish a good thing: demand, overcrowding, and the pre-lottery*

When parents insisted credit recovery be removed from OPHS for the reasons above, they were accused of being elitist. "They (the district) think it's elitist...It would be elitist to say no credit recovery at OPHS, but credit recovery at other schools" [Parent Interview, 12/3/08]. Contrary to the uses of credit recovery which I argue ultimately undermined student achievement, the district was very protective of the educational equity and access of students of

color to excellent schools like OPHS. One year they increased the number of freshman entering the program through the lottery to 250 to alleviate some of the public pressure for increased access to their highly rated schools. The first reading I want to do of the struggle for the pre-lottery is through *policy as practice*. I want to look at how district decisions to increase enrollment without increasing teachers or resources impacted the school's ability to maintain its program and was perceived to have an extremely negative effect on the culture of the school and the achievement of students.

In Chapter 5 I will re-read the pre-lottery issue. There was a tension that the district struggled with along lines of race and class. Columbus City Schools was very much concerned with equity, and this was viewed as at odds with the parents and school's concerns with protecting the excellence of OPHS. Race worked at the seams of these relationships, and I argue it is this tension between equity and excellence that "colored" the relationship between the predominantly white PTA at OPHS and administration protecting the predominantly African American Columbus City Schools. As we will see later, perceptions of elitism were intricately tied to whiteness and direct accusations of racism on the part of the PTA. But for now I want to look at how demand and overcrowding were perceived to lead to the approval of the pre-lottery.

As a high-profile school, it is expected that OPHS would experience an increased demand. Most parents and students indicated that their main reason for applying to the lottery was the reputation for academic achievement and college preparation attributed to OPHS. From time to time the lack of access to schools like it in the greater Columbus City Schools district would leak out into the media. An editorial in the Columbus Dispatch asks why the district did not put its energy towards replicating the program and criticizes it for not providing more



opportunities for its students to have access to the good education provided at OPHS. As Mrs. Cowan explains, it was perceived that CCS wanted to increase capacity and access:

Sara: Why did OPHS accept more freshmen?

Mrs. Cowan: People like it! Just like what you said. When you ask them ‘what’s the best urban city school in Columbus?’ they are probably gonna say Ohio Public High School, because we receive a lot of honors. And I think because of that, people want us to accommodate more. And I think that it was the thought that we can make them larger. Let’s accommodate some people. ...Lets bring it up to capacity, and lets make it available to more students.

[Interview, 3/25/09].

For the most part, the parents that fought the most for increased access to the high-achieving lottery schools were predominantly white parents, those on the PTA and those out in the community, who had seen or felt the effects of having a gifted student or academically-driven student lose in the lottery. These parents put pressure on the district to open up more seats for their students who they often referred to as “the kids that want it the most” [Parent Focus Group, 1/6/09]. Parents felt that “kids that really want to go to OPHS should be given priority, and one measure of how badly you want to go to OPHS is how successful you’ve been in school, in middle school, how hard you’ve worked” [Interview, 12/3/08].

The pre-lottery was one solution that parents proposed for years and the district rejected for different reasons. A pre-lottery or selective admission program was conceived to allow students to apply to OPHS ahead of the regular lottery and be competitively selected for one of 50 seats based on merit rather than luck of the draw. The number of regular lottery seats at

OPHS would be reduced to 100 to maintain the small school climate. But rather than open up a selective admission to appease what was perceived as a small but loud constituency of white parents, the district increased the number of regular lottery seats in 2007-2008 from 150 to approximately 226 students, according to one PTA parent, though I also heard estimates of near 250.

The increase in demand, rather than leading to increased access, created an overcrowded school that actually limited student access to the curriculum and jeopardized instruction. Mr. Carmichael was an active African American PTA parent whose son had been a freshman that year. He told me increased enrollment physically prevented his son from receiving classroom instruction:

They admitted 226 and half the time my son told me *he was in the hallway*. Not because he got there late, he was just standing there and the classes would fill up whatever amount of chairs there were. Although he could hear what was taking place, he and one or two other kids, *rarely was there enough space for all the students*. So that was a concern for me, that they accepted so many without making adjustments.

[Focus Group, 2/3/09]

Mr. Carmichael also felt that the teachers' ability to serve students was disrupted by the increase in enrollment:

It's even bad to put teachers in that position. ...because if you're just going to put teachers in a position where they can't give writing assignments, can't give projects because they don't have time to get to it. And even when they do give writing assignments...just for instance, it takes over a month, month and a half to get it back.

I'm not critical of the teachers. I've asked them, and they've said, and I might be passionate now but I try to be levelheaded, and they say 'we're trying to get to it, but we have a lot of students.' And I understand that.

[Focus Group, 2/3/09]

Teachers also stated that it was the lack of resources to serve the increase that impacted the school. Mrs. Scott cut to the chase when giving her opinion on the increased enrollment, "We agree more students should have access to the program. What we don't agree with is not getting additional staffing to match it" [3/17/09].

It was believed that the failed attempt to fix demand with increased enrollment and the fall-out from this led the district and ultimately the Superintendent to approve the pre-lottery:

The superintendent did come. She comes to OPHS every once in a while, and she did mention that that year they really wanted to open the doors to more, because they knew there was a great demand to be at a place like OPHS, and they really wanted to try that out. *But they saw that the scholastic infrastructure couldn't hold that many so they kind of scaled back a lot.* But I think he (his son) has to endure that his whole 4 years.

[Mr. Carmichael, Focus Group, 2/3/09]

The adverse reaction of parents to the overcrowding and ways in which increased enrollment limited course offerings placed further pressure on the district to rectify an already tense issue:

Normally we would have about 180 freshman each year, that and the last three years that began to balloon to 220 admission without any new staff. Last year was the biggest year. *And then as a reaction to parents being upset that no new staff was being added and*

*obviously that means overcrowding in classrooms as well as course offerings aren't as frequent, the district reacted with this program of ok we'll give a little bit of a separate category again in a lottery system now not based on racial background but academic profiling.*

[Mrs. Scott, 3/17/09]

The inability of OPHS to shore up the district's desire to meet demands for increased access without increasing support structures, eventually gave way to long sought after pre-lottery program:

When you get 30 and 40 extra freshman for 2 years in a row and no new teachers something's got to give. And something gave last year. And the concession was that the selective lottery for (another lottery school) and OPHS as well as a limit on the freshman coming in to let us catch up.

[Mrs. Scott, 3/17/09]

Parents, teachers, and staff often talked about how they perceived that OPHS was at the bottom of the district's list for support and resources. "All of my complaints have to do with the lack of support that I think we get from central administration and the district" [Dr. Steele, 12/3/09]. The pre-lottery was one of the few times they felt the district had made a decision that supported their program. This is just one example of the pressures this struggling district experienced.

The experiences of OGT preparation, credit recovery, and the fight for the pre-lottery demonstrate what it means for schools and districts to play the accountability game on the state's terms. On more than one occasion the district shifted responsibility to the school, increasing

their freshman lottery enrollments without increasing teaching staff or infrastructural resources, requiring OGT preparation and credit recovery.

The push for standards and accountability arguably created the constraints experienced by other less successful schools in the district which hinder rather than support their ability to promote student achievement. These schools' inability then to play the accountability game on the state's terms of graduation rates and test scores produces them as unsuccessful. OPHS paradoxically plays the accountability game on its own terms, re-appropriating a climate of high expectations and college preparation as its achievement benchmarks, subverting the constraining effects of NCLB. Its success at playing the game, its ability to not sacrifice excellence for achievement, is what attracts parents and students.

Rather than receiving additional support, infrastructure, or resources the school, its teachers, and its students are further burdened by the system's inability to provide an adequate education. Because the district plays the standards games on the state's terms, rather than learning from one of its best and most nationally recognized schools how it supports academic success, the district places money, time, and effort into OGT preparation and credit recovery. In many ways OPHS is exploited and punished for being successful on its own terms.

### Ethnographic Moment

Because of its amazing success, the public often perceives OPHS as having the best resources and facilities of any school in the district. The following vignettes adapted from field notes demonstrates how success and achievement are intricately linked to privilege and excellence. Can we conceive of excellence without privilege?

#### *“See What We Don’t Have”: The Myth of the Boutique School*

*Most of the classrooms at OPHS have rows of tightly packed chairs, old computers that are rarely used because they are practically unusable, and just barely enough space at the front of the room for a teacher’s desk and a place to stand. White boards were installed over the chalk boards during winter break, and this was the extent of updating that I saw while conducting research.*

*Dented gray lockers line the first and second floor hallways. The auditorium is too small to hold the entire school. The gym floors and bleachers look original, but considering that there are no sports at this school, it is safe to assume that the gym is a last priority. The cafeteria is small, with standard folding tables. The lunchroom fills to capacity during each of the 3 lunch periods, and excess students overflow into the gym in the winter and the backyard and blacktop courts during warmer weather, playing basketball or football. Ten or so students typically brave the weather and sit at picnic tables in the courtyard, while a few others stand in the back hallways. The soda machine is empty as the school discontinued their contract with Pepsi, but students still make use of the snack machine.*

*The Principal, Dr. Davis, explained prior to coming to the school in 2008, even she had the perception, “that OPHS had everything, everything you could imagine was here at OPHS. And it just wasn’t so” [Interview, 10/19/08]. She talked about her struggle to improve the facility for teachers and students, often at her own expense. I noticed that Dr. Davis’ office was small and lacked adequate furniture to accommodate her tall frame. She worked on a computer at a small wooden desk, a collapsible table full of papers served as a credenza, and a few mismatched wooden chairs sat up against the wall for guests [Field Notes, 9/29/08].*

*It was important to her that the school looked nice for the students and staff, “Something that small makes a difference, but it says to me that we care enough; even though we may not have a lot of nice things we’re going to make it look nice” [Interview, 10/19/08]. When she arrived, she asked the janitors to re-arrange the desks so that each room had desks that match in color. She went to the district warehouse to get 200 more desks, and when she refused to take the desks they had that did not match, warehouse staff complained to her boss that she had “an attitude.” She explains, “I said, ‘why should we get the trash. I’m working with trash now and trying to clean it up. I’m sitting in my office with two tables’...I’m thinking, ‘I don’t have to have the best of the best here as long as the students and teachers have what they need, then I’ll wait. But right now it’s important for the teachers to get what they need’”*

*[Interview, 10/19/08].*

*Parents were also shocked at the facilities when they made their first visits to OPHS. The parent of a new freshman explained:*

*The facility is terrible. It's unbelievable to me. They have chemistry labs with no chemicals. They can't really perform experiments. They can't weigh things, they have these ancient scales. They don't have any real balances. Pieces of ceiling fall down all the time. The heating and air conditioner are nonexistent...You see mice running around the auditorium when we're in there...There are kids who faint in the heat when school first starts. It's unbelievably hot in that building. The auditorium is pathetic.*

*[Parent Interview, 12/3/08]*

*Parents, teachers, and administrators were also aware of the lack of technology at the school. One parent told me in an agitated voice, "Our dag gone clocks aren't even set" [Parent Consultant Interview, 1/27/09]. Dr. Davis acquired 30 outdated computers that another school was discarding to construct the first full-service computer lab OPHS had ever had. She discussed taking a visiting school board member on a tour of the school to "see what we don't have" [10/19/08]. "I'm trying to get the whole building wireless", she tells me. "Where are the smart boards, where are computers, where are the laptops? ...because I want to make sure they have everything that the kids at (her previous school) have. Because I made sure they had the top everything. They might not have utilized it as much as the kids here, but they have it accessible to them". Her previous high school was a low-achieving program with a very successful athletic department.*

*Its extracurricular activities, like chorale and theatre, were underfunded. The library was want for resources. The librarian has had difficulty filling in the deficits in her collection for research projects and extended essays. She states that "...the only budget you get basically is pleading with the principal to cough up something...The minute you get into a school like this that needs resources that are at a higher level, you're looking at college level type text books and reference that are costing \$75 to start" [Interview, 10/29/08]. The PTA was her best source for funds; small and private grants, she said, were difficult due to the approval process one has to go through with the district. Her explanation of how schools get resources is telling of the mixed effects NCLB has on high-performing urban schools:*

*"Well, the equity is I guess if you score low, you get all the prizes. You don't need help, apparently you're doing well. That's basically how the trickle down process works in the district. And since we were high performing, we're bottom on the list for little perks."*

*[Librarian Interview, 10/29/09]*

*Teachers and parents perceived that the lottery created a situation in which staff at other schools harbored resentment towards those at OPHS, and that this contributed to their access to resources. As Dr. Fisher explains, "But there have been efforts, real or imagined, by people outside the school...I've heard people in the past say they want to break us. They want to make us more...there are people who resent OPHS. They think we get too much." [Interview, 1/21/09].*

*Mr. Westfall, one of the IB teachers, sees a connection between between the success of their students and the assumption that the school gets preferential treatment, treatment: “they’re getting more funding. You’re getting the best people. You’re circumventing the lottery to get in that place. This is not fair” [Interview, 3/11/09]. It’s apparent once you cross the threshold of OPHS that their success is not guaranteed by excellent resources and infrastructure and that their excellence is not the result of privilege, advantage, or special treatment.*

*Member Check: “We really feel that the Program is at Risk”*

In January of 2010 I was contacted by the previous PTA president, referred to here as Pam, who had been very cooperative and forthcoming during the pre-pilot. I did not know the details at the time, but she and other parents were very concerned about a number of district changes coming to the school that they believed put the program again at risk. I was soon contacted by the Principal and the current PTA president about sharing a preliminary report (Appendix B) of my research with a small group of current and previous PTA members and the Principal. I quickly became enmeshed in a bit of a political controversy. Each party was interested in my data for different reasons: 1) could it be used to support an increase in the pre-lottery, 2) could it be used to support the district’s resurrected desire to again increase freshman enrollment at OPHS, and 3) could it potentially cause problems for the school with the district if it proved to be useful to either side?

At first I was asked to keep the meeting to a presentation format only, and it was requested that any discussion about the future of OPHS be restricted to school faculty and administration. Eventually the tension and a series of miscommunications resulted in our first meeting being cancelled. Everyone was apologetic, but all the chaos led to me conducting three



very productive member checks with the PTA, the teaching and administrative staff, and previous PTA members that had been invested early on in my project.

I attended a staff meeting on February 22, 2010 to present my preliminary report to the school. I learned that OPHS was being saddled with, or threatened with depending on who you spoke to, an increase in enrollment to 800 students and the potential loss of two teachers. The Principal expressed during the meeting her deep commitment to the program and that she was going to fight for them as long as she could. I had learned from the current PTA president in an earlier email that the school had discussed merging the block scheduling with a traditional 48-minute period schedule to accommodate the additional students. In this email she portrayed teachers and parents as on-board with the changes and looking forward to the future. The previous PTA president represented the group of parents who truly felt the program was again being sacrificed to the whims of the district. I met with these parents on February 24, 2010, and I want to share some insights from this meeting as a conclusion to this chapter.

Pam insisted on buying me dinner, and I let her. We met at a local eatery half-way between her neighborhood and mine. Her husband and another previous PTA president from OPHS, called Jen here, joined us. They were enthusiastic about my project, they wanted recommendations, and they needed time to talk about their frustrations. This was a group of parents whose students were long-gone from the school but still remained truly committed to the future of the program.

They were skeptical of the Principal's motives and her commitment to OPHS. I was surprised. I discussed what I had heard at the staff meeting and my perception that Dr. Davis was stuck between a rock and hard place, trying to protect the school and negotiate district

demands. My reading of her has always been that she was committed to OPHS. In some ways I alleviated their fears that she would sacrifice the school. They spoke very candidly about their feelings that the district despised the success of OPHS and treated the parents of OPHS poorly though they worked so hard to support the school. They were angry, concerned, and maybe even a little hurt. But as Pam stated quite frankly and with all seriousness, “We really feel that the program is at-risk.”

This provided an entry point for me to talk about how the strong and predominantly white PTA might be read by the district as elitist and advocating for their own white students at the expense of the students of color. We talked about how race “colored” this relationship in unexpected ways. While I could not support an increase in the pre-lottery, because I believed it undermined equity, I also did not support increased building enrollment, because it undermined student achievement. I explained that I perceived that NCLB required districts to think short term and bottom line – graduation rates and test scores – rather than long term – structural solutions to educational equity and excellence.

OPHS has a history of attending to the long-term implications of education for its students. Its parents have a reputation for being strong and motivated advocates capable of shoring up the struggling program. What if the parents and the district could start to put their energy toward long term solutions to structural issues of equity and access? I recommended that the parents continue to think about long term solutions to the district’s perennial problems, and also use the school-specific issues to demonstrate that they were fighting for all students, not just their white, middle class students. I also recommended that they make a point of reminding the

district that their support for the excellence of OPHS would also support the achievement of all students.

What I learned from the course of this project is that critical schooling actors are engaged in the cross-hairs of equity and excellence which are continuously redefined and reproduced within the context of policy. Under NCLB equity and excellence are reconfigured within the terms of the state. They are measured outcomes of graduation rates, standardized test scores, and a statistical closing of the “achievement gap” between the disadvantaged and their more advantaged counterparts and minority students and their non-minority peers. CCS is like most districts and works within the terms of the state, and when its students demonstrate achievement on these terms, it is deemed successful. Equity and excellence are assumed “unmeasured” bi-products of this success. The state does not measure success in terms of equity and excellence, which I argue is one reason why NCLB fails as an equity reform.

Paradoxically OPHS redefines standards and accountability on its own terms, and in the process of remaking, it meets both accountability demands and these loftier goals of student excellence and engagement. Equity, though, is harder to track at OPHS. The assessment of equity is more complicated due in part to the ways in which race inescapably works in schools. In the next chapter I will look at how the school’s “excellent intentions” undermine the possibilities for equity, and I seek to disrupt the normative discourses that separate urban students from academic success on their own terms.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter analyzed how teachers and parents view the impact of educational policy on OPHS. Classroom observations and teacher interviews demonstrated how OPHS successfully

subverts the constraining effects of NCLB through curriculum and instruction practices that promote engaged learning and college preparation. Teachers were vocal about the efficacy, independence, and sense of professionalism they were afforded by these policy practices that set NCLB as a bottom level of expectations for teachers and students. As a practice, state accountability standards set a minimum benchmark for student achievement at OPHS. OPHS self-measured its accountability based on college preparation, high expectations, and the meaningfulness and relevance of the curriculum to its students. This chapter also addressed how OPHS' successful practices were punished and undermined by the district's attempts to meet federal measures of accountability on the state's terms. Credit recovery and increased enrollments without increased resources were viewed by parents and teachers as damaging practices that subverted the climate of high expectations and hindered student engagement. The next chapter will look more deeply at how race continues to work in public education despite this school's desire to promote both excellence and equity for its students.

Interlude  
Field Notes from Three Classrooms

*“Is Sex Art?:” IB Theory of Knowledge at OPHS*

*5 white males  
3 African American Males  
13 white females  
2 African American Females  
1 East Asian Male  
1 East Asian Female*

*I sit on a stool in the corner by the computers and the chalk board on the far side of the room. Students trickle in. Two boys sit near me, one white with thick curly hair wearing a soccer jersey and the other African American wearing a red t-shirt and baggy shorts. As I’m making notes, the African American student holds out his hand and shakes very firmly. I tell him my name and smile and wait for Mr. Westfall to start class. They don’t know if I’m a student, a sub, or what.*

*Mr. Westfall is very experienced at getting the class under control by using his voice and never cracks a smile. To my surprise these IB students talk quite a bit and require frequent reprimanding from their teacher throughout the entire class. Today they are going to have small group discussions about Art – is art a way of knowing? Do we learn things from art? Why don’t we test art with the OGT? Then he introduces me and asks that I explain my research question and how I’m conducting my study. He says it’s like a more complicated “EE” or extended essay, which is something they all have to complete by the end of their 2<sup>nd</sup> year in IB.*

*Mr. Westfall uses a deck of playing cards to divide the students into random groups – kings, queens, jacks, and aces. Each group takes a white board to record their discussion, and they are scattered between two classrooms. I float around to see the different groups and then choose to sit with the group of the first two boys I met when I came into the class. The curly haired boy makes remarks such as “is sex art?” and then turns around sheepishly and says to me “please don’t judge me!” I inform him that I’m not judging anyone, just listening.*

*Two groups in the main classroom are having very serious discussions about art. I hear a white female student in the back corner complaining that this exercise is going to be so boring, that everyone is going to agree that art is important, so she’s going to disagree. She says it’s blasphemy for her to take this position, because “my opa’s an artist”. A slender pale girl with dark hair and an annoyed lilt in her voice says, “What’s an opa?” “Grandfather in German”, the other replies. “I don’t know German”, the pale girl responds. Then she says, “I really don’t think art is important.” This sets off a firestorm of controversy. Another slender white female with long brown hair cut into a trendy style*

*that all the IB girls seem to be wearing becomes very upset. “How is doing trig important to me if I’m going to be an artist! You’re going to have a boring life. You’re boring, because you don’t like art!” They bicker back and forth, on and off for the next 30 minutes. Though they never raise their voices or throw punches something in the dagger looks they give each other makes me wonder why so much tension over a hypothetical question.*

*A very, very pale white male wearing a black and white striped shirt, black skinny jeans, and black chucks attempts to jump into the fray. The boy in the soccer jersey tells him to stop being an “IB philosopher.” Mr. Westfall leaves the room and I see cell phones flip open. When I question the new cell phone policy that forbids use in classrooms, they say nobody cares, nobody pays attention, and nobody follows it. Well at least not in IB I guess.*

*I always make a note of student dress. The one thing I notice in this class is that the white girls have a more disheveled look to them. They all seem to wear the same skinny jeans, chucks, and cardigans stretched over the ends of their hands. They are all very thin and petite like birds, with the exception of the girl with the Opa who is heavier and has a round face. The two African American girls are dressed more athletically, both wear their hair pulled back in a ponytail and have on gym shoes, and other white girls are wearing simple jeans and hoodies. In the other corner of the room there is a white male wearing a white button up shirt and jeans, his dark hair curling over his forehead and into his eyes. He most fits the typical nerd stereotype. But there are also kids I wouldn’t expect to see in the IB class – a tall thin boy with blond tipped hair who looks like he would be more interested in being cool and playing basketball. When Mr. Westfall asks what someone means when they say “concentrated medium,” he’s able to help them expand their answer.*

*Class reconvenes and Mr. Westfall is trying to locate the groups. When he asks, “Where’s the queens,” a Southeast Asian male student playfully raises his hand with an over the top smile and everyone laughs. Some of the laughs are in jest of him, but I am so impressed by his confidence and willing to own the space and ignore other people’s discomfort. If he is bothered by the laughs that were at him and not with him he didn’t show it. I’ve seen him before. He usually gets the male lead in all the plays. He appears to be very active in the school and outgoing. His downfall I suppose is that he likes to talk. I watch him chat though most of class.*

[Field Notes, 3/26/09]

### *Mr. Hart's Split Class*

*I feel like I've been gone for a while from this class. They've been re-arranged. I notice the new whiteboard, but Mr. Hart is allergic to them. He wears medical gloves and puts all his notes up in the morning before class. Dr. Fisher is yelling out in the hall, "Let's go. Get to your classrooms." A girl got her lip pierced. Students are commenting on how it's swollen.*

*This class is high energy. Tim is already in trouble for attempting to eat a cupcake. Mr. Hart says he can go to the Principal's office if he keeps it up. There's a stand-off. "Don't eat it," he says over and over, and tells the student not to test his limits. Esther stomps in looking angry. She has been moved to a desk by my side of the room. She throws her Dora the Explorer backpack to the ground and puts her head down on the desk. Tim starts up again, generating more wrath from his teacher. "Can you just teach please," he finally asks, giving up the fight.*

*The class moves on uneventfully, until Esther begins drumming her long black painted acrylic nails on her desk loudly. Her hand has been up, but not answered. I'm wondering myself if she wants to participate or interrupt so I understand why Mr. Hart is ignoring her. No notes or cartoon are on her desk. Just her nails drumming with increasing speed.*

*He ignores her. They talk about FDR and polio, about the pictures and images that did not show him with crutches or a wheel chair. There are questions about the number of days between election and inauguration. The nails start up again, "Can I go to the office" she blurts out aggravated. "It's an emergency" she says in quick anxious words. I hear her say something about \$70. She leaves without an answer. She's distraught. I want to pull her aside and ask her why she didn't go to him at the beginning of class.*

*There's a quiet rumble though the class, but then the video about the 1920's starts. He prompts them to "pay attention" and think about "why didn't we have a revolution in America? What are the differences between Hoover and FDR?" Then somebody asks, "Do those shoes make you look taller?" Kids are so observant, and they know how to use it against you.*

*The movie starts and hands go up. People want to leave. They need tissues. They need to sneeze or cough. They're thirsty; they need to spit out their gum. The girl in red can't seem to sit still. She's up and down, making weird noises and hooting at odd moments, as if she has Tourets. She looks at me. I try not to look at her. I don't want to reinforce it. Esther is back, and Mr. Hart quickly asks her out into the hall. She stomps out. I am suddenly struck by her worn out backpack. It either speaks to an innocence or a poverty. Her clothes are not the coolest or the best. Her hair has been died black recently. I just wonder what other frustrations she has from home that she brings to school.*

*A girl behind Tim plays with his braids. Suddenly an African American person is interviewed for the documentary. Somehow this draws their attention in and the disruption stops. People stare at the TV. The class finally quiets down, like a baby. They've either given up or been sucked in by the face on the television. Was it the African American person, Hitler, or images of the depression...*

[Field Notes, 11/14/08]

*"He Just Gave Us All the Answers:" Boys Participation in 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Humanities*

*I moved to an empty chair at the back of the room behind a group of boys. It's a very good spot, particularly to observe a group of students up close and listen to their whisperings and exchanges. A white boy with dirty, slightly greasy, brown hair sits to my left. I saw him my first day here, sitting alone out on the back pavement at lunch. I remember his shoes, black airwalks with bright green laces. He's got the same shoes on, a pair of loose tan cargo pants worn out at the bottom from dragging under his sneakers, and a dingy gray jacket. His nails are dirty. He's got nothing out on his desk, just a small red backpack with rope straps next to him on the floor. He looks disinterested.*

*Today the students are turning in their final essays with the works cited, rough draft, and pre-writing attached. Mrs. Perry provides very complicated instructions for ordering and stapling the assignments together, and I can barely follow her. The teachers hand out multiple staplers. Hands go up and students begin asking her to repeat the instructions. It's obvious in her voice that today is Friday and this is the last period of the day. There's an edge to her gruff comments, and she eventually stops answering them.*

*An announcement comes over the loud speaker. Dr. Davis asks that if anyone has found a purple wallet with a green frog on it to please return it to the office for a reward. That must be Esther's wallet.*

*There's quiet talk amongst the students as they staple and pass in their work. The African American male in front of the white boy next to me asks him for his work. He shakes his head apathetically and says unapologetically, "I didn't read the book." The young man in front of him replies, "I wrote something," with a look of surprise on his face that the boy didn't do anything. He continues to get chided by others around him, "you could have wrote something" another boy says. While this discussion is going on the boy in front of me passes a computer printout of high top sneakers to his friend.*

*Dr. Fisher is his usual joking self. I see him move a boy to the front. He asks for the students to get out a worksheet on the Industrial Revolution they were to complete for homework. The white boy beside me has nothing to turn in and the boy in front of him*



*can't find his. He combs through a folder filled with various wrinkled and smudged worksheets rather reluctantly. I don't think he really cares if he finds it.*

*I quickly take a head count while the class is reviewing the answers to the worksheet. Being the back of the room makes it easier for me to stand up without drawing attention. They are paying attention or being quiet at least. The white boy next to me stares listlessly at his desk and around the room. He's not even doodling as the boy in front of him who could never find his worksheet is doing to at least pass the time. I can see pages and pages of faces and crosses as he flips through the notebook.*

*Count:*

*White Females 5*

*White Males 2*

*African American Females 20*

*African American Males 18*

*Asian American 1*

*The worksheet they've just gone over gets passed up for a grade. The doodling student says to the slacker, "he just gave us all the answers", again shocked at his classmate's lack of effort.*

*The next assignment discussed is a propaganda poster that they have to make. The doodler turns around to ask the slacking white boy if he's even going to do one. He shrugs. He's busy folding a note he just wrote.*

*Dr. Fisher discusses the importance of accuracy and reminds students to check their history and use the internet. One African American girl asks, "Why can't it be pretty. Why it have to be all serious?" Of course he responds with sarcasm, "Pictures of flowers and ponies provoke me to violence." To drive the point home about accuracy, he says that the American Flag only had 48 stars on it when he was born, so if you put a flag on your poster, make sure it's historically accurate. He's joking.*

*All the while Mrs. Perry is at the board making notes. I notice that her hair has fallen, her red suit jacket is disheveled, and her make-up has expired. Maybe she's had a long day.*

*She begins her part of the lecture on All Quiet on the Western Front, and Dr. Fisher leaves. "Really try to remember to bring your books to class" she says. Some kids don't even bother to look for a book, while others have it out and I can see their highlights.*

*I enjoy sitting in these classes. I never read All Quiet on the Western Front. I think about all the lectures I zoned out on and things I probably missed. They are reading from a handout. A boy at the front reads like my husband, in fits and starts,*

*mispronouncing words. People laugh, but he continues unfazed. Mrs. Perry supports him to continue and even she smiles as he reads.*

*People have their highlighters out unprompted. "Let's highlight that paragraph please", she says. She asks a very broad question "is war senseless" and there is brief discussion. Her comments are slanted and liberal, but I don't mind. I'm glad. The bright pale blonde with braces makes a comment that's more conservative than I would have expected.*

*This class works. It's large and full of mixed ability students but somehow it stays together. How? What changes between 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade?*

*My eyes roam the room to count 5 boys not taking notes. An African American male two seats to my right is looking at a worksheet that he is holding up close to his face. His nails are bitten to the quick, bright red and faintly bloody...*

[Field Notes, 11/14/08]

## Chapter Five

### The Concept of the Academic High School: Complicating Excellence and Equity

#### *Introduction*

OPHS' practices of success produced the paradoxical discourse of the "academic high school" which strangely distinguished it as an alternative to the "traditional" public secondary education. When did academics become the alternative? This chapter interrogates the concept of the academic high school from two perspectives: 1) a inquiry into this ironic oxymoron through an analysis of the perceived impact of the *absence* of interscholastic sports on the school's climate, and 2) a deconstruction of the school's identity as academically successful in light of the raced stratification of course enrollment, the material experiences of urban students, and the discursive constructions of urban students that are implicated in teaching and learning. We see that race is manipulated and negotiated in complicated and competing ways. It offers a range of productive effects and limits from which we can learn a great deal about the work race does in public schooling today in light of current educational policy under NCLB.

For all intensive purposes OPHS looks like a typical high school. The hallways are crowded with students talking and carrying on much like students at other schools. But as the librarian states, with time the uniqueness of the school becomes apparent:

My first year ...I didn't really see a real difference. In the hallways with the behavior I didn't really see much of a difference. Because I think we're getting the same kind of kids (as the other schools). But as I spend some more time here, I think there is an

underlying culture of high expectation and you either buy into it, and you have permission to do that here, or you bail...there is some sort of current here.

[Interview, 10/29/08]

It is not only this climate of high expectation that encourages success, but also the sense of *permission* to buy into academics, that makes the school unique. As one white female freshman elaborates during a focus group, “Most of the people here kind of are smart-ish and you have, instead of that be a bad thing, its like everyone else is and it’s like ok...” [3/30/09]. Mr. Hart also noticed that, “The students here, they talk about school...just the fact that you have these students that aren’t so academic talking about academics is really important” [Interview, 1/21/09]. I witnessed these conversations between students quite often during my observations.

Why is it a unique occurrence that students in school feel they have permission to be smart and talk about academics? The concept of the academic high school should be a tautological redundancy, but OPHS makes clear that the idea of an “academic high school” is a surprising oxymoron.

One way to look at the paradoxical discourse of the academic high school is through the lens of sports and participants’ perceptions of the effects of the absence of interscholastic sports on academic achievement.

### *The Absence of Interscholastic Sports at OPHS*

More so than not, sports are a standardized, normalized, and unquestioned part of the US high school experience, not only for students, but for parents and community. During the course of interviews at OPHS students, teachers, parents, and administrators talked at length about the

perceived benefits of not having an interscholastic sports program at their school. Their comments challenged the taken-for-granted idea that sports are inextricably linked to secondary education and make visible the paradoxical discourse of the “academic high school.” While the notion that high school is *academic* should be what is taken for granted, the absence of sports at OPHS brings into relief the strange expectation that the academic high school is a rare occurrence and serves as alternative to a traditional (and unacademic?) education. It requires us to question what other productive effects the presence or absence of sports might have on the academic climate of schools.

While OPHS never had competitive interscholastic sports teams that played against other schools, I found in yearbooks that they did have an intramural basketball team that played against local community teams, and some years they had a dance team and cheerleaders, though they had no team necessarily for which to dance or cheer. A teacher who had been at the school since the early 1980’s explained that not having sports at OPHS was not necessarily part of the plan, but that “It used to be the Ohio High School Athletic Association refused to let magnet schools have sports programs, because... all football players from all the high schools could come here. We could have a super football team. So I’m not sure if that was by design that we couldn’t have sports,” [Interview, 3/11/09].

While some parents were indifferent and one parent disapproved of not having sports, many parents I interviewed chose OPHS, in part, because it did not have sports, and they felt the environment would positively benefit their student. As one parent explained, when I asked her if sports had an impact on her decision, she told me, “It did. It made us want to go there more”

[Interview, 12/3/08]. Another parent also agreed, “one of my attractions was it didn’t have sports so it (sports) wouldn’t be much of a detraction (from academics),” [Focus Group, 2/3/09].

Other parents felt that even with the benefits, their students were missing out on some of the important experiences of high school. Summer explained that her mother, “...always thinks I missed out a lot. She didn’t want me to go here. I didn’t do the pep rallies. I’ve never been to a high school football game. I’ve never been to a high school basketball game. So she thinks I’ve missed out on a lot. But for me, I’ve never known that so I don’t think I’ve missed out on anything” [Focus Group, 4/23/09]. The parent consultant, who also had a daughter at the school, believed that “sports just kind of naturally cause people to become engaged” and OPHS has had to find “other types of events that try to bring parents in and encourage students in excellence...” [Interview, 1/27/09]. In these comments we see a this perception that sports is an integral part of the high school experience, while at the same time, they can serve as a mechanism that detracts from the academic environment.

Teachers at OPHS believed that the absence of sports at OPHS made it possible for them to shift the climate towards academics. According to Mr. Westfall, “it changed the culture of the building in a very favorable way:”

But it’s a tremendous benefit to the program to not have them on-site, because they (sports) dominate the culture. Of every high school that I’ve been in, if there’s a sports program, and that’s every high school that I’ve ever been in beside this one, that’s the dominant social program. That’s what people talk about. Not about AP, or IB, or the literary festival or what’s happening in the theatre. It’s ‘did the football team win Friday

night?’ and ‘are you going to the football game?’ So it changes the culture of the building in a very favorable way to academics not to have it here.

[Interview, 3/11/09]

Mrs. Scott told me it was “lovely:”

... (and) wonderful to not be interrupted with pep rallies or the whole basketball team is not going to be in class for the next three days, because of XYZ. *Our students know that academics come first, and academics should come first in any high school. And I think that’s often the rhetoric but not necessarily the practice, and here it just is true.* Because they literally are separate programs, and physically, the students understand that one has to take priority over the other. So it’s lovely, because kids get the best of both worlds”

[Interview, 3/17/09].

By emphasizing academics she also believed they were working against the belief that sports provided unrestricted access to college scholarships, particularly for students of color:

I will often say to anybody that provokes it, that we can’t give any assurance that we can get any student in our school an athletic scholarship. That talent and determination are yours, but academically we can give you the skills to get any academic scholarship that you’re seeking out if you’re capable and willing. *The success of the program is that it’s not overshadowed by elements that are in large numbers not under the students control...But our goal is that students understand that athletics may not be something you can change in terms of your success based on your physicality, but academics are in your control.*

The peculiarity of OPHS is that teachers and parents perceive that the absence of sports does the work making school academic, and that sports makes this difficult in other high schools. Dr. Davis was also a principal for several years at a local high school well known for its athletics program. Students from all over the city attempt to lottery into that program each year to play sports. Her comparison of this school, which I refer to as Woodland, to OPHS offers an extreme example of the effect that sports can have on schools:

...but what I saw my first year was there it was almost like a sports Mecca. I mean you walk in the building...have you ever been over there? ... It's just got walls of all these people in the NFL, just halls and halls of sports. All American and everything. Their banners...I mean they've won state in girls basketball, track, boys football. And then you think, (she names a professional player from Woodland), it's just unbelievable. Then you come here, they've got quite the opposite. Walls of national merit scholars.

[Interview, 10/19/08]

Principal Davis had taken on writing a proposal for a prestigious grant that was eventually accepted. Through her vision for a small schools initiative that was supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation she wanted to "transform Woodland:"

We can give it an initiative, give it a purpose, *that purpose, just not of sports, but the purpose would be how can we make learning more meaningful, really touch out and reach our kids*. Become that personal...you know...everyone knew all the sports kids. What about the average Joe that's in the class?



But her investment in a more meaningful learning environment that had a purpose beyond sports created a tension between her and the coaches and teaching staff that were extremely invested in the sporting identity of Woodland:

...But they really felt that I didn't, that I pushed academics and that I didn't push sports, that I didn't support sports. Once I became principal it just got even worse. Football coach is like you know, you never come to the practice, you never been... I'm thinking, first of all I'm the first female principal at Woodland in the history of Woodland. Secondly I'm not going to stand...who wants to go to football practice? I'm thinking come on guys the expectations that you have of me are totally unfair. You're going on what prior principals did. It was ok for them to go out and watch practice, do this and that. I trust that you guys and the athletic director are going to take care of all of that. It doesn't mean that I don't support it. So that went on to the point where I just gave up control to my athletic director. I said 'X, you handle sports, and I'll handle academics,' because I didn't want the fighting.

So I say I know all the coaches were celebrating when I left. So here I don't have that fight, but I do have a group of parents who want to make sure that their students are getting everything academically, and it's good. Where I had the opposite...I mean I had parent meetings, stuff downtown, all of that over sports. Parents saying I want you to make sure my kid plays this...oh my gosh! It was unreal! Then trying to balance that piece and stay on top of academics is hard.

Like Mrs. Scott, she felt it was important that students understood that sports did not serve as a guaranteed ticket to college or to a professional sports career:

...but I wanted the students to understand, yeah, that sports are good but how many students are going to get to the next level of sports? Those days are gone where you have droves of people offering scholarships to high school students. You have to have that balance. So I started students taking their ACT in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. I was paying for them out of the principal's account. Having those important pieces and saying academics is where it's at.

She also challenged the coaches to take responsibility for their players academic futures:

Some of the coaches were upset, because I felt that every senior, in whatever the sport was, especially football, I believed that the coach had the obligation to find them a scholarship. They didn't agree. And I totally disagree. If that kid has been with you for 4 years, I don't care if he's the water boy or the ball boy you owe them an opportunity to find out. What better person to help than you? That takes the load off the counselor. The counselor already has 100 and some odd kids, you taking your 10 seniors and you dedicating your time. We didn't see eye to eye on those things.

And being at OPHS, she admits that she's glad she does not have to work at Woodland and deal with the sports "piece" of high school anymore:

Those were...I'm glad I don't have that piece anymore. The current principal that's there, he loves sports, he loves it. And he was there prior to me. They did some moving so he went back, and they love him. And he loves kids and he loves sports. So he'll do well. I'm glad I don't have to sit in that chair anymore.

Students were more ambivalent about the effects of sports in school. Though students could play sports for their home school, it was difficult for most, because it required them to

have transportation to practice, and those students I interviewed who played sports or tried said they worried about being late for practice. Parents too complained about how difficult it was to pick their students up and drive them to practices and games in other parts of the city. Tanesha explained that she wanted to participate in sports but transportation was a barrier:

(Not having sports is) Kind of difficult, because you don't want to go to your home school and do a sport. How you get from here to practice and then to work? It's really difficult...If you're here and you're like me and you live all the way south and you have to travel thirty minutes to get to practice and you're late...

[Interview, 5/5/09].

But the absence of sports at OPHS created a different discourse for Tanesha, one that emphasized the importance of academics:

Sara: Is there anything positive about not having sports?

Tanesha: You focus on academics more, because I think a lot of schools that have sports, that's their whole thing. Cause you'll hear about a lot of schools, like that's a really good school, they're football team is good, and that's probably the only thing you really hear about them. You don't really hear about academics, but when you hear about OPHS that's all you hear about. *Because the sport is not going to go long term. It's really about education and how much you have in your brain academically.*

In sum, the absence of sports at OPHS allowed students to conceive of education on their own terms, different terms that unfixed race and sports from academic achievement. Though students like Natasha maintained that sports made students motivated to do well academically to maintain eligibility, I argue that the absence of sports at OPHS served to disentangle the urban

student identity from the stereotype of the black athlete whose physicality serves as a suitable substitute for intelligence.

Interscholastic sports in urban school contexts continue to function as a discursive formation that does specific work in relation to race, work that delimits the perceivable possibilities for seeing public schools and urban students as capable of success on their own terms. Perceptions of educational achievement, opportunity, and excellence are intricately tied to the unique role of sports in US high school culture. The historical context for the rise of interscholastic sports is an important framework for thinking about representations of urban student identity and conceptions of equality and excellence that are made possible in urban schools. Ohio Public High School sits at the nexus of these issues. It confounds and perforates commonly held perceptions of the urban child's capacity for excellence. It also calls into question the effects of sports on academics and school culture. *It is this absence that calls into question its very presence.*

Ethnographic Moment  
Winter Formal Assembly

OPHS strived to have an uninterrupted, academically focused day and therefore limited in-school assemblies. OPHS had two non-academic activities during school hours while I was there. One was an end of the year celebration and the other the Winter Formal Assembly. It was a special experience to see the students outside of the classroom participate in something social.

*There are already students seated at the front of the auditorium. Parents are directed to the orchestra pit by the young mother from Dr. Fisher's split class. The energy is palpable and grows as students are allowed down the aisles. This is the first time I see the whole student body at one time, with the exception of freshmen who are excluded from the assembly, because the auditorium is too small to hold the entire school.*

*Controlled chaos ensues as they try to get students seated in the right place. Seniors want to be in the middle. The Assistant Principals are repeating this over and over, and eventually one says it over the loudspeakers. There is a huge response – shouting, cheering, and booing. I see a young African American male in a tie and dress shirt stand up and start pointing and yelling at underclassmen to move. IT IS SO UNBELIEVABLY LOUD IN A SCHOOL THAT IS ALWAYS QUIET! I've not known this kind of noise at OPHS.*

*The shabby burgundy velvet stage curtain is lit by a nice set of stage lamps hanging from the ceiling. There are two wimpy ficus trees at the corners of the stage. A podium sits stage left. It takes almost 25 minutes to seat the 10-12<sup>th</sup> graders and make everyone happy. The students are reluctant to quiet down. The Assistant Principal says, "We have guests. Please be respectful and be quiet like you were asked." You can hear the restraint in his voice, trying to keep it together in front of the parents. The students do simmer down, but not for long. Dr. Davis comes on stage and makes a few announcements. She reminds them that they can cheer but not so loud that no one can hear.*

*Male and female attendants for the sophomore and junior classes enter from off stage. Both white and students of color are running for homecoming court, but it is predominantly African American students on the stage. The school cheers as each student's name is called. Cameras flash. I can almost guess who the winners are going to be based on the applause. They stand spread out across the stage, alone, with lights shining down on them. Some girls wear cute dresses, some have on dress shirts and nice pants, others have on tall high-heeled boots, tight jeans, fur lined jackets. Esther from Mr. Hart's class is on the stage for the juniors. Her hair is now blazing red and she's wearing shiny black boots with a stiletto heel. She waves at everyone, her long acrylic nails dancing in the air. The boys wear jeans mostly. One African American male is wearing a white suit (with a vest, no jacket) and a teal shirt and shoes. The boy who gets the loudest cheers from the sophomores is dragging himself across the stage with an ornery smirk. He's wearing probably what he wears everyday – a loose t-shirt, baggy jeans, and sneakers.*

*The seniors are a different story. Mrs. Scott takes the podium. She states that it's a tradition for the seniors to enter from the back of the auditorium and walk down the aisle. R&B music comes in over the loudspeakers and two names are announced. A mass of senior students sitting in the first eight center rows jump up cheering and pull out their cameras. They announce the first pair of names. Girls go down my side, boys on the other.*

*The senior girls are all wearing formal attire. Some boys have respectfully donned jackets. One boy has taken a humorous approach, his pants hoisted up by suspenders, fake buck teeth, and taped up glasses. There are two white males, two black males, and five African American females up for the winter court. Back tattoos peak out from behind the austere appearances - a floor length teal spaghetti strap dress cinched in the front with a rhinestone clasp, a thin burgundy formal more appropriate for spring with an open back, a short black casual dress - all with heels, all appear to be wrinkled and worn, maybe from riding on the bus and dragging the hems through the wet and snowy parking lot.*

*The last girl descends in what looks to me like a used wedding dress, heavy cream satin, embroidery and rhinestones, satin buttons down the back. I am taken aback by both the formality and ill-fit. It's too big for her, but nobody seems to notice. The students are cheering the most for this young lady, their cameras are flashing, and they are going wild. Her male counterpart wears a bow tie and old school football sweater. She is most definitely the star of this show.*

*As they descend, Mrs. Scott tells the audience about each student, their college plans, their favorite classes, their favorite high school memories, the people they respect the most, and the words they live by. The boys have written their scripts with humor, while most of the girls' memories and quotes are serious and sickeningly sentimental. I'm struck by how almost every student mentions a member of the Humanities faculty as someone they most admire or their favorite teacher. Teachers and counselors have an important impact here. Students say they are hoping to attend Cornell, Clark Atlanta, Wright State, OSU, Ohio University, Toledo University, Dayton, Loyola, Princeton, Boston College, Hampton University, York State, Tifton, Ashland, Urbana, Kentucky State. The boys attending Tifton, Ashland, Urbana, and Kentucky add that they are going to play football.*

*Staring at the court I acknowledge its diversity but also the fact that only three students are white. When I assess who is most excited, it's the front section of seniors. The majority of those students are African American. I am sitting in the back of the auditorium surrounded by white students who have no desire to cheer, stand up, or get out their cameras. There's no animosity or disrespect, but it's safe to say that more African American students are showing excitement about this dance than the white students. While I do see groups of students racially intermixed, there are definite and distinctly large pockets of students of the same race sitting together and getting excited about this dance and other pockets that are sitting together and not excited. Who get's excited about this dance, who cares about it, who pulls it together? Does it take the place of sports?*

*[Field Notes, 1/30/09]*

*... I catch Dr. Davis in her office. We talk about the formal. A popular girl was nominated but didn't attend the dance. She knew she was going to win, but she wants to be prom queen. The crown ended up going to the girl in the wedding gown. She was the 3<sup>rd</sup> choice. The runner-up also did not attend due to her prom aspirations. The school sprang for a dinner buffet that did not get eaten because the kids went out to dinner on their own.*

*Dr. Dixon exclaimed, "There sure were a lot of white kids there. Where did we get all those white kids?" Turns out the white kids at OPHS brought white kids from their home schools. So much for interracial dating. She filled me on the rest of the court. The ornery boy from 10<sup>th</sup> grade won. All the white kids won. She says typically white kids have won in the past, because the (black) vote is usually split. This year she said they (black students) pulled together and made sure they got the queen nomination.*

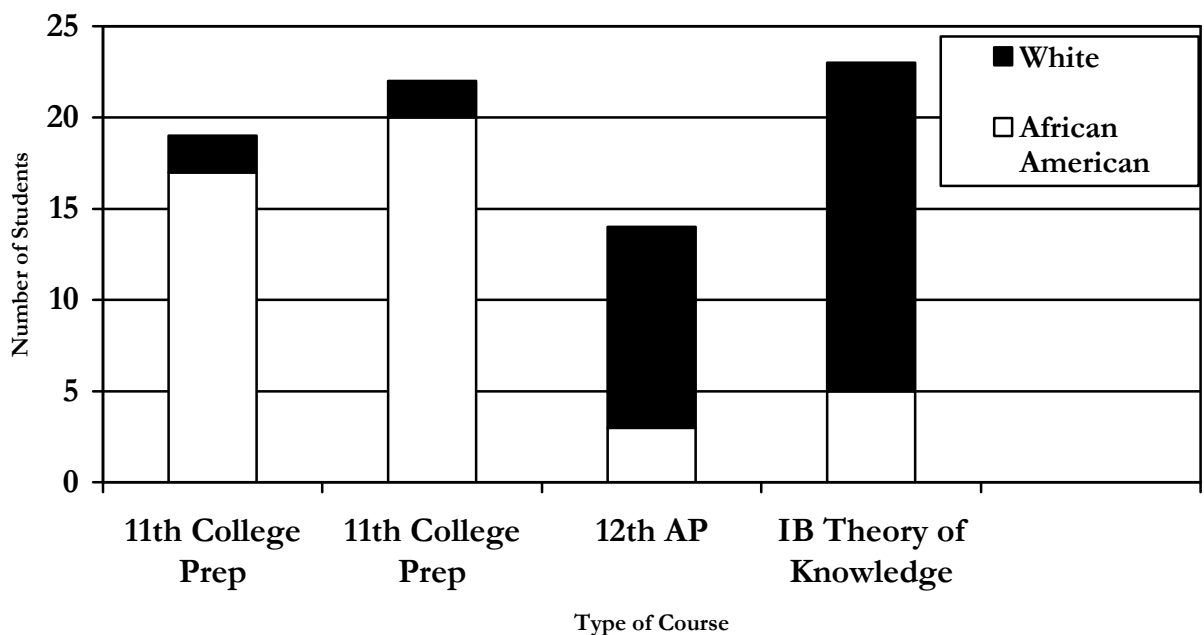
*[Field notes, 2/18/09]*

In many ways, OPHS perpetuated a climate of academic success that enhanced its students' experiences and propelled them towards achievement and college. Simultaneously the school performed a great deal of boundary maintenance to protect its academic climate, and much of this maintenance occurred unwittingly along lines of race and class. Though intended to protect excellence these intentions effectively undermined its mission to promote the equity and achievement of urban students. The next section looks at how race worked to subvert the excellent intentions of OPHS.

#### *Excellent Intentions: Racialized Enrollment Practices in Humanities, AP, and IB programs*

It became apparent during my classroom observations that enrollment at OPHS was stratified by race across the three college preparatory programs at the school, those being the college prep, advanced placement (AP), and international baccalaureate (IB) programs. Of the

classrooms I observed, International Baccalaureate courses were predominantly filled with white students, Advanced Placement courses will also predominantly white with a slightly larger percentage of African American students, and college preparation courses like English/US History combined (a.k.a. “the split”) were almost entirely African American (see Figure 3). Enrollment procedures required interested students to complete applications for AP and IB programs that were reviewed by the teachers, and student choice was therefore often asserted by teachers and administrators as the reason for this stratification. But in an interview with the Principal, she spoke openly about the need to address this issue. Dr. Fisher, the teacher who helped me gain entry into the school, also spoke with me during two conversations about his attempts to actively recruit African American males into the AP program.





*Figure 3. Enrollment by Race in a Sample of College Preparation, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate Social Studies Courses.*

When I began to talk with other faculty, staff, and parents about the overrepresentation of black students in the college prep program, conversations typically took two paths. One, race held an absent presence in our conversations, participants talked around race, never clearly identifying it, but signifying it in the context of conversations. The second approach was discomfort and agitation at my raising the issue. Some participants resisted answering the question directly, often positing other possibilities for the stratification. Other participants openly expressed their agitation. In all conversations particular discourses circulated rendering race an (im)possibility for explaining the racialized enrollment patterns. The following interview excerpt below offers an example of the dominant discourses at work at the school – the discourse of individual choice, the discourse of colorblindness, and the simultaneously raced and de-raced discourse of urban student identity.

Sara: ...Can you talk about why you think enrollment across the three programs is stratified by race?

Vice Principal: I just think that it's offered to the general population and *I believe you just have more Caucasian kids that are interested in it*. It's not to say we don't have African Americans and other nationalities in there, because we do. It's just not the same component as far as numbers. But the kids that are African American have done really well and they benefit. *What people should look at is the rigor of the program and not the*

*color of the race involved in it. Because its whether or not the individual, and race doesn't have anything to do with being an individual, whether or not they want to put in the time and the effort and the rigorous academics that it takes to get through the diploma program. And I think the people from outside will look at numbers and say "ohhh" (with sarcasm).*

Sara: Well I guess I was surprised.

Vice Principal: ...You've got more white kids in there than black kids. What's wrong with the program (with same sarcasm)?

Sara: I guess I was surprised because the school is predominantly African American in general, so when I went into IB...

Vice Principal: *It's a personal thing on whether or not you want to work that hard. And that's where it is. And I don't think that's race based.* And I think that's individual.

Whether you want to write a 4,000 word extended essay, whether you want to do the internship thing, giving back to the community is huge. Take the time to do theory of knowledge. You better be prepared for that.

[Interview, 6/2/09]

This portion of our conversation occurred at the close of an interview I conducted with the Vice Principal toward the end of my data collection. He became agitated when I asked him to talk about the stratification of enrollment at the school. As evidenced above, the fact that more white kids were in the AP and IB courses was believed to be coincidental. He shifted responsibility to the students, asserting that the make-up of the programs was a result of individual choice based on a students' willingness to put in the time and effort required, and

coincidentally “you just have more Caucasian kids that are interested in doing it.” He also asserted that I should not be looking at the “color of the race involved” in the programs but the rigor required. He mocked my questioning during the interview with a great deal of sarcasm, indicating that in his eyes I was being unnecessarily critical.

I start with this interview excerpt, because it illustrates the ways in which colorblind discourses were instituted along with the discourse of individual choice as a justification for the overrepresentation of black students in the college preparatory program. The choice discourse shifted blame away from the school and its staff onto the students and effectively delimited any need to look structurally at the issue. The colorblind discourse of race similarly worked to evade the pattern of racialized enrollment at the school, asserting that racial patterns were coincidental and individual. The school then was not held accountable to the patterns of inequity.

Moving forward from here I will look at the work that de-raced discourses of urban student identity, choice, and colorblindness did at the school. The choice discourse and the colorblind discourse were effectively articulated with discourses of urban educational identity. This articulation contained students within de-raced discourses of urban disadvantage and risk that worked in tandem with discourses of individual choice to evade socially and historically constructed racialized power relations circulating within the school. Students were constructed as individually responsible for their failure to take advantage of opportunities at the school. Colorblind discourses further solidify this explanation, eliding race through beliefs that race no longer mattered in US schools.

I want to address racialized enrollment and the overrepresentation of African American students in the college preparatory courses at OPHS by looking at the enrollment practices

promoted, performed or experienced by 1) faculty and staff, 2) white students and parents 3) and students of color.

*Faculty and Staff Explanations and Practices of Racialized Enrollment: “Race Doesn’t Have Anything to Do with Being an Individual”*

The guidance counselors emphasized that as students progressed, each year they had “more and more choices” in terms of course taking. By junior year students were able to take both AP and IB courses across the curriculum. Though I believe they felt they had students best interests at heart, I found that faculty and staff in many ways dissuaded students from registering for these courses. African American students were the most impacted by faculty and staff practices of recruitment and course registration.

*Practice one: emphasizing rigor over benefit*

Students were required to complete an application for AP and IB programs if they wanted to enroll. Applications were not intended to be used for excluding students, but as a tool for counseling them. Both applications assessed prerequisite courses and requested grades though neither program had a GPA requirement.

It was explained to me that the purpose of the application was to ensure that students “know what they’re getting into.” An analysis of the language used on the applications demonstrates that they had a second function of dissuading students, and that the application encouraged students not to enroll based along lines of race and class.

Both applications emphasized challenge, rigor, and “a serious commitment of time and energy well beyond that expected in a typical high school course of study” (IB application).

According to the AP application, success “occurs because of four key elements present *in the student and family*” (AP application, emphasis mine). These included a “strong desire to think critically...and to read and write”, “*strong parental involvement* supporting students effort to achieve time management and patience will college-level curriculum,” “student responsibility,” and “academic *commitment* to the Advanced Placement experience *in the student’s life*.” The IB program similarly emphasized desire, discipline, time management, and academic success.

Each application asked a series of questions which inadvertently served a sorting function. The IB application asked students to describe their study habits and if they had a job and how many hours they worked. It noted that “It is strongly recommended that job hours be kept to an absolute minimum.” The AP application required students to submit a writing sample answering the question, “What do you see yourself doing seven years from now, and how does the AP program fit into this long term goal?” Both applications end with a signature page. For students, signing indicates a “commitment to work diligently,” “strong interest,” “desire for scholarship,” and an understanding that both programs require exams at the end of the year for credit. Applications also required a parent signature, indicating that they understood the rigor and commitment expected as well. The AP application also stated that parents signing understood that classes are “equal to that which is expected of a college freshman,” and that there is a financial obligation for calculators, review books, and materials.

These applications served as a deterrent for those students who had limited parental engagement. Though I did witness a very quick recruitment talk in Mr. Hart’s split course, the school held its information session in the evenings and the counselors and teachers talked about how difficult it was to get more than the regular group of involved parents to attend these

meetings. Jamie, an African American male in Mr. Hart's class, explained that his "mom's not really the best academic person" and he depended more on people in his community for support [Student focus group, 4/22/09]. Natasha, an African American and Puerto Rican junior in Dr. Fisher's afternoon split class who also held a full time job, explained that her mom worked nights and that "it would be kind of hard to ask my mom...to come to something...Its kind of hard for a parent to have to be involved with everything with their student if they're not able to be there" [Student Interview, 5/1/09]. The emphasis on parental involvement immediately constituted a barrier for students who had limited parental support or involvement in their academics for numerous reasons.

It was also clear from responses that the messages they did receive in school made them aware of the high academic expectations of the course, but unclear of the benefits. Students in the college prep program who did not take advantage of AP or IB discussed how the reputation of the courses discouraged them from applying. Natasha thought the school could do more in terms of explaining the benefits:

Some teachers rarely explain what's in AP or IB. They'll say well it's a test at the end of the year. *It's work. It's work. You have to study.* That makes people not want to go to it. If you explain the advantages of it, like well it could benefit you later on. You could get this done, this done and this done with it. I think people would sign up for it more. If they realize what it could do for them they would sign up for it more. This school just basically gives you papers saying sign here if you want to do it.

[Interview 5/1/09]

Tanesha, another African American student in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade split course, agreed that the school failed to emphasize the benefits or “that you can learn and have fun...Its just telling you that...AP and IB is just work-work all the time” [Interview 5/5/09].

Parents and students agreed that the school tended to emphasize the rigor of the courses over the benefits, and that the school was in effect weeding students out before they even applied. One parent of a student in the AP program stated, “I would like to see more encouragement for (these programs).” In her experience the guidance counselors were not “proactive in getting the information out and making parents understand what this program is and encourage everybody to try and go for it...Instead of putting up criteria that weeded out kids to begin with, let people apply who want to apply and then if they don’t make through the application process...but don’t discourage them. Open up the doors for them” [Parent Interview, 12/9/08].

Guidance counselors also tended to emphasize the rigor of the courses over the benefits. Mrs. Cowan used the academic level and size of the book to talk about AP European History, a sophomore course option. “I said it’s taught like a college level course...I held up the text book, because that sucker is big.” She states that she wants students to “try something different, but don’t overload.” Students and parents were “clammering” for AP courses, and she felt that “For some kids it’s wonderful, but for other kids it could be crash and burn...I think we just have to do a really good job as counselors and parents to make sure that we are selecting the right students...” When I asked how she would explain how these scheduling decisions precipitate into racially stratified classes, she seemed to evade answering the question directly and said I may want to talk to the other counselor about that issue [Interview, 3/25/09].

*Practice two: prerequisites as an obstacle to enrollment*

When scheduling students, Mrs. Altman, the other guidance counselor, focused on graduation requirements and helping students to receive their college prep diploma. Students also had to complete the necessary pre-requisites to enter AP and IB courses. I asked her how OPHS helped students who did not have access to the appropriate prerequisite courses or recommendations needed at the middle school level to make them eligible for AP and IB. She stated that they could “accelerate through their sophomore year with the blocks (block scheduling), but they need to know that they need to accelerate through.” She admitted though that accelerating is not always possible due to scheduling constraints, and “there’s choices (between classes) that they’re gonna have to make, and sometimes things don’t fit in terms of schedule...” The block schedule inadvertently encouraged a type of tracking. Students preparing for AP and IB scheduled and therefore took several classes together creating a tracking pattern that started immediately and continued as they enrolled in AP and IB. As one student stated, “...you have to have a background to come into a little track with some people who are similar to you,” and this academic background segregates along lines of race.

OPHS did not have intervention strategies to make sure that incoming freshman were made explicitly aware of how they would need to accelerate through to take advantage of AP and IB. In talking to students, the lack of middle school preparation and limited knowledge of prerequisites was an obstacle. Students coming from traditional middle schools, as opposed to the alternative or “feeder” middle schools that prepped students for the alternative high schools, suffered from limited resources that translated into lack of access, and these students tended to be predominantly African American.



Mrs. Altman also wanted students to “choose things that they’re strong in, and they like, and they think will relate to their future path.” She wanted to “leave the doors open” for students when they got to college. She also felt that the “social dynamics” and “peer pressure” impacted students’ ability to choose AP or IB and stay enrolled. “Different social groups have different pressures, so put it that way.” When asked about the racial stratification of enrollment she admitted the school’s at least partial responsibility, “I think there’s a variety...it’s a very complicated mix of reasons why that occurs. There are probably things that we could be doing to encourage kids more to take those academic risks, to seek out the rigor. Part of that is on us” [Interview, 2/18/09].

Students I interviewed who were already in AP or IB or had plans as freshman and sophomores to enroll seemed to have an embedded awareness about the programs that they brought with them from their middle schools. Eliza, an Asian American AP senior, did not experience any recruitment activities at the school, but knew she wanted to take AP for college credit because she was bored in her regular classes and wanted a challenge. Alexis, a white junior IB student, applied to the lottery as an upperclassman expressly to enroll in IB. She and her father independently set up a meeting with school staff to learn more about the program and how to enroll [Focus Group, 4/27/09].

Of the five freshman students I interviewed [Focus Group, 4/30/09; Focus Group 3/30/09], four started their freshman year with plans to enroll in either AP or IB later in their careers. Some had already applied to AP European history for the sophomore year. Interestingly, three of these students came from a predominantly white and middle class area near the school and another student, who was African American, had attended a foreign language

immersion school known for its academic excellence. Based on socioeconomic standing and school attendance, these students appeared to have access to prior knowledge about the programs and this helped steer them academically.

In talking with students about their knowledge of prerequisites and their ability to schedule courses, African American students appeared to have scheduling issues that white students I interviewed did not. Erica, an African American freshman, was rescheduled for two courses she had already completed successfully in middle school. “I was supposed to be in Biology this year, but they didn’t have the grade from my middle school so I just took physical science again” [Focus Group, 3/30/09]. The other two students in her focus group, both white females from Clintonville, had both been recommended by their middle school science teachers for pre-AP/IB biochemistry. Erica also discussed that she was placed in Spanish I first semester, but she had already taken that course as well. Second semester she was moved into Spanish II. The two other students questioned why this happened, deciding it was just a scheduling error.

Natasha as well appeared misinformed about her options for AP and had issues with her schedule. She stated that had she known Dr. Fisher was going to teach AP English that year she would have applied. She also signed up for AP Physics and by her account she not only had all the pre-requisites for the course she also had good grades, “but for some reason ...they didn’t give me science this year. They just totally skipped me out on it” [Interview, 5/1/09].

An interesting pattern began to emerge in the data where African American students in the college preparatory courses and not pre-tracked for AP or IB appeared to have a lack of knowledge about the programs and significant scheduling issues that would impact later opportunities to enroll. Some of these issues occurred because students did not have access to

necessary prerequisites at their middle school. In Erica's case there appeared to be a miscommunication in terms of appropriate classes for her, and possibly, the tracking that begins to occur as students taking advanced math, science, and foreign language may have resulted in her scheduling errors. Similarly for Natasha, it is quite possible that her normative position as a college prep student in the scheduling framework may have made it structurally difficult for her to schedule AP physics. It also may have made it easier for staff to overlook this issue, because she was marked as a college prep student with average grades who was read as disinterested in school. I will further explore in an upcoming section how college prep students are discursively constructed and normativized within constructions of urban identity and analyze how enrollment practices are situated within and constrained by these racialized contexts.

## Ethnographic Moment

### Who's Left Out: Participation in Advanced Placement Chemistry

*The room is filled with white tables configured into a U with Mr. Westfall's old wooden desk at the front of the room. They are talking chemistry when I walk in, he and a few students, before the bell rings. I hear words like polarity, covalence, and hydrolysis. He gives me a weird glance and then remembers who I am. He did say I could just show up whenever I wanted, so here I am. I move toward a table in the corner, but he directs me to a seat with the other students. I'm on the end with nobody beside me.*

*The class is composed of 10-12<sup>th</sup> graders, the majority of which are 11<sup>th</sup> grade. There are five white males, one white female, one Asian Female, two African American females, and no African American males. The white boys are centered directly across from the desk and board with the exception of one who sits at the seat to my right, closest to the door. The white female and Asian female sit together right of center where the tables join to make a corner. The two African American girls sit at the far end of this arm with seating between them and the Asian student. Later another African American female arrives late due to a bus issue and sits next to the white boy by the door.*

*Some of the students have their own pieces of white board which they use to show the solutions to chemistry problems and share their work with the class. That is part of today's assignment. But first they nominate questions from the test to review. I have a copy of the test taken November 10<sup>th</sup>. It's handwritten and photocopied, and it looks hard. The discussion is quite interesting as they work through the problems. Mr. Westfall continuously asks them what "criteria" they used to determine their answers. I like this line of questioning.*

*They discuss each question as a group. There's not a lot of hand-raising, more conversation and working together. Almost all of the answers are coming from a white male near the door (who I realize probably has a learning disability) and the white female, though she is more tentative. There are also two boys to my left who offer a lot of discussion while making 3-D molecules which they later use to discuss the questions.*

*Then there are a series of disruptions – a student comes in to collect hygiene products for the soldiers (there's a competition and a pizza party); this is followed by intercom announcements about cookies for the soup kitchen. Mr. Hart comes in with a quick question for Mr. Westfall*

*The discussion continues. The white female is working on her whiteboard. The two African American females are silently looking at the exam together, exchanging glances, and pointing at things on the test. Mr. Westfall directs all of his questions and eye contact towards the back of the room directly facing him – the white boys and the white and Asian girls. The Asian girl doesn't participate. The boy by the door has no problem interjecting, interrupting, asking questions, and generally including himself in the discussion. The two African American females do not participate in the exchange, nor are they brought into the conversation. I don't see the teacher look their way, and I know it can be easy to forget them with students right before you eager to participate.*

*As I write in my field journal I notice that my left hand is wrapped around my mouth as if I'm suppressing a gasp. In my mind I think I am gasping at who is and is not being left out in this class. Mr. Westfall catch's my expression, and I think he's smart enough to realize based on the direction of my eyes what I'm thinking. Suddenly he directs a question at one of the African American girls...*

*[Field Notes, 11/20/08]*

### *Practice three: recruiting African American students when interests converge*

A previous AP teacher was perceived as very concerned with test scores and therefore limited the students she would enroll in the course. "Her class was never bigger than eight people. It's hard to justify having a year-long class with eight people and almost solidly white," according to Dr. Fisher. When the AP program began to lose students, the desire to recruit more African American students for equity reasons converged with the teachers' interests to ensure that the class did not disappear. Dr. Fisher explained, "So I felt like that in order to keep the class, and because of my own feelings about, umm, equity, I went out and recruited African American kids to take it who wouldn't have taken it otherwise unless I went and invited them in,

and some white kids too, and a couple of Asian American kids who knew me...So they might not ordinarily take it, but I'll talk them into doing it, not only because I think they would benefit from it, (but) I am not worried about their test scores" [Interview, 1/21/09].

Other teachers felt that recent attempts to expand the AP program had "watered down" the curriculum and instruction, because of a lack of criteria for admission. As Mr. Hart explains:

We have expanded AP classes over the past 8 years. It used to be that the students in there were ready to succeed. The first few years I was here I would have 80-90% of them passing. We have opened up the class to a much more diverse group of students and a much more rigorous set of standards. More and more students are trying to opt into it even if they don't have the A's and B's.

As a result he perceived that the classes were "more diverse and less successful" and engendered "less of a pure level of learning," because the program expanded without criteria:

When I got here there wasn't a rigid criteria, but somehow or another it was communicated to the students and they seemed to follow this - that in order to get into an AP class you had to be an A-B students and do well on tests. You can't get all your points from projects and homework. And the classes we're all taught by dually certified teachers. So you had a relatively small group with one teacher teaching the two classes. There was also the contradictory perception that the college prep courses had become a refuge for low-achieving students based on how AP and IB programs were perceived to siphon good students off the college prep courses:

...IB takes a lot off the top. AP takes some off the top. Who's filling up the rest of the seats are students who are mediocre, or who have shown a track record of mediocrity. So then for those students, normally a lot of them, the rigorous nature and speed of the AP class isn't good for them, and the comprehensive nature of it makes it very difficult...Who's in there (the split class) now are some students who fit that mold, but more and more students who are there because there's an open seat.

Paradoxically though, Mr. Hart also recognized the benefits afforded his classroom by admitting these "lower-level" students:

...if I ask a question in the split class it will generate discussion...If I ask a question in the AP class, and I'm very frustrated by this, there are six kids that discuss. That's it. I can't ask a question anymore, because I know (names four students) are going to answer. The other kids have grown accustomed to it... And part of me gets so frustrated when they take so long to get an answer whereas other kids have the answers. It's become difficult, because now if they don't answer I end up spending much more time doing my lecturing. Which I can do but I really don't like to do and I don't think it's so profitable for them. Now I have to come up with a way to engage them and get them in smaller groups and activities. They should be reading or writing every class, individual or small group, that's meaningful. The difficult thing is making it meaningful. And that takes time and effort to prepare something that is a small group activity and you don't always get as much progress as you want. If you're on a deadline it becomes difficult to do.

[Interview, 1/21/09]

I observed these divergent practices of curriculum and instruction. Though Mr. Hart worked hard to keep students on task and manage disruptions, the students in the split course were always eager to participate. In the AP class, I watched those same 6 students he identified answer his questions over and over. I observed long moments of silence and entire class periods taken up by small group projects to attempt to engage students in the material.

From the vantage point of CRT/in education, when the fear of losing the AP course became apparent, interests converged momentarily with issues of equity and access for African American students. Equity was accommodated, because it was of benefit to the AP program, but equity alone did not precipitate the recruitment of students of color to the program. CRT in education posits that AP and IB courses existed as a form of white privilege and whiteness as property in the school, privileges that were maintained and momentarily interrupted when the survival of the program converged with equity concerns.

*Practice four: the absent presence of race in conversations about enrollment*

Dr. Davis recognized that race was an issue at the school that was not discussed. Her story about how a teacher broached the subject of race and enrollment at OPHS when Dr. Davis began her job as Principal demonstrates how race is an absent presence in the school, something that is acknowledged by some, but not discussed openly.

I had heard those things prior to coming. Someone said ‘oh, here are some issues you’ve got to face.’ So I thought, how do you talk about those concerns and if they truly are concerns. ... I have to give you a copy of this article. Someone put this article in my mailbox. It talks about basically increasing the minority presence in AP courses and what this teacher did to improve that. *And an AP teacher put this in my mailbox, so I*



*thought, hmm, the door is open. I didn't have to come in and say guys you don't have enough black kids in AP. Someone in that AP department noticed that there were not enough. It was amazing that the teacher gave it to me, and when I talked with her about it, she said oh yeah. They know that they need more, and I've even talked to Dr. Fisher. I said if you guys know this, and I told him in the summer, what are you doing about it? We can't just allow things to happen and we not do anything. Because there's nothing wrong with saying it. And then we can go...some kids don't want to be in AP. Well why is that? What are we doing again to sell the AP program, to make the AP program more attractive?*

[Interview, 10/19/08]

She also recognized an inconsistency between the numbers of students the school perceived to be gifted and talented, the number of students actually designated gifted and talented, and then the number of students taking advantage of AP and IB:

I met with... the gifted and talented coordinator last week, and she gave me the list of the gifted and talented students - 30 pages (she showed me the 30-page front and back document comprised on a spreadsheet in 8 or 10 size font listing all the gifted and talented students at OPHS.) ... I was like, whoa! Some of the students on this I know were not in AP classes. So I'm thinking ok, why aren't these students in AP classes. So what are we gonna do...

As she assessed the situation, she recognized the need to talk openly about the school's responsibility in directing students to AP and IB and motivating them to believe in themselves:

We're going to have a meeting with just the AP teachers and talk about *who are the kids, what do they look like, and I think those conversations have to be, we have to have them. Because I don't know who is making the choices...* well I'm sure the kids are choosing AP. I would assume that parents are pushing AP, and I would assume that counselors are directing to AP. *Sometimes we don't direct students as best as we could, and sometimes kids don't believe that they can meet the challenge.*

Teachers and staff had excellent intentions, but excellent intentions cut two ways. They wanted students to be successful academically and did not want to discourage students by placing them in courses that would prove too difficult. But teachers and staff also intended to protect the excellence of their advanced classrooms. They were concerned about how expanding AP and IB enrollments would negatively impact classroom management, curriculum and instruction, and test scores. While applications overemphasized rigor and served to weed out those students who were not perceived as having the academic habits and family support necessary to succeed, staff and teachers recognized that they were not doing enough to invite students into the courses. Based on an analysis of the application and interviews, teachers and staff were very concerned about maintaining the rigor of their courses and expressed a tension between this concern and the recognition that opportunities to participate in advanced programming at the school were inequitable. Their excellent intentions to protect students were undergirded by more dominant effects which in essence protected the excellence of the courses from low-achieving students. These low-achieving students, "the mediocre," were again, predominantly African American students concentrated in the college preparatory courses.

### *Enrollment as White Privilege: Leaving the Troublemakers Behind*

Of the 11 parents that I interviewed, 8 were white and 3 were African American. Of the white parents, all but one of their students<sup>19</sup> was participating in AP or IB programs. Of the three African American parents, one student was taking one AP course.

White parents overwhelmingly talked about how the AP and IB courses made it possible for their students to leave the troublemakers behind. As one parent explains, “But as he got into his sophomore year and he could take AP art history and AP Euro, then the troublemakers were left behind. And now he’s in IB and they’re gone as far as I know,” [Parent Focus Group, 1/6/09]. There was a perception that OPHS was attracting more and more students not interested in academics, because it was safe, or their parents were choosing the school in good faith hoping that the school would prepare their academically disinterested student for college. These students were perceived as negatively impacting the climate of the school, and AP and IB courses served to “weed out” the troublemakers. Parents perceived this weeding out process as a benefit for their own students, “so that just showed me, well the more the students progress on to their next classes, so my son’s going to be in AP classes, you’re not going to see the kids that were troublemakers in the AP classes. If you do I’d be very surprised. The more he gets into school, and the more, the higher grade he gets, the less that becomes a problem. The first year it was a problem, there were disruptions. This year I don’t hear that” [Parent Focus Group, 1/6/09].

---

<sup>19</sup> The student was a freshman.

In these conversations parents did not make a connection between their white students escape to AP and IB and the predominantly African American students left behind in the college prep courses. CRT helps us to see that the maintenance of these programs as predominantly white, though the school would argue that this occurred inadvertently due to student choice, served inadvertently as a form of white privilege. Whiteness colored the enrollment process and the privileges of advanced curricula, status, and prestige constructed the privileges from which white students could benefit from more often than students of color. White students and families, due to structural constraints of scheduling, their access to middle school prerequisites, and an early knowledge of requirements maintained their rights to the use and enjoyment of the programs while African American students were structurally excluded from this use and enjoyment. As predominantly white courses, they took on a positive reputation and status, one that was not bestowed on the predominantly black college prep courses. The right to exclude, a component of white privilege, is inextricably bound up in the use of applications and an emphasis on rigor over benefit to discourage college prep students, students with jobs, and students with disengaged parents from applying.

These practices were justified in and through racialized discourses of urban students that construct them as disinterested in school and allowed the school to overlook structural issues that may have impeded students desire to apply. De-raced urban student identity functioned as a site of power/knowledge where colorblind discourses and the discourse of individual choice were put to work. Urban student identity was constructed and circulated in ways that preserved white privilege. Colorblind and choice discourses maintained the absent presence of race, rendering race something visible yet inconsequential (i.e. we could see that classes had patterns along lines

of race yet these patterns were rendered insignificant). These articulations impaired any desire or need to look further, look structurally, or reflectively question practices that might be having an impact on African American students.

*Negotiations of Urban Student Identity and Subjectivity as Policy as/in Practice*

*Urban Cachet: How Critical Schooling Actors Negotiate Urban Student Identity and Subjectivity as Policy in Practice*

It is within the specificity of NCLB policy that the urban-ness of this high achieving alternative high school becomes important in new ways.

The policy contexts and the historical materialities of OPHS and its students which were discussed in Chapter I are entangled with discourses of urban educational reform. Though “urban education” is the common term, race functions in meaningful ways within and through the bodies of students. Urban education articulates race with a democratic project concerned with equity and access for “disadvantaged” students, a term that discursively signals low-income students of color, and in the case of Ohio, it signals African American students most intently.

In its transformation from a desegregation-era magnet school to urban success story, OPHS has taken on a certain *urban cachet* that translates into particular racialized strategies for enrolling students in the school. By *urban cachet* I am referring to the sense of identity, specialness and prestige that comes from identifying as an “urban” student or school and how this cachet is used in making decisions to support student achievement.

*Transformation, promise, breakthrough: urban cachet and the production of urban students as objects*

The identity of OPHS as an urban school was an important tool in critical actors' negotiations of NCLB in making decision about enrolling in the school and in choosing classes. Its urban identity was also a characteristic often used by the district and the school to gain recognition, awards, and grant money. The district is proud of OPHS, and rightly so, because of its amazing success graduating urban students and propelling them to college.

The school, the PTA, and the district all put to work urban student identity in ways that capitalized on historical and material understandings of urban students as cultural others who are in need of transformation, show signs of promise, or experience a breakthrough via urban education. The following example illustrates this point.

OPHS was recognized in 2007 by the National Center for Urban School Transformation for its ability to transform the urban school setting into one "where all students achieve academic proficiency, evidence a love of learning, and graduate well prepared to succeed in post-secondary education, the workplace, and their communities" (ARAdmin, 2007).

Urban education gives meaning to race, and frames itself particularly as democratic project concerned with equity and access for at-risk students. Urban students, their bodies, and what they signify become useful in showcasing urban education and its transformative effects on "the disadvantaged." It capitalizes on and solidifies historic and racialized narratives of the always failing, culturally deprived student of color (and more specifically African-American students), which excludes the history of African American education, the failures of integration, and the implications of these failures for urban education today. Urban students then become

powerful fixed objects that attract status and prestige and give the school its cachet. This cachet in turn is manipulated by the school and the district to attract awards, recognition, and much needed grant moneys that are used to shore-up the under-resourced school and provide additional opportunities for students.

Individual parents also managed and manipulated urban identity and cachet in making enrollment decisions for their students. These parents expanded their decision-making criteria to include not only accountability and curriculum standards, but to also further capitalize on the urban-ness of the school as a college entrance strategy and for personal gratification. I provide two examples:

*“It’s a strategy:” how African American families negotiate urban student identity*

Mr. Carmichael was an active member of the PTA and African American father whose sophomore son was reluctantly recruited to the AP program. During the focus group it was clear that Mr. Carmichael supported the school, but he referred to the curriculum as “watered down” and not of the same caliber as private schools in the area. He described how he perceived that black parents such as himself were taking their kids out of private and parochial schools to strategically capitalize on the urban cachet of OPHS. Like Mr. Carmichael, these parents did not see themselves as “urban;” they were middle or working class parents with professional jobs living in or near middle class neighborhoods; they were educated, and if not college educated, they made up for this via engagement in their students academic lives. Mr. Carmichael explained what he perceived to be the decision-making process of parents he knows:

You might not be as special at a private school, like at Academy or St. Charles. Even if your kid is doing A’s, a lot of these schools you may have 20 kids with a 4 point, 4.1. So

depends on what the parent's goal is for that child, maybe the child might be aspiring to go to a certain school. The parent will say you're not special here... *My concern is that with the parents it's a strategy. I'll take my, maybe even A student... put them at (OPHS) and they should sail through. And the schools (colleges) think 'here's an inner city kid, look how well they've done with the opportunities they've had.'* Well, no they really (aren't an inner city kid), but that middle school is not on the transcript so they (the colleges) don't see that. Every parent I talk to, to me it seems to be a strategy.

[PTA Focus Group, 2/2/09]

*"I wanted her to be of the world:" how white families negotiate urban student identity*

Most white parents I spoke mentioned unprompted their support for diversity in the high school during the course of interviews. Two parents I met with strongly believed in the importance of diversity and equity and had a sense of pride in sending their children to an "urban" school. Here I share one parent's comments:

Dr. Steele was a well-respected professor from a local university who volunteered to participate in my study after hearing about it through the PTA. Her daughter was then a sophomore with plans to enroll in the IB program which initially attracted them to the school. Her mother spoke at length about how diversity impacted their decision to choose OPHS. Her comments below demonstrate a desire to support diversity and demonstrate progressive politics by enrolling her daughter in a predominantly black public high school. Yet at the end of this response, there is an acknowledgement through a silenced but racialized discourse of the ways in which urban cachet capitalizes on the materiality of the bodies of students of color.



One of the reasons we wanted to stay in the city of Columbus and why we started out with her in a public school in Columbus is because we wanted her to be in the world. It never was a concern to us that she was going to be a minority...because white kids are the minority at (OPHS)... She was enthralled by the fact that in the cafeteria, because she had seen movies about high school, that there weren't tables for the white kids and tables for the black kids, that everybody seemed to be involved with everybody else. She seemed to be enthralled with the mix of styles that people dressed, the sort of gangster style and preppy kids, and everyone seemed to be interacting... I said to her, it looks to me, looking around, that you'll be in a 10% minority. She's not just a white girl, she's a tiny white girl. She's 4'10" and weighs 90 lbs NOW. She was smaller then. And I said are you going to be uncomfortable? She said it doesn't feel uncomfortable. She walks around surrounded by these 6-foot tall... (pause, as if looking for the appropriate word) gigantic kids. She's at home there.

[Parent interview, 12/2/08]

Each form of cachet utilizes a construction of urban educational identity overburdened by discourses of disadvantage and risk. These negotiations of urban cachet demonstrate how urban students and schools are discursively constructed through cultural assumptions that attribute student failure to those discourses. These power/knowledge relations are productive of multiple effects which require and desire this particular brand of urban educational other to function, and each retraces the limits of the identity in its reproduction.

Most, if not all, of the awards and recognitions received by the school were hinged on its identity as a high achieving urban high school. In this era of accountability where schools are

measured by the achievement of their students, the reproduction of the urban educational other is a form of policy in practice where schools such as OPHS receive credit and recognition for educating those students. Simultaneously, capitalizing on urban identity has been used to support the achievement and success of students, making it possible for the PTA to shore up the under-resourced school. Yet, without its urban education other, the achievement at OPHS would not be so surprising or worthy of recognition. It is the expectations of low achievement from students of color, the discursive relations of whiteness/achievement and blackness/failure, which give OPHS its referential power.

Black families' utilization of urban identity as a college acceptance strategy negotiates the power/knowledge relations of this identity in new ways. This utilization likewise resubstantiates the necessity of an urban other and sustains surprise at their success. Yet, it also clearly delineates a black achievement identity based in African American engagement in education. In this instance black families are produced as savvy identity consumers, well aware of the commodification of urban-ness, and able to exploit this commodification to the advantage of their students. Troubling though is the necessity of these families to be set up as outside of the urban discourse in order to put it to work. It is through the productive force of this insider/outsider binary that urban students are reinscribed as others in the educational process.

The negotiations of urban identity by white families signal another productive moment which demonstrates how commitments to diversity and equity are also inescapable of white privilege. The pride this family experienced from sending their daughter to an urban school "to be of the world" can be read as a form of whiteness as property. Whiteness as property serves as a form of protection from the commodification and objectification experienced by urban

students. It does the work of reaffirming the boundaries of white and black identity, equating whiteness with privilege and blackness with disadvantage. The willingness of this family to cross these identity borders into disadvantaged urban schools and their political desire to allow their “tiny white girl” to be around “6-foot tall gigantic kids” is also a manifestation of interest convergence. Their desires for their child to attend a high achieving school converge with their commitments to diversity and equity making the decision to attend an under-resourced school with urban students both academically advantageous and personally fulfilling. OPHS though is not a typical urban school, but families that capitalize on its urban cachet resurrect traditional notions of disadvantage to do so.

It is important to note that when the term *urban* is used, its use often elides race and class distinctions. During an informal conversation, Dr. Fisher brings this elision to light, “Why don’t we say what we mean when talking about failing schools? We don’t mean New Albany. When Obama talks about failing schools why doesn’t he say what he means – poor urban and rural schools” [3/4/09]? In the instances of urban cachet above, urban identity does this work of eliding, making any recognitions of the complexities of race, socioeconomics, and educational disadvantage unnecessary (im)possibilities.

The next section will attempt to unfix urban students from discourses of disadvantage and risk by looking at how students at OPHS enact themselves as educational subjects on their own terms.

*Achievement On Their Own Terms: How “Urban” Students Negotiate Educational Identity and Subjectivity*

In previous sections I have looked at how *urban student identity* is negotiated by schooling actors, and how in the process of these negotiations this identity is contained and fixed within the de-raced discourses of disadvantage, risk, and poverty that foreclose other possibilities for equity and access to education for these students. I also discussed ways urban students are situated as fixed objects within these discourses and how this translates into a form of cachet used by schooling actors in competing ways. This next section attempts to disrupt the fixing of identity and shift thinking to an *unfixing* of the urban subject that is open to the messiness and complications produced when urban students are seen as *elusive agents* of education on their own terms (though these terms are constrained by discourse and power).

*“Those” Students*

During the course of my data collection I found that parents and teachers perceived there to be two kinds of students at OPHS. The first student was the academically driven, intrinsically motivated student who decided along with their parents to apply for the lottery. AP and IB students were often put into this category, and most of the parents I spoke with, particularly white parents, described their students as goal oriented and wanting to be at the school. I refer to this as the *discourse of the successful student*.

IB students in particular were characterized as “the elite” and “the most high-achieving group.” Some parents who had students in gifted and talented programs felt that their students had been on a fast track to OPHS, and that the pre-lottery formalized this fast track by allowing

students to apply for selective admission based on merit. Students that attended certain alternative middle schools were also perceived to have a leg up in being at least prepared to attend OPHS. These academically motivated students, the ones that had shown through academics that they “want it the most” were the students that parents and school staff felt OPHS was designed to educate.

Students also talked about this kind of student in particular ways. Natasha said that these students were the ones “who really want to do something with their life, want to be something with their life, something major,” who were “really smart,” and “they want to really challenge themselves.” But they were also considered elitist. Michael told me that these students “think they’re better than you,” and “they keep talking about it.” He said this was just as disruptive as the kids who misbehave in class.

When questioned, parents and staff would recognize that these students were disproportionately white, but again their explanations focused on individual choice and colorblind evaluations of this pattern. One teacher talked about a discussion he had years ago with some students about why they thought the IB and AP programs were not as attractive to black students. Race did matter according to these students, but black identity was invested with the discourse of choice made possible by minority *advantage* or *cachet*, as opposed to disadvantage:

Teacher: ...Another kid said that black students don’t have as good of credentials to go farther, because they get all the minority advantages.

Sara: That’s the perception?

Teacher: Well, no that's the truth. It's easier for them to get scholarships and get admitted to colleges. They don't have to stack their resume nearly as much as the white kids do, because of the whole minority, informal affirmative action kind of thing. This is true...And it's a harder program so what's the point of doing that if you don't need to...

Sara: I wouldn't have expected that, not needing...

Teacher: Not needing to have the good stuff on the resume. It's true. And they see it as a white thing. Kids still identify this is a white thing, this is a black thing.

[Interview, 3/11/09]

In this explanation, the disadvantage attributed to minority students and the potential for affirmative action prompted them to choose the courses that were perceived to be less strenuous academically.

The second type of student at OPHS was the student that had been placed at the school by a family member or guardian, but who did not want to be there. These students were the ones participants referred to as "those" students, and the discourse around "those" was rather striking. The parents of these students were perceived to have "just dump(ed) their kids off and s(aid), 'hey, they're at the best school now, you deal with them.'" These students were referred to as "the usual ding dongs who don't seem to care one way or the other," "freshmores," "troublemakers," "underperforming kids," "taking up space," who were maybe even "borderline retarded." They were considered not as focused as the first group, perceived to be disruptive in the classroom and failing academically.

On a particularly challenging day which seemed to go from bad to worse for Dr. Fisher, he shared with me his frustration with trying to work with these students. The grades he shared

demonstrated that the norm in his sophomore humanities classroom was not the academically driven student but the struggling student. His second quarter grades he felt reflected more accurately the academic climate in some classrooms at OPHS: 31 F's, 11 D's, 8 C's, 3 B's, and 0 A's. The highest score in his class was an 82%. Two students who had not missed a day of school had unbelievably low grades. One white boy had a 7% average and another African American boy had an 8%. Of the 31 F's, 23 were African American students (14 male and 9 female), and the remaining 8 were white, and he believed that most of these students had failed 9<sup>th</sup> grade humanities as well. He speculated that based on his interactions with parents that most of these students came from single-parent female-headed households who were financially stressed. He also felt that these same kids were the ones that parents had "turned over to us" hoping that the school could turn them around [Field Notes, 3/4/09].

These students and the stresses they brought to the school were talked about as "the burdens". Mr. Hart explained that OPHS has created a focused academic environment "against the odds...Over the last few years the burdens on the teaching staff and the school have grown. The burdens of the social problems coming into the school have increased, not beyond control, but they've increased. So we've had a lot of student who just aren't academic." Whereas in the past students who were unsuccessful at OPHS could leave, credit recovery had made it practically unnecessary for them to leave and made it difficult for the school to direct them to other programs. OPHS found itself in a new position of having "to deal with (our) share of the burdens too" [Interview, 1/21/09]. They also recognized that were getting more students who were not as prepared as they had been in the past, and they attributed this to a greater proportion of students and/or parents choosing OPHS for safety rather than academics.

Teachers and staff felt stretched in terms of time and resources to serve students in a social service capacity. As a guidance counselor explained, “I can’t be a full-time counselor for kids experiencing problems, although that’s what they train me to do in college. You don’t have enough time to do that...” [2/18/09]. She went on to tell me about these other issues which included homelessness, transience, pregnancy, and anger management. Teachers I interviewed also speculated about issues including home violence, drug addiction in the home, and poverty.

Students also agreed that there were those students that “sleep,” “argue with teachers,” “act out,” “yell and cuss and scream a lot,” and are “the loud fighting type.” Jamie confirmed that “there’s two types of students at OPHS. There are the people that are passionate about their social life and people that are passionate about their educational life.” The split classes I observed typified this behavior. Students agreed that these students had a negative impact on the classroom learning environment.

When I asked students to describe what was meant when references were made to “those” students, their descriptions took on racial and socioeconomic contexts associated with urban identity. During a focus group, Michael stated that he felt those students were not just the black kids, but a diverse group of students. Isabella disagreed, “Most of the people who do act like that, it might be their environment that they live in, because I don’t think anybody that lives where he (Michael) lives would act like that.” Michael was a white student from the predominantly white middle class neighborhood north of the school. Later Michael went on to speculate that “Statistically with the demographics of where people live and the work ethics associated with *that race* stereotypically might (have) some impact on it.” Though he did not



refer specifically to African American students, it was clear that this was the demographic to which he was referring when he talked about “that race.”

On the other hand Natasha’s talk about “those students” was heavily invested with racialized urban discourses that associate African American students with failure and lack of interest in school:

I just believe, not trying to be racist. I’m partially black. I just believe that, oh this sounds so bad. Black people are really lazy. They don’t like to really apply themselves, because they figure what’s there after high school. What is there for me to do? Because there are so many stereotypes against black people nowadays where they can’t succeed when they do this, they can’t succeed when they do that...

I know if I had a choice now I would have been in AP or IB looking back at it. But the IB students and AP students are really students who really want to do something with their life, want to be something with their life, something major. *And I already know that most of the black students here aren’t really into that.* They really don’t care whether or not they get really good grades or if they get something on their transcript like that. They’re not really worried about it. They’re just worried about what they’re wearing tomorrow.

I know for a fact that certain people here, like the black students that are taking AP or IB, they’re really smart... It doesn’t have to be everybody in there. I think it’s a good mixture because you don’t want a lot of...*I won’t say you don’t want a lot of blacks and whites together, but its always predominantly a white thing, because we’re the minority*

*group, so of course the majority group is going to take over. And they don't want to sit in regular classes and have regular studies. They want to really challenge themselves.*

[Interview, 5/1/09]

As we have seen here, discursive constructions of urban student identity were raced in specific ways. These discourses had strong implications for how teachers and parents saw students and how students saw themselves as agents in their own education. Just as discourses of urban student identity are overburdened by African American identity, discourses of success are equally “colored” by whiteness. Though we typically view issues of race as “colored” by African American identity, in the next section I want to demonstrate how whiteness, often viewed as an invisible marker of race, “colored” the fight for the pre-lottery and how the discursively racialized identities of the successful student and those students were put into play.

*“The district is all about political correctness:” the fight for the pre-lottery*

Though in most conversations with parents about racial issues at the school were read through discourses of individual student responsibility and colorblindness, issues of race were acknowledged in discussions of the PTA's long fight for the pre-lottery selection process which was finally approved by the district for the 2008-2009 school year. Their whiteness “colored” the pre-lottery, their fight with the district, and potentially the bodies that gained admission through the program. The pre-lottery was deeply tied to racialized discursive constructions of “those students” and “successful students.” Using Critical Race Theory the practices of white parents advocating for their students can easily be situated as practices of white privilege and whiteness as property which continued to exclude students of color from opportunities like OPHS. Moving forward here I read these practices through power/knowledge relations that

racialize parental advocacy and student access to schools to look at how whiteness, often viewed as an absent marker of race, “colored” the pre-lottery.

A parent who was a member of the district task force that created the pre-lottery explained she was motivated by the inability of the district to serve all its high achieving students with challenging enrichment opportunities, “I think one of my big things was, ‘(We) know you worked really hard. Congratulations! You can go to a mediocre school.’ Or a school that doesn’t have as many course offerings or advanced placement offerings. That just doesn’t make sense to me” [Parent Interview 12/18/08]. But she also talked about how “not everyone wants to go there for the right reason...and they really don’t want to do the work (and) they’re taking the seat from somebody else who might really want to go there and work really hard.” Though they were often talked about in de-raced terms, it was “those students” who were attending OPHS for the “wrong reasons” that also drove desires for the pre-lottery.

When parents in particular talked about OPHS, they often talked nostalgically about OPHS in the past and rather hesitantly about how they perceived OPHS had changed, and not necessarily for the better. The nostalgia was tied to being more populated in the past by the “successful students,” while the change at OPHS was most attributed to the burdens and disruptions the school had taken on with the increase in “those students” coming to the school for other than academic reasons.

As one white mother of a current student and an alumnus stated during a focus group, “part of why we tried to do the pre-lottery (was) to get more kids that really wanted to learn and that were focused on academics and try to bring it back to the way OPHS used to be” [1/6/09].

Another parent questioned the legality of the pre-lottery and believed that parents had driven the pre-lottery issue, because OPHS was “getting underperforming kids:”

I have friends in other schools that are teachers and there is some concerns about how we got to get the cream of the crop in our lottery – pick out 50. And I’m not quite sure how we got that legally. I think the parents drove that. I think it was because we were getting underperforming kids.

[Parent Interview, 1/27/09]

If we read the desires for a pre-lottery through racialized discourses of urban student identity that produce “those students” as students of color and “successful students” as predominantly white, the pre-lottery issue is “colored” by these power/knowledge frameworks. Parents inescapably worked within this grid, and purposely or not, their advocacy for their students adversely affected “those students.” The color, the whiteness, of the parents advocating for the pre-lottery produced interesting racial tensions with the district, making whiteness visible:

This is my seventh year in the school, and we talked about this for years. It really fell on deaf ears with the administration. Two years ago our president started a dialogue directly with the superintendant, but what I think really gave us a leg up is that with the new Ames Middle School, if you were lucky enough to lottery in there you were guaranteed a spot at (another school) because you were prepared in the arts... I had quite a heated debate with the former principal about this, but she just didn’t want to listen. But it was a lot of persistence I think, because we have this really great rigorous program, why shouldn’t it serve the kids that want this the most? And all we said was ‘why can’t we

offer a portion of our seats to kids who demonstrate?’ They wouldn’t have to be lucky enough to lottery in. ...you know why aren’t there other programs like this in the district where kids can be, where they get what they need, not just based on random lottery? And it was difficult. We argued for years. *The first time we talked to the superintendant unfortunately the group was all white, so she basically said we were elitists and we didn’t want black kids in the school.*

[Parent Focus Group, 1/6/09]

Teachers too recognized that a tension existed in the lottery between “those students” that got a seat at OPHS and “successful students” who lost a seat to the academically unmotivated. The district ignored requests and demands for a pre-lottery, but then suddenly they changed their tune. Some speculated that it was because the increased enrollment hurt the program and caused the district to give in. Others believed that it was the increase in “those students” that led to the implementation of the pre-lottery:

...if you had told me they were going to do that I would have said ‘you are crazy,’ because they dug their heels in for years. I’ve been here 27 years, and we started talking about the need for that thing when I’d been here 2 years... Because there were people here that were not fitting. ...we would pick 150, and 50 or 25 of them would be like ‘wheeeee, ooooo.’ So it rankled people. *There’s kids out there who would really give their eye teeth to be in this program and you’re just sitting there taking up a spot.* So there’s where it came from, and the district would hear nothing. They would not even entertain the discussion. Just like, get out, close the door, don’t, no,

stop. Then suddenly...and I think maybe...we were beginning to have trouble. We were beginning to have trouble with an imbalance of kids, too many kids, that...there's certainly got to be a critical mass of kids that want to do this or...I mean you can take them to water...

[Teacher Interview, 3/11/09]

This teacher perceived the district approved the pre-lottery to help OPHS recover from the increase in enrollment and attempt to re-balance the population with “successful students.” For parents and teachers, race was inconsequential to their desire for a pre-lottery. They were interested in providing enrichment to “successful students” and shifting the balance of OPHS back to an academically motivated climate. Though many wanted to read race as inconsequential, it has proved to be inescapable. Whiteness colored desires for the pre-lottery.

I had no way of knowing whether or not the 50 pre-lottery students were predominantly white or black. Several people at the school told me that they did not want to find out who the pre-lottery students were until after the grades were posted the first semester, and I was not able to get that information. Some worried that the selective admission did privilege white students:

The peculiar and depressing and disturbing part of this is my daughter is on the school bus that goes through Clintonville. Last year that bus was practically empty, this year there is no room to sit. Most of those, all freshmen. So this is what's worrisome. Most of those freshman who got in that pre-application pre-lottery program are white middle-class kids from Clintonville. And that's the part that's of concern.

[Dr. Steele, 12/3/08].

This school bus route might very well be a direct indicator of how selective admission favored white students. If we think back to the practices of racialized enrollment and how they were entangled with structural issues like the type of middle school attended, student awareness of and access to appropriate pre-requisites at the middle school level, and the availability of parents or teachers who also had this awareness and ability to advocate for the student, we can see that the pre-lottery is equally bound up in structural and racialized issues of educational access.

The pre-lottery was justified in and through de-raced notions of “those” students. Though parents desired to de-race the fight for the pre-lottery, white privilege circulated in powerful ways, becoming entangled with racialized discourses of urban student identity which potentially allowed the district to overlook the structural issues that might impact a student’s eligibility to apply. White parents’ read their intentions as de-raced though their access to better educational resources and their increased ability to advocate for their students functioned as sites of power/knowledge where whiteness “colored” the pre-lottery and functioned to contain urban students within fixed discourses of disadvantage, disinterest, and risk.

When a white female student told me “the district is all about political correctness,” it was not expressed in a positive way. She felt that the desperate attempts to provide “equal opportunities for everybody” avoided discussion of the fact that some programs “were better than others” and some students were “better prepared for the future.” Even this 14-year old freshman sensed that there were tensions between equity and excellence and that maybe these tensions were irreconcilable. As we have seen in the debates over the pre-lottery, equity and excellence played out along lines of race in difficult ways. I run the risk now of asking how we

might move to disrupt these racialized tendencies and reconceive of urban students on their own terms, potentially opening up the possibilities for equity and excellence in public schools.

### *On Their Own Terms*

In spite of the issues of stratified enrollment and the pre-lottery, teachers and staff also felt strongly that “we take all kids in through the lottery...and we eventually do good things with most kids” [Teacher Interview, 3/11/09]. Though OPHS had a reputation for producing elite students and “skimming off the top” the best students in the district, it was very clear during my time there that they were educating a full spectrum of students from the very driven to the very apathetic and everything in between. It is the students that did not fit neatly into either category of the successful or the “those students” identity, the ones that failed to be contained and disrupted the dichotomy in play, that might help us to re-envision them as urban educational subjects on their own terms.

Urban students are elusive and fluid agents in refashioning urban educational identity on their own terms. I refer to the students as elusive agents to signal a conceptualization of students as subjects in the making, remaking, and resisting of identity that elude any fixed form of representation through research. Subjectivity, the product and process of lived experience, is discursively situated within the grid of power and knowledge, but permeable to the complicated ways students live their lives.

Rather than asserting ethnography as a coming to know the urban subject, I assert ethnography as a necessary failure that desires an elusive subject and produces a representation that slips and slides in and out of our grasp. This slipping and sliding, this failure to fix, is the



mark of validity that makes use of the disruptions and aporetic suspensions to trouble taken-for-granted understandings of urban students and make room for other possibilities. How is “success” operationalized, resisted, and reconstructed at OPHS through student practices of schooling, and how do these practices provide an understanding of urban student subjectivity in relation to macro and micro policies and practices that construct urban student identity?

As I recognize the complicity of research in continually resurrecting the *urban other*, I also acknowledge the equally damaging possibility of delegitimizing the lived experiences of systemic poverty and oppression that does indeed impact students in urban schools. This is one aporia this study inhabits, a paradox of how to both legitimate the materiality of urban schooling for students and teachers without, as Fine so adeptly states, “containing and displaying” them.

There is potential for urban educational studies to reconceive this tension, fight the tendencies of containment and display by constantly troubling the representation and looking for possibilities, openings, and leaks in the limits of our understanding. Students at OPHS are highly recognized for their academic achievement. At this school, race, poverty, and other urban “disadvantages” are articulated with academic success. The success of these students might be read as the resiliency of students who act as agents in their own achievement given the opportunity of a school that supports this endeavor, rather than as students who have been transformed by outside forces. How might all students succeed if they were afforded the opportunity of this school?

The following portraits attempt to look at urban students on their own terms, admitting that these terms are elusive, and that their negotiations slide both in and out of the traditional discourses of urban identity. But it is in the slippage that urban subjectivity becomes unfixed

from taken-for-granted notions about not only the larger dominant discourses around urban, disadvantaged, and at-risk students, but also the local discursive constructions of “those students” that are entangled with urban and racialized subtexts. The ways in which these students inhabit, re-appropriate, and puncture the containment of urban identity functions as a “subversive repetition” replete with (im)possible understandings and reconceptualizations of how these students negotiate academic success and achievement on their own terms.

*Natasha*

*I sit in Dr. Fisher’s room and wait for my interviewee to show up to first block study hall. When she arrives she has a little attitude with him and he has one with her. He asks her to come to his desk, but she doesn’t seem to hear him. He waves her over in an exaggerated manner, rolling his eyes. He mutters under his breath about “these kids” and tells her I’m here. There’s some back talk, and her tough demeanor makes me worry about how this interview is going to go. I get the impression that she’s a difficult student. But then we leave and I meet someone different.*

*Natasha is tall, maybe 5’11”, and thin. She is in Dr. Fisher’s afternoon split class. I learn during the course of our interview that she identifies as African American and Puerto Rican. She’s dressed comfortably in jeans, sneakers, and a jacket with her hair is pulled up into a high pony tail. I introduce myself as we head down the quiet hallway to the cafeteria with a box of fresh glazed donuts. She immediately begins asking me questions about going to college, and her enthusiasm catches me off guard after the interchange I saw between her and her teacher. She’s smiling and lit up in a way I never expected, and the furrowed brows and vinegary disposition I witnessed have dissipated. She asks me what my degree will be when I graduate. “How do you get a PhD?” “How long does it take?” She tells me eagerly, cutting me off before I can finish answering, that she plans to attend a four-year college to get her bachelors, but eventually wants to get “the highest degree” she can get, which for her is an MBA. I learn that she has chosen a school, is preparing to take her SAT’s, and is saving money for college. She wants to go into business and fashion design. She takes a fresh glazed donut from the box, and we get started with our interview.*

*She works to support herself and her mother, has younger siblings, and is trying to save money for a car. She’s very conscientious about money. Kmart works her close to 40 hours a week. She gets home late and usually does homework at school during study hall*

*and steals time during class. She recognizes that her B average grades would be better if she didn't work, but I can see that in a lot of ways she doesn't have a choice. I am really glad to have her in my study. She is the typical OPHS student, but not the one in the spotlight. She's the student that they capitalize on when they want to be urban.*

[Field Notes, 5/1/09]

Natasha inhabited a Derridean space of difference that defied her containment precisely within the discourse of “those students” or the “successful student” identity. Her ambivalence left a trace of “all that is not what is being defined or posited” (Spivak, 1999, p. 424) by shifting our gaze to the absence of materiality of race and class inequalities in our discussions of urban students. The recognition of these complexities that situate Natasha both within and against urban identity opened up the restricted binary formulations. Her subjectivity offers us a transgression of the imposed boundaries of knowledge about urban students and therefore common constructions of urban educational identity. We get a glimpse of this student and how she negotiates the lived experiences and discursive constraints on her own terms.

Early on in the interview she cast herself simultaneously as both a student looking for a challenge and a student who was academically disinterested. She, and not a parent or guardian, took the initiative to enter the lottery for OPHS:

You know most children here say that their parent picked it for them. Well me and my mom sat down and talked about it. I would rather go to a school where its one of the top ranking schools in Columbus ...so that's why I chose to go here. Right when they were telling us about the lottery and they showed us all the names, and I was like, I've never heard of that before and that would be interesting to go to a place you never heard of and no one's ever been there. Especially in my family I know I'm the first one to go here... It wasn't my mom's decision.

She also referred to herself as “lazy” several times during the interview when talking about herself academically. She told me, “I have really horrible study habits, and I’m lazy as I don’t know what,” and this discourse of laziness was often asserted as a reason for her average grades and inability to complete her homework. “...I got a high B in that class and I barely still didn’t do anything. I don’t know why I’m so lazy with that kind of stuff. I just don’t feel like doing it.” The discourse of individual choice permeated her explanation of homework habits and grades, and this choice was tinged with racialized conceptualizations of herself as lazy and disinterested.

It was quite obvious though that her family struggled financially, and that Natasha took it upon herself to support her mother and her siblings while also trying to save money and meet her own needs:

Sara: Do you wish you didn’t have to work so much after school?

Natasha: I wish that a lot. Like yesterday I didn’t go to work even though I was supposed to, just because it takes a lot out of you and it wears you out. You get home and you’re seriously tired, because it’s basically like you go to school from like 8 and you come home at 10:30 at night. And you only get like 20 minutes to be at home and eat and all that kind of stuff. I think that if I didn’t have to work so much I would be happy. But then again when you see the paychecks that you get your kind of ok it was worth it.

Sara: What do you spend your money on?

Natasha: I’m saving it for my car. My mom kind of gets mad, because I’ll pay my phone bill. My mom doesn’t pay my phone bill. You know most students have their parents pay for it. I pay my phone bill, and anything I want I get for myself. I don’t ask my

mom for anything. I save up for my car. I put \$150 down every paycheck. Give it to my mom. I want her to hold the money, because I think I'll spend it if I had it by myself.

She kind of gets mad because I spend my money on clothes sometimes. She's like 'you have a lot of clothes don't spend your money on it.' I don't know, I love clothes. I just love things that you don't have that you weren't able to afford before.

My mom did have to do this all by herself, having 4 kids and having a job all by herself, having to pay a mortgage, and having to pay a car, and all this stuff by herself...

She kind of gets annoyed. She'll be like 'well Natasha I have to get this and that.' This might sound selfish, but I hate when people complain about it. I mean I don't hate when she complains, because you know I know she means for the good. If she could get it for me she would. I just can't stand the complaining. I'm like, 'I might just get a job and get it for myself. You won't have to complain and worry about it.'

The only thing she does for me is pick me up from work every single night before she goes to work. So I know if I have a car she won't even have to worry about that. I can just take myself and bring myself back home, and she'll be all on her own doing whatever she does.

Sara: Do you buy your own food?

Umm,hmm. I give her \$100 every time I get paid. My mom will sit there and be like 'you all eat all the food all the time.' So I just give her money so she'll have more money to add on to what she usually buy, and she won't have to worry about the food being gone in two days.

As a student Natasha inhabited this tension between family responsibilities and academic opportunities. The “choices” she made about her courses took place within a network of structural disadvantages entangled with racialized discourses about “those” students.

Sara: If you could work less would you study more?

Natasha: If I could work (less) I would study more. It would make life so much easier than having to come to school and start doing work and worrying about am I doing this right or what’s going all wrong.

Sara: Do you think you’re teachers know why you don’t get A’s? Do you think they think you’re serious when you come here? Do they know you work?

Natasha: They don’t know that. Most of them don’t know that I work. Dr. Fisher knows that I work, but I still manage a B in his class. I go to their class and their like ‘why are you so tired and why are you half asleep.’ So I’m just like I have a job. It’s kind of hard to keep up with all this stuff. I’m doing your work at night and trying to sleep. It’s really hard. If I didn’t have a job as much working I would do a lot better.

Sara: Do you think they think you’re a serious student?

Natasha: When I apply my mind I’m really serious about it.

Though she could easily be read as a “mediocre” college preparatory student who enrolled in split courses, slept in class, and struggled to complete her homework, she continued to hold onto an educational identity that was academically invested and headed for college. She talked about her love of science and how it came “easy” to her, and she was enthusiastic and definite about her college plans and career goals. Natasha was an educational subject on her own

terms, one who negotiated family struggles with academic expectations. Though her efforts might have been read as average, she proved to be a savvy self-advocate independently entering the lottery and making educational decisions to increase her opportunities. If we read against the racialized discourses that construct her as academically “lazy” and disinterested, we find a subject who re-appropriates high achievement on her own terms, taking advantage of educational opportunities, and managing adult responsibilities against academic expectations made for traditional students from structurally advantaged households.

### *Esther*

Esther was a student in Mr. Hart’s afternoon split. She was a junior, and I overheard her say in conversations that she had not passed her OGT. She had long straight hair that she dyed often - jet black, flaming red, golden brown. She came to school in t-shirts, hoodies, and jeans, her shoes were worn, and her jeans were last year’s style. She carried a weathered Dora the Explorer backpack. If there was any student that most represented one of “those students” it was Esther. I observed her in Mr. Hart’s class on numerous occasions, and in reviewing my field notes, there is not a day of observations that went by without some type of disruption from her, and most of the time these disruptions were severe and resulted in her being asked to leave. The following is an example of an average day in class with Esther:

*Esther is trying to answer questions in class, but is also making comments to the students who are handing out hall passes for sports pictures...Mr. Hart continues with the lecture, with more explicit instructions, “this is what you’re going to do. You’re going to take a look independently...” He tells them to highlight the date on the NYT article handout and explains that it is a primary source document. They all start working on the assignment while he hands tests back...*

*As students get the tests back I try to slyly steal glances at their scores. I see 80's, 50's and 70%'s. Esther looks at her test and has no problem airing her dirty laundry, "36%, oh my God. Oh Jesus. Did you grade my other worksheet?"*

*...Everybody is awake, taking notes, and paying attention. There is very little noise or disruption. Esther takes off her sports t-shirt with a smug grin and sits at her desk for a few moments in a tank top. She pulls a regular shirt out of her backpack and slips it on cutting glances at students around her. As Mr. Hart is directing the class to "write it down" and makes comparisons between the lesson and the current situation with Iraq and Afghanistan, Esther sprays perfume into the air above her and lets it float down. She holds it up to Tim's nose. "Put that away," Mr. Hart orders. "I am!" He shifts back to the class, "Guys I need you to focus." Suddenly Esther shouts, "You rude man dang!" I can't even figure out why, but then she says that he didn't see her hand up, and that she has to go to the bathroom. Because of her outburst he tells her to leave the class, take herself to the bathroom and then to the office, but she comes back...*

*Kids are talking again...Students are complaining that Mr. Hart didn't get their homework graded. He hands it back so they can study for a test. Esther accuses him of throwing the worksheet at her, "that's disrespectful" she says with a great deal of hostility. The class is getting ready to go to the computer lab. "You can walk with me" he tells her. She says "No" and stomps out the door ahead of him. What a handful.*

[Field Notes, 10/24/08]

But then there were instances when she participated in class and demonstrated that she prepared ahead of time and was engaged in the material. Her participation had a positive effect on the classroom:

*The class is reading Being There by Jerzy Kosinsky, and they are unbelievably engaged with the text in spite of the fact that several of them admit they haven't started reading it. He spends the majority of the period leading students through an introduction to the story. Not much has changed in this classroom. Melinda still gets up to blow her nose out in the hall. Mr. Hart is still prompting them to "write this down," and there is still quite a bit of noise, students engaged in their own conversations, and unnecessary outbursts which he continues to ignore.*

*What has changed is their connection to the material. They are very engaged. They love talking about the story to the point where there are voices on top of voices and it takes some finesse to wrangle in the conversations. Esther surprises me. She's read the book. She answers questions and refers to specific pages for examples. She still exhibits attention seeking behaviors, yells, and has side conversations, but she's also*



*participating. There also seems to be a renewed teacher-student relationship between her and Mr. Hart:*

*Esther (standing up): Can I get some water...by chance? (The character in the book is named Chance.)*

*Mr. Hart: That's what lunch is for...by chance.*

*Esther: I don't have \$.you owe me \$2 by chance.*

*Mr. Hart: I do owe you \$2 by chance...*

*They are both smiling, and they're exchange provokes some laughter from the class.*

[Field Notes, 3/17/09]

When I asked Mr. Hart about Esther, he resisted classifying her as one of “those students.” He perceived that she wanted to be at OPHS, because she recognized the opportunity it provided for her to escape the climate of her home school:

...A lot of immaturity. But when it comes down to it she does a decent amount of the work. She got a C in my class. She didn't do it all, but she did enough. So why is she still here? I think even students that don't like every aspect of it recognize that there is value in it somehow. But it's also a very safe place for them to be.

...Even the kids that are like Esther, that sort of have an attitude that don't seem to want to be here. Ask them to go to their home school. There's a social aspect of not wanting to be here, but then there is a private aspect of wanting to be here. They may push the rules, try to test the rules, test the waters, they would not go back to their home school. Because if they test the waters (at the home school), (they know) there's going to be other consequences..., because they live in those neighborhoods.

He also situated her as disruptive and simultaneously “committed” to her education and empowered by being there, something I only glimpsed during my observations:

Mr. Hart: She's not that bad...

Sara: She's not horrible, I guess she could be worse, every time that I've been in here...

Mr. Hart: She answers back. ...she doesn't have any control. She's very self-centered at this moment in her life. It's very simple; if you challenge her she challenges you back. She probably does that to her mother.

Sara: The day she lost her wallet...she was strumming her nails so loud...you're very good at trying to diffuse the...

Mr. Hart: She's gonna walk out. If they walk out I have to write them up, but I don't always do that. That's the thing...*but overall she's a committed student. But there are other people with behavior problems who aren't committed students.*

Sara: you probably have a different picture of her because you know her grades... She's definitely a presence in the classroom, where there are some kids you almost don't even know they're here. A continuum...

Mr. Hart: I think we'll solve the problems of education when we learn to deal with kids on a more individual basis. I think what frustrates me about teaching is you feel you're perpetuating a system that is not empowering its students. It can be. This school is empowering to a lot of people

[Interview, 1/21/09]

I tried throughout the year to interview Esther. Finally in late May, I tracked her down in the hall and asked her if she would meet with me at lunch. She was flattered, "You want to talk to me?" I came in the following week to find out that she had been expelled for the last few days of the year and the first day of the next year for letting off smoke bombs in the hallway with two other students.

Esther was elusive in many ways, not only because she was difficult to interview. She slipped in and out of discourses of urban identity and the “those students” category. Her disruptive behavior signaled this location, but her teacher read her differently, with a sense of empathy and compassion that I found admirable, and this allowed him, and me, to see her as a student on her own terms. And then there were those moments when she was invested, on task, and making a contribution to the classroom. As he stated at the end of our interview, he did not want to perpetuate an education system that failed to empower its students. I witnessed from Mr. Hart, though he struggled in his classroom, a desire for students to be empowered by OPHS on their own terms, and he tried to meet them halfway to help them do this.

### *Ryan*

Ryan was in Dr. Fisher’s 12<sup>th</sup> grade AP English class. His quiet demeanor stood in contrast to his tall, football-like stature. He was white with shoulder-length dirty blonde hair. He wore baggy clothes and sometimes wrapped a long flowing scarf around his neck, and his style set him apart from the other students. He had a girlfriend, who was also in the class. She was planning to attend a university a few hours away, while Ryan planned to enroll in community college to save money.

He sat quietly in the front row, usually watching and listening, flipping through the reading material. He participated only as needed, maybe once or twice per class session, but his comments were always thoughtful. From time to time he would say hi to me in the hall or share some random information with me before class. In a few moments time I learned a lot about him:

*As I head into the classroom I make eye contact Ryan in the hall. I ask if there is a test or quiz, and he says that they are going downtown to see A Midsummer Night's Dream at the Southern Theatre. He seems eager. He tells me that he doesn't have a car and has never been downtown before. I comment quickly that he'll definitely enjoy the Southern; it's my favorite. I take my usual seat, a chair in the closet doorway, and wonder how a kid in Columbus could manage to never go downtown. So he's never been to the mall, the museum, the library?*

[Field Notes, 11/19/08]

The first time we arranged to meet after school he stood me up. He eventually called to apologize, and we rescheduled - he had forgotten. The next time we met, he had gotten a haircut, and it was a stunning change. The Principal walked into the conference room where we were meeting and jokingly called him "lover boy," teasing him about his haircut. He smiled shyly. While he ate the hot chocolate and a brownie dessert I brought him, the shyness dissipated, and I learned that Ryan was highly intelligent and full of opinion, but made little effort in school. He lived alone, worked part-time at a local restaurant, and rode his bike as much as possible so as to avoid public transportation. He wanted to be a veterinarian.

Though Ryan was in the AP class, he situated himself within and against the discursive construction of the elite, successful students:

Ryan: I've always been a brainiac, since middle school, but I was always bored, so I never tried. I was suspended from kindergarten, because I told the teacher her class was boring. It happened here too. I don't get good grades - the occasional B, but I average C's and D's. They wanted to test me for gifted, but I refused to take it. What's the difference? It's just the same stuff I already know. AP English is the first AP class I've taken all four years. I find it more tedious than challenging. I don't think OPHS is a more challenging high school...Once I get into college it will actually matter.

He saw himself as different from the other students in his AP class, and said that most of his school acquaintances were in “regular” classes:

Nobody knows me outside of school. Outside of school I’m completely different. I don’t want to hang out with anyone here (with the exception of his girlfriend and a few friends)...I’m an outcast anywhere else. I’m a hermit. Anywhere else they say “stay away from us,” but not here.

He was gifted, but admittedly academically unmotivated. He was not disruptive, but he was not making the most of his opportunity at OPHS. He told me that “not everyone likes to go here...school’s a boring place.” Ryan’s academic behaviors closely associate him with “those students” who took up space, but he situated himself outside of this discourse as well:

Sara: So who are “those” students?

Ryan: They are loud, obnoxious...they have no respect. They’re always texting, they don’t pay attention. I’m not a model student, but I give them (the teachers) respect. They (other students) don’t do anything. I don’t try, but I do the work.

Ryan gave little consideration to the other issues going on in his life - factors that I thought equally contributed to a lack of interest in school:

I live by myself. I’m comfortable alone. My mom lives with her new husband in (a town outside of Columbus). I buy my own clothes, but my mom comes every weekend to check up on me and bring me food. I share a house with my brother. He works from 5:00 A.M to 3:00 PM.

In another portion of the interview he mentioned that he had an older sister who was found in a crack house about 10 years ago. His father lived out of state and they had very little contact.

[Interview recorded in Field Notes, 4/7/09]

Like Natasha and other students I interviewed who held jobs and struggled with life outside of school, Ryan failed to consider the impact of this on his academic life. He spoke of his disinterest as a choice or coincidence, something that resulted because he did not think high school was important. In college he would choose to do better, because “it will actually matter.” He held onto his college aspirations. Regardless of perceived investment in high school, college was a given for Ryan, just as it was for the many students at OPHS. Therefore while structural inequalities shaped his experience as an “urban” student who had never made it downtown, his negotiations provide another example of how students at OPHS became educational subjects on their own terms. Ryan’s subjectivity portrays this liminal location of urban educational identity demonstrating the failure of dominant discourses of urban students to capture the indeterminacy of his material experiences.

In early fall of 2009 I ran into Ryan while he was at work. My family and I frequent his restaurant, because it is loud and kid friendly. He stopped by my table, and I asked him how college was going, hoping to get a good report. He expressed that he was struggling to pay for community college, and struggling to make it to work and to class. He had to increase his hours to help pay for school and said he was still short on tuition and money for books. I asked him about financial aid, but he said his dad’s income was making it difficult for him to get aid, even though his dad lived out of state and did not support him. I talked to him about transferring to

Ohio State. Having once worked as an academic advisor, I knew that four-year institutions have more financial options for students, so that in the long run it might be slightly more expensive, but it would make it possible for him to stay in school. He was disgruntled with my advice and angry at what he perceived to be a hopeless situation. Ryan had been looking forward to college, and it pained me to hear that it too was a struggle for him. I had hoped the college would provide the academic challenge he longed for and the financial and emotional support he needed. I took his phone number, thinking that we could reconnect later for a member check, but we have not talked since.

*“We really believe they can do it”: how freshman teachers view urban students on their own terms*

During my interview with the freshman humanities teachers, Mr. Springer and Mrs. Scott, I was caught off guard by their attitude towards the students. Prior to this conversation, most teachers and parents talked about students within the dichotomy of either academically motivated or personally disinterested. I made the following field notes:

*I am struck by their attitude toward their students. Something changes between freshman and sophomore year. Students change or teachers change. Expectations change. But these teachers believe that everyone can succeed.*

*[3/17/09]*

These teachers were not plagued by the mindset I heard from others who worked with the upperclassmen and perceived lower expectations for college prep students and higher expectations for others. Mrs. Scott and Mr. Jones worked in racially diverse, mixed ability classrooms. I firmly believe that it was their attitude toward students as learners and their willingness to bring students down the academic road on their own terms while setting high

expectations laid a firm foundation that students held onto as they progressed. The following excerpts from our interview strikingly demonstrate their commitment to seeing their students as agents in their own education by providing them with the skills they might not have had access to in middle school and encouraging them to move forward:

Sara: Do all students in the class rise to the challenge? Is it more of a slow progression?

Coming from all over the district, how do they acclimate to your expectations?

Mrs. Scott: They do at different levels and different speeds. Its difficult...it would never be possible to get every 9<sup>th</sup> grader that walked through the door ready for 10<sup>th</sup> grade academia in OPHS their freshman year. *I know for certain that we believe strongly that we get every student the same distance forward, they just may not end up at the same spot academically.* And we really strongly believe that our program in 9<sup>th</sup> grade is stronger than any other program in 9<sup>th</sup> grade in probably the city, which sounds arrogant, but if we didn't believe that we'd change it. So whether it's accurate or not, we really believe it - *that what we're doing for them is giving them a skeleton for success and they can't all go at the same pace because none of the middle schools are aligned at all.* There are lottery middle schools, arts focused middle schools, private middle schools that they come from so they're all prepared at different levels. It's impossible to come in and say that we could get them all to the same academic spot. *There is resistance from students who aren't as prepared for 9<sup>th</sup> grade and so it's inevitable, and we know that. But we know for sure they are further along with us than they would have been without us.*

Mr Springer: They do come from all over. There are some kids from certain middle schools that typically are going to be better prepared than others, *but we still have the*



*same expectations of all the kids. We expect the kids to do a certain thing or to be able to perform at a certain level and so we hang those high expectations in front of them. Some we have to help more than others and some we have to push along a little more than others. What I've notice since I've been here, the kids that are more reluctant or it takes a little longer for them to catch on, there's always a point in the year when you definitely can see a change in them...It's usually a particular unit that they like more than others when everything finally comes together for them. Whether the student gets to be more organized – because that's a big problem too - organization skills. Sometimes it's just a certain unit that captures their attention more than others that makes them realize how all the pieces fit together.*

There are some kids who unfortunately may have to fail the class and they may not get there until their sophomore year. *They may have struggled through their freshman year, but they'll come back and you'll realize what's happened when they learn from their mistakes and their ready to go the next year.* So it may take a year of struggling for some kids. But I think the expectations are so high. *The theory is you have high expectation the kids will rise to those expectations, and I think what we've been doing proves that.*

Mrs. Scott: Our kids, *I think they're aware that we really know they can do it. Its not lip service.* We're not saying you can do it and you better do it and come back tomorrow when you've done it. *We really believe they can.*

They also recognized that it was structural disadvantages and students' limited access to skills that affected their potential to succeed at OPHS, not lack of intelligence, interest, motivation, or desire:

Mrs. Scott: Most of the time, almost all of the time, when a student isn't prepared in their 9<sup>th</sup> grade year for what we're giving them that first month, it's because *they haven't had access to the skills*. It's not because they can't. *It's our job to give them access to the skills and allow them to go at their own pace with us, but it's not an option for them to not do it*. They may just not do it at the same pace as everyone else, and they understand that we are always going to expect them to rise to those goals that we have for them. *We really believe they can do it*.

Yet they also believed that there were some students that the school was failing by allowing them to struggle when another school might serve them better, and they perceived that they were getting more of these students each year:

Mrs. Scott: It's clear that we have more students coming unprepared for their 9<sup>th</sup> grade year. They are not students that can't do the work, but they definitely aren't fully prepared. They are put at a severe disadvantage by their families who may be making a decision in some cases to send them to this school for other than academic reasons. We struggle with that as a staff, because we understand the reasoning behind the parent's decision, but sometimes students are at such a disadvantage that no matter how much remediation we provide for them, it appears by their senior year their still not able to catch up for some reason.

And yet they argued that students that were "capable" and "willing" could still be academically successful at OPHS:

Mrs. Scott: Our goal is to not have remedial courses in this school. We have never and our goal is to never. Because we really want to remain an alternative program for

students in public school who are *capable* in 9<sup>th</sup> grade of doing the work that we're asking *or willing* in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. *Both of those categories are fair to ask our students. If you're not capable but willing, we think we can get you there. If you are unwilling and aren't able in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade...When I say capable I mean come ready, not can't; if you are not ready academically, but you are willing we can get you there.*

In their talk of students they situate them within the discourse of urban students who have been limited in their access to academic resources, but they unfix students from the urban discourse that situates them as culturally disadvantaged, purposefully disinterested, or intrinsically unmotivated. Their explanations for under-achievement are shifted from the students to the educational system, and as educators they assume the responsibility of bringing students farther along their academic path by setting high expectations and providing the skills needed to succeed. Their statements are peppered with indications that they accepted students on their own terms – moving them forward while knowing that they will not all reach the same place, pushing some a little more than others, allowing them to go at their own pace but expecting them to do the work, and watching the pieces fit together.

Erica, a freshman that I interviewed, recognized the importance of having these teachers and the impact they could have on students and their futures:

But at OPHS, the teachers keep trying to help you, keep trying to enforce that education is important, and that's its not something that you try to give up on. I think its all about the decision to try and accept the fact that someone's helping you...If you accept the help that you're getting I think that will bring (you) up to the point where (you'll) recognize education is important.

[Erica, 3/30/09]

While some of these students would eventually find themselves in college prep courses and experience lowered expectations, I believe that the foundation they received in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, the high expectations and the belief that they could do it, carried them through their four-years and encouraged them to hold onto college aspirations. I end here with a quote from Tanesha, a student in Dr. Fisher's split course, who also worked full-time and supported her family financially. Tanesha sees herself as "smart" and recognizes the possibilities of OPHS, regardless of how others see her, the classes in which she is enrolled, or the circumstances of her life outside of school:

Dr. Fisher, he's a really good teacher even though he jokes a lot. Because the jokes are educational. And that's another way *you find out how smart you are*, because you're laughing at an educational joke. Everybody's like 'oh yeah, I get it'

Sara: You feel like you realized how smart you were when you came here?

Tanesha: Yeah, I realized. I was getting A's and B's since kindergarten. I think through middle school I didn't realize how much I really learned, but I did learn a lot. So here, and being in humanities, *you realize how much you learn* from the books and everything. Like I'm watching TV and they say something about a book we read at school... because we read *The Invisible Man*. And they read a quote out of that book that I did my report on. And I'm sitting there like 'OPHS does a lot!' And my mom's like 'what?' 'Nothing mom, you wouldn't understand, because it's about school.' ...you're probably gonna be a little nerd. I tell my mom, 'nerds make all the money,' because my mom calls me a nerd.

[Tanesha, 5/5/09]

### *Conclusion*

This chapter looks at how critical schooling actors make sense of policy, race, and sports at a high-achieving, predominantly African American high school. OPHS is in many ways an example of urban public schooling at its best, and I attribute much of their success to the strength of their humanities program, the culture of high expectations perpetuated by the school, and their commitment to meaningful teaching and learning focused on college preparation and attainment. These factors allowed the school to subvert the constraining effects of NCLB and circumvent the impact of high stakes testing by offering academic achievement on their own terms and not solely on the states terms. Their students appeared to fair better, go farther, and the experiences they shared are a testament to the possibilities of public education.

Through these practices OPHS established itself as an academic high school which surprisingly situated it as an “alternative” to traditional public education, though academics should be the norm of school. The idea of “academics as the alternative” calls into question the expectations we have for secondary education and for students. In what ways are we undermining the academic climate of public school? This chapter used the absence of interscholastic sports at OPHS to interrogate this question. It showed that sports are perceived by parents, students, and school staff to have an adverse effect on the academic climate of schools. How might secondary education reclaim academics in their mission? How might they prioritize the primary intention of educating all students without “sucking the joy” out of the social and community aspects built by sports in schools?

This chapter articulates the meaning of race in public education today and looks at how race in many ways disrupts the excellent intentions of OPHS. In spite of the school's excellent intentions, practices of enrollment were embedded within a grid of racialized discourses about urban students that justified the overrepresentation of students of color in college preparation courses and placed responsibility for course selection largely on the students. Parents and school staff situated this pattern as an effect of individual choice and identified other colorblind reasons for this racial stratification. Faculty and staff performed practices that discouraged students from taking academic risks and enrolling in AP or IB courses, and these practices had effects along lines of race and class.

Yet, race was manipulated and negotiated by schooling actors in complicated and competing ways. Parents and students worked discourses of urban identity to their advantage. The school utilized its urban cachet to receive recognition and awards that often benefited the students, the school, and the district. Black parents used this urban cachet to gain acceptance at competitive colleges, while white parents took a sense of pride in bending their white privilege by sending their student to a predominantly black high school. The discourses of urban identity remained unchallenged though by these manipulations, which tended to maintain and stabilize urban students within the discourses of cultural disadvantage, risk, and poverty.

By looking closer at the material experiences of "urban" students at OPHS we begin to see through their elusive and slippery negotiations that they are quite capable of becoming educational subjects on their own terms. They show us that part of being an urban student at a high achieving school is working to negotiate the lived experiences of structural disadvantage within and against the discursive, historical, and social constraints of education. Their

ambivalence in the on-going process of becoming educational subjects marks the traces of “all that is not what is being defined or posited” (Spivak, 1999, p. 424) in constructions of urban identity. The analysis of these portraits shifted our gaze to *the absent traces* of raced and classed structural inequalities in common understandings of urban students. The negotiations of Natasha, Ryan, Esther and other students opened up the restricted binary formulation of those students/successful students and non-disadvantaged, white student/urban student other. Their subjectivity offers us a transgression of the imposed boundaries of knowledge about urban students. We get a glimpse of and how urban students negotiated the lived experiences and discursive constraints as *educational agents on their own terms*.

## Chapter Six

### Bearing Witness to Difficult Knowledge

At the beginning of this dissertation I stated that I had two goals in mind: 1) to examine how critical schooling actors at OPHS “translate” and negotiate a complex set of policies in ways that appear to support student success, 2) to explore the way race continues to work in schools and unfix students of color from the overburdened discourses of urban identity to see them as educational agents *on their own terms*. What did this project make seeable through a sociocultural analysis of policy and was this translation useful or merely troubling?

This final chapter will attend to these questions. In traditional policy analysis, “translation” typically produces implications in the form of absolute evaluations of effectiveness and tangible recommendations for improvement. Though a methodological goal of this study was to push the positivist limits of policy analysis, I do not completely resist the very real need for tangible recommendations in schools. During the member check I conducted with teachers and staff I was directly asked for “concrete recommendations” that arose from the data. Out of the desire to be useful, to find use in the data, and reciprocate my appreciation for being allowed to conduct my study at OPHS, I sketch possible recommendations here.

I “ended up” with concrete recommendations as a result of bringing conflicting frameworks to bear together on the data. I endeavored to make five shifts in policy research that engaged critical feminist, critical race, and post-critical/poststructural theories to complicate the ethnographic analysis of policy as practice and hold it accountable to the disruptions, difficulties,



and trouble incurred when trying to research others and tell their stories. I want to further trouble the idea that useful recommendations are always possible and usable.

Following the recommendations I want to substantively address the contributions a study like this might make to the field of ethnographic policy analysis, urban educational research, and qualitative research by reviewing the key conceptual findings and the methodological and theoretical implications of this study which I believe are useful because they are troubling. In conclusion I want to lastly address the failures of NCLB as an equity reform, the effects of our educational debt on student achievement, and possibilities for equity and excellence when we view students as educational agents on their own terms.

### *Recommendations*

Teachers and staff were most acutely concerned about the stratification of enrollment at OPHS once the data was presented. Their request for concrete recommendations stemmed from the desire to address this concern more directly. Teachers and staff make difficult decisions everyday about their students. My recommendations here request that we move forward and make an explicit attempt through school policy and practice to de-stratify the enrollment at OPHS with a goal of achieving racial, economic, and gender parity in the College Preparation, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate Programs that mimics the demographics of the school. Some of these recommendations are tangible; others are about shifting beliefs and thought processes about urban students.

#### 1. Alignment of Middle School Curriculums with College Prep Curriculum

Curricula alignment is a district and state responsibility that local schools have little to no control over. Though this is a lofty goal I recommend that OPHS faculty, staff, and parents advocate for this alignment and do so to promote the equity and access that the district so highly values. There seems to be a miscommunication between OPHS and Columbus City Schools in terms of helping the district to understand how the under-preparation at the middle school level sets up students for potential failure, not only at OPHS but at other area high schools and later in life. I believe in the near future policy will shift its focus to middle school alignment once policymakers and administrators realize the impact of this on graduation rates and standardized test scores.

2. Increase awareness and understanding of pre-requisites for AP and IB programs at middle school level and upon entering freshman year

One thing students and parents made clear was that they did not have a firm understanding of the necessary pre-requisites for the AP and IB programs. Even those families that felt they were “tracked” into OPHS admitted that the path was unclear to them. It is important to not only publicize OPHS at the middle school level, but also provide clear information regarding courses that need to be taken before enrollment. This information should be provided to parents and students upon entering middle school, revisited and redistributed each year, and highlighted again when lottery information is provided. The focus here should be on “nuts and bolts” requirements.

3. Clear Articulation Maps for students coming from different academic backgrounds and Plans of Attack

OPHS recognized that students came to the school with different academic backgrounds. This information was taken into consideration internally by faculty and staff when making scheduling decisions for students. Again many parents and students found the scheduling process to lack transparency and found the current scheduling materials that the school provided to be confusing. Clear articulation maps that were externally available to parents and students would be invaluable here. These maps could take two forms: 1) Clear and Individualized Maps that layout the course paths for each program option at OPHS – AP, IB, Seniors to Sophomores, Fort Hayes, Career Center, etc with pre-requisites, and 2) Clear and Individualized Maps for Middle Schools that clarify the pre-requisite courses needed at the middle school level and then at OPHS. These maps would demonstrate a plan of attack for students coming from a more traditional school, a private school, or one of the more aligned middle schools in the district. These maps would give students and parents the information they need to make informed decisions and address any scheduling errors. These maps would also serve as advocacy tools for parents that are less likely to engage and for students who are self-reliant in the educational process.

#### 4. AP and IB Recruitment

##### a. Advertise widely

The school does try to advertise AP and IB courses and make students aware of the application process. Students felt that they did not clearly understand the benefits of the program. Possibly an in-school assembly would be more time efficient and enable students to get all their questions answered. Continue and increase active recruitment of students of color.

b. Emphasize benefit over rigor

Students and parents felt that the rigor of the course was emphasized in such a way that it discouraged students from applying. Allow the already understood rigor of the school and the climate of high expectations to continue to be implicit in all courses. Spend time with students emphasizing the benefits of AP and IB in terms of college preparation, college credits, and college costs. Some students also felt counseled away, counseled out, or rejected from the programs. Maintain the level of expectations set for students entering their freshmen year. OPHS was already an academic risk for many of them. Encourage them to continue to take those risks.

c. Eliminate exclusionary language in applications

Students found the language on applications to be exclusionary and discouraging, particularly for students that held jobs or had additional family responsibilities. These students, due to financial considerations, are quite possibly the ones that need access to these opportunities the most. Change or remove language on the applications that suggests that employment or lack of parental engagement guarantees difficulty in succeeding in these courses.

d. Open, unrestricted enrollment

Another potential strategy to increase AP and IB enrollment is through open and unrestricted enrollment. Once pre-requisites have been verified allow for open and unrestricted enrollment for all students. Eliminate essay questions to gauge

writing skills and other “gatekeeping” strategies that discourage students from taking advantage of AP and IB programming.

5. Think about urban students on their own terms

a. Carry high expectations into all classrooms

Students perceived that the expectations were lowered in College Prep courses once AP and IB courses were available. Rest on your laurels. Trust the preparation and expectations you have already provided early in their careers to continue to guide students through OPHS. Students of color overpopulated college prep courses for a variety of reasons, some individual and some structural but most a combination of both. But they also enrolled in these courses, because they perceived they were easier and that they as students were not considered capable or interested in something more challenging. As an academic high school carry equally high expectations of students into all classrooms. Students have greatly benefited from this message.

b. Elevate College Preparation out of the Hierarchy

Parents and students perceived that the course offerings existed in a hierarchy with IB at the top, College prep at the bottom, and AP in between. Eliminate language and expectations that maintain this hierarchy. Re-establish the college preparation courses as high achieving in the eyes of students and parents while making them aware that the AP and IB courses have additional tests with potential benefits.

c. Recognize Structural Barriers

Students indicated that they dealt with a variety of structural barriers that impacted their academic decisions. Consider how structural barriers, like socioeconomics and educational background influence students course taking decisions. In many cases what teachers read as disinterest is symptomatic of students very real struggle to manage the stress of home, work, and school.

I fully acknowledge that these recommendations are easier said than done, particularly those that recommend change at the district level. I firmly believe however that local level change in schools where policy is practice can significantly improve the access to opportunities for students.

### *Substantive Implications*

#### *Policy as Practice*

This urban school case study bridged theorized analyses of race with an explicitly ethnographic study of policy as practice. As such it interrogated the sociocultural manifestations of No Child Left Behind as negotiated by critical school actors and highlighted how they subverted the constraining effects of NCLB in ways that supported the academic success and achievement of their students. This research also exposed the punishing policy practices of the district which undermined the school's academic climate of high expectations. Practices of credit recovery and increased enrollment became strategies employed by the district as they attempted to comply with the bottom line of standards and accountability – numbers, test scores and graduation rates – the terms of the state. The *policy as practice* framework served as a useful tool to expose the complicated workings and negotiations of policy on the ground. As a

translation study it provided a careful analysis of how policy is practiced at the local level by teachers and administrators, the daily negotiations they undertake to protect academic excellence and promote equity, and the power relations that are manifested within accountability and their punishing impact on successful schools.

### *The Absence of Sports and the Academic High School*

The concept of the academic high school should be a tautological redundancy, but OPHS makes clear that the idea of an “academic high school” is a surprising oxymoron. Data presented challenged the taken-for-granted idea that sports are inextricably linked to secondary education and made visible the paradoxical discourse of the “academic high school.” While the notion that high school is *academic* should be what is taken for granted, the absence of sports at OPHS brings into relief the strange expectation that the academic high school is a rare occurrence and serves as alternative to a traditional (and unacademic) education. Participants perceived that the absence of sports at OPHS had a positive effect on the academic climate. They perceived that at other schools with sports academics was overshadowed, but at OPHS academics came first. They also felt that the absence of sports contributed to the school’s overarching mission to empower students to see their academic success and college aspirations as independent of and not dependent on their participation in sports.

I argued that the absence of sports at OPHS served to disentangle the urban student identity from the stereotype of the black athlete whose physicality serves as a suitable substitute for intelligence. Interscholastic sports in urban school contexts functions as a discursive formation that does specific work in relation to race, work that delimits the perceivable

possibilities for seeing public schools and urban students as capable of success on their own terms. Perceptions of educational achievement, opportunity, and excellence are intricately tied to the unique role of sports in US high school culture. Ohio Public High School sits at the nexus of these issues. It confounds and perforates commonly held perceptions of the urban child's capacity for excellence. It calls into questions our "un-academic" expectations for traditional public secondary education and the effects of sports on academics and school culture. *It is this absence that calls into question its very presence.*

### *Urban Cachet*

In Chapter 5 I defined the concept of urban cachet which refers to the sense of identity, specialness, and prestige garnered by identifying as an "urban" student or school and described how this cachet was put into practice by the school, parents, and students. I identified three uses of urban cachet that required a construction of urban students as objects to be contained, displayed, or transformed by education: 1) OPHS commodified this cachet to gain recognition, grants, and awards which supported student success and shored up depleted school resources; 2) African American parents purposely enrolled their students at OPHS to use this cachet to improve their students' chances for admission to prestigious universities; and 3) White parents desire to send their children to a high-achieving school converged with their beliefs in diversity making their students' enrollment in OPHS both academically advantageous and personally fulfilling. While these three manipulations of urban cachet had productively positive effects for students – increasing school resources, opportunities, and diversity – they fixed, displayed, and capitalized on the discourse of the urban student as other.



Each form of cachet utilizes a construction of urban educational identity overburdened by discourses of disadvantage and risk. These negotiations of urban cachet demonstrated how urban students and schools are discursively constructed through cultural assumptions that attribute student failure to those discourses. These power/knowledge relations are productive of multiple effects which require and desire this particular brand of urban educational other to function, and each retraces the limits of the identity in its reproduction. Without its urban education other, the achievement at OPHS would not be so surprising or worthy of recognition. It is the expectations of low achievement from students of color, the discursive relations of whiteness/achievement and blackness/failure, which give OPHS its referential power. This utilization likewise resubstantiates the necessity of an urban other and sustains surprise at their success. As demonstrated by participants' failure to talk about the materiality of urban identity, urban cachet is a de-raced product that elides the complexities of race, socioeconomics, and educational disadvantage as it is put to work.

### *On Their Own Terms*

By seeing students at OPHS as urban educational subjects *on their own terms* I strived to conceptualize students as agents in the making, remaking, and resisting of identity that elude any fixing of representation in research. Seeing urban students as elusive subjects gave way to a desire to unhinge dominant and local discourses to produce a failure to fix them as a validity practice of this project. The portraits of Natasha, Esther, Ryan, Tanesha and the insights gathered from the other students demonstrated how students' negotiations slide in and out of traditional discourses of urban identity. These slippages give way to an understanding of urban

subjectivity that demonstrated how students inhabit, reappropriate, and puncture the containment of identity to negotiate success and achievement on their own terms.

This analysis engaged with the materiality of students' lives as urban subjects who negotiate academics with the real needs to support themselves and their families financially. They worked to pay for housing, phone bills, and food while saving for college and attempting to stay on top of their academic work loads. These raced and classed structural inequalities, not inherent cultural traits or intrinsic abilities, directly impacted their course choices, homework completion, and class participation. By unhinging discourses of cultural disadvantage from urban student identity and reconceptualizing students on their own terms, I lastly wanted to *shift educational responsibility back to schools, districts, and the state*.

### *Theoretical and Methodological Implications*

#### *The Re-Invention of Urban Education: Disrupting the Dominant Construction of Urban Educational Identity with History*

The historical construction of urban identity inside and outside of social science research is more than just troubling; it represents the constant (re)presenting and fixing of urban identity within racialized discourses that locate disadvantage, risk, and poverty as functions of race and culture. I attempted to conduct a genealogy of urban identity and the complicit role that even well-meaning social science research played in the “containment and display” of urban communities and students for the purposes of research. Through a historical analysis I located for myself, and hopefully for others, a new historical “starting” point that decenters urban identity within a history of successful African American education located within a long legacy

of education for freedom. Disrupting the damaging discourses of urban identity is imperative in attempting to do ethical and valid work in urban educational studies. If we start from the very place that contains African American students and students of color within the discourses that fix and solidify what we think we know about their educational engagement, we have done nothing but further contribute to their marginalization.

### *Tightening and Loosening Theory Revisited*

At the same time I want to undermine any exceeding intentions to liberate myself from the trappings of racialization. I fully acknowledge that I cannot escape the ways in which race works in research, regardless of my attempts to disrupt the power/knowledge relations of race in my project. That being said I think there is something powerfully important about “doing it and troubling it simultaneously” (Lather, 2007), and about moving out of the paralysis that ensues when trying to do socially just research on and with others.

I relied on a diverse set of theoretical and methodological frameworks to make specific shifts or interventions into policy work for the purpose of my analysis to create for myself a feminist post-critical methodology to do policy work differently. I engaged the theoretical tensions and methodological frictions at play to move me through aporetic suspensions and emotionally troubling spaces of the work. Specifically I put Critical Race Theory in Education in direct conversations with poststructural/post-critical theories to *tighten and loosen* frameworks. This tightening and loosening was not for novelty’s sake; it was about using theory to promote and trouble ethical engagement; to keep the work moving while troubling it every step of the way. CRT held me accountable to naming race and privilege; it tightened

poststructural theory to make use of the materiality of urban students' experiences and bring structural inequality to bear on the analysis. As such, race mattered and was a privileged site of working poststructural theory. Simultaneously poststructural theory performed a loosening of CRT, reading structural inequalities along the lines of power/knowledge that are held within them, identifying both the limits and the productive possibilities, and using the loosened reading to unhinge and unfix urban student identity to think differently about students as educational agents on their own terms.

Again I think the implications of tightening and loosening theory are about making ethical moves that use the power of theory while placing these theories in direct conversation with their overriding critiques to continuously disrupt their own fixed and troubling tendencies. Each framework has use, and each framework requires continuous critique to be useful. This useful troubling then is in the name of a more accountable social science.

#### *Deconstructive/Disruptive Practices of Research*

I used Derridean deconstruction as an analytic practice to keep it open to the anomalies, the complications or “outliers” typically left behind, scraped, or trimmed off for another day. I utilized deconstruction to privilege the messiness of everyday teaching and learning and tap into it as the very energy and product of research (Lather, 2010). This style of analysis led me toward a series of substantive findings that expose both the productive effects and the limits of policy as/in practice and the workings of race in schools.

### *Feminist Post-Critical Policy Analysis*

I have attempted to use feminist post-critical policy analysis as a tool to be of both trouble and use. Shifting its gaze from the macro to the micro, this form of policy analysis engages a *policy as practice* framework while bringing feminist critique to bear. It takes seriously Catherine Marshall's (1997) call to focus research on the local level and extends this idea by privileging its usefulness on the ground. The focus of translation shifts from the traditional macro-level policy-makers to local policy-actors. It disrupts the romance of data-driven policy formation and the desires to be useful at the macro level of policy and politics by engaging more complex questions about how data is negotiated and put to work in the local. Equally it problematizes a feminist critical tradition of heavy-handed critique and seeks a more nuanced relationship with its data that is invested in both the productive effects *and* limits of policy as practice. I have also not shied away from making recommendations, but I trouble the translation, applicability, and "implementation" of recommendations. I am more interested as a feminist post-critical policy researcher in the ways in which recommendations are engaged as power and knowledge, used, negotiated, and critiques in the everyday practices of teaching and learning.

### *Conclusion*

#### *The Failures of NCLB as Equity Reform: How Race Works in Schools*

In conclusion, I lastly argue that the federal policy of No Child Left Behind fails as an equity reform. In spite of the rhetoric of policy and the intentions of some policymakers to close the achievement gap, NCLB functions as an accountability and standards reform that assumes

equity to be a byproduct of a success that is measured by test scores. It fails to acknowledge the structural inequalities that critical actors face everyday that impact teaching and learning and shift responsibility away from the state and back to students, parents, teachers, and cultures.

As we see at OPHS, though the school was effective in closing the achievement gap, it continued to expose the limits of excellence and the inability of NCLB to promote educational equity and access to opportunity for students of color and poor students. Standards and accountability, the terms of the state, effectively delimited the very excellence of OPHS' curriculum and climate through practices of credit recovery and graduation test preparation. Race worked in complicated ways, policing the boundaries of excellence through racialized enrollments that marginalized students of color from AP and IB courses and eliding the structural inequalities that effect students in schools through *color blind discourses* and *discourses of individual choice*. In spite of the school's ability to meet the terms of the state by closing the achievement gap and the empowerment it did offer students, equity itself was an elusive goal, something glimpsed but not fully realized.

As Ladson-Billings (2006) argues, the US preoccupation with the achievement gap and the narrowing of the gap through educational reforms locate the problem within individual students, teachers, schools, families, and communities, and offers merely short-term solutions to long-term inequality. Rather than an achievement gap she argues that the US has accumulated an *educational debt* that has been shouldered largely by students of color and their communities who have been deprived of educational and other resources leading to educational inequality. In one way, OPHS demonstrates the continued impact of this debt despite our best intentions to do otherwise. Despite the fact that equity and educational achievement are at the core of this

school's mission, race works indelibly within and against practices of successes. Statistically the gap is closed and arguably repays some of this debt by increasing aspirations, graduation and college entrance, but in practice much of this debt remains in the discursive constructions of urban identity and the overrepresentation of students of color in college prep courses.

So how might OPHS point us toward a more complicated understanding of tensions between equity and excellence? What might we learn about how to better serve students from their wrestlings with the materiality of these tensions? What concrete practices can we put in place? How might we divest from privilege? And how can we begin to see students on their own terms? In spite of our desires to believe otherwise in the US, race continues to matter in schools. It matters in the creation and implementation of educational policy. It matters in practice and the everyday lives of teachers and students. Despite its rhetorical focus on the disadvantaged and minority students, NCLB fails as an equity reform, because it functions as a colorblind reform that ignores structural inequalities along lines of race and class while simultaneously asserting a reform colored by whiteness, choice, and a belief in merit unburdened by discrimination or systemic disadvantage. Race is both meaningless and meaningful. Under NCLB minority students *can fail on their own terms, but they cannot achieve on their own terms*. For NCLB to succeed as an equity reform it must attend to the structural inequalities that exist for students and center equity within its mandates, measures, and enforcement. At the same time we need to begin to see students on their own terms, as educational agents that negotiate inequality, opportunity, and achievement. By starting from a different position that privileges a centering of the effects of race historically and presently on

students and schools, I hope this bearing witness to difficult knowledge will bring us closer to meeting our expectations for a more just and democratic education.



## References

- Atkinson, P., Coffey, A., & Delamont, S. (2003). *Key themes in qualitative research: continuities and changes*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.
- Bacchi, C. L. (1999). *Women, policy, and politics: The construction of policy problems*. London: Sage.
- Behar, R. (1993). *Translated woman: crossing the border with Esperanza's story*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Bell, D. A. (1995). Serving two masters: integration ideals and client interests in school desegregation litigation. In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, & K. Thomas (Eds.), *Critical race theory: the key writings that formed the movement* (pp. 5-19). New York: New Press.
- Bell, D. A. (2009). Brown v board of education and the interest convergence dilemma. In E. Taylor, D. Gillborn, & G. Ladson-Billings (Eds.), *Foundations of critical race theory in education* (pp. 73-84). New York: Routledge.
- Bridges, D., & Watts, M. (2009). Educational research and policy: epistemological considerations. In *Evidence-based educational policy: what evidence? what basis? whose policy?* (pp. 36-57). West Sussex, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Bridges, D., Smeyers, P., & Smith, R. (2009). Educational research and the practical judgement of policy-makers. In D. Bridges, P. Smeyers, & R. Smith (Eds.), *Evidence-based*

- education policy: what evidence? what basis? whose policy?* (pp. 1-10). West Sussex, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Bridges, D., Smeyers, P., & Smith, R. (Eds.). (2009). *Evidence-based education policy: what evidence? what basis? whose policy?* West Sussex, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 347 U.S. 483. (1954)
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of "sex"*. New York: Routledge.
- Campbell, N. (2000). *Using women: gender, drug policy, and social justice*. New York: Routledge.
- Caputo, J. D. (Ed.). (1997). *Deconstruction in a nutshell: a conversation with Jacques Derrida*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Charmaz, K., & Mitchell, R. G. (2001). Grounded theory in ethnography. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland, & L. Lofland (Eds.), *The handbook of ethnography* (pp. 160-174). London: Sage Publications.
- Childers, S. M. (2008). Methodology, praxis, and autoethnography: a review of getting lost. *Educational Researcher*, 37(5), 298-301.
- Clarke, A. E. (2005). *Situational analysis: grounded theory after the postmodern turn*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Clifford, J. (1988). *The predicament of culture: twentieth century ethnography*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Collins, P. H. (2004a). Comment on Hekman's "ruth and method: feminist standpoint theory revisited": truth or justice? In S. Harding (Ed.), *The feminist standpoint theory reader: intellectual and political controversies* (pp. 247-252). New York: Routledge.

- Collins, P. H. (2004b). Learning from the outsider within: the sociological significance of black feminist thought. In S. Harding (Ed.), *The feminist standpoint reader: intellectual and political controversies* (pp. 103-126). New York: Routledge.
- Spivak, G. C. (1999). Appendix: the setting to work of deconstruction. In *A critique of postcolonial reason: toward a history of the vanishing present* (pp. 423-430). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J. (1992). *Ethnography and the historical imagination*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G., & Thomas, K. (Eds.). (1995). *Critical race theory: the key writings that formed the movement*. New York: The New Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2007). Race, inequality, and educational accountability: the irony of 'no child left behind'. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 10(3), 245-260.
- Demerath, P. (2002). Perspective-taking in the practice-research gap: using ethnography to help schools see themselves. In B. A. U. Levinson, S. L. Cade, A. Padawer, & A. Elvir (Eds.), *Ethnography and education policy across the Americas* (pp. 143-154). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Demerath, P. (2009). *Producing success: the culture of personal advancement in an American high school*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dixon, A., & Rousseau, C. (2006). And yet we are still not saved: critical race theory in education ten years later. In A. Dixon & C. Rousseau (Eds.), *Critical race theory in education* (pp. 31-54). New York: Routledge.

- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: a methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2001). Participant observation and fieldnotes. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland, & L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of ethnography* (pp. 352-368). London: Sage Publications.
- Erickson, F. (1986). Qualitative methods in research on teaching. In W. C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (3rd ed., pp. 119-161). New York: Macmillan.
- Erickson, F. (2002). Ethnography and education policy: a commentary. In B. A. U. Levinson, S. L. Cade, A. Padawer, & A. Elvir (Eds.), *Ethnography and education across the Americas* (pp. 189-195). Westport, CT: 2002.
- Fine, M. (2007). Swimming: on oxygen, resistance, and possibility for immigrant youth under siege. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 38(1), 76-96.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219-245.
- Foucault, M. (1970). *The order of things: an archaeology of the human sciences* [Les mots et les choses]. New York: Vintage Books.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books. (Original work published 1972)
- Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality: an introduction* (Vol. 1, R. Hurley, Trans.). New York: Vintage.
- Foucault, M. (2000). *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Power* (Vol. 3) (J. D. Faubion, Ed.). New York: The New Press.

- Fusarelli, L. D. (2004). The potential impact of the No Child Left Behind Act on equity and diversity in American education. *Educational Policy*, 18(1), 71-94.
- Garcia, S. B., & Guerra, P. L. (2004). Deconstructing deficit thinking: working with educators to create more equitable learning environments. *Educational Policy*, 36(2), 150-168.
- Gay, G. (2007). The rhetoric and reality of nclb. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 10(3), 279-293.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (2006). *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research*. New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transaction. (Original work published 1967)
- Gonzalez, N. (2004). Disciplining the discipline: anthropology and the pursuit of quality education. *Educational Researcher*, 33(5), 17-25.
- Gordon, T., Holland, J., & Lahelma, E. (2001). Ethnographic research in education settings. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland, & L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of ethnography* (pp. 188-199). London: Sage Publications.
- Gould, S. J. (1996). *The mismeasure of man* (2nd ed.). New York: W. W. Norton & Company. (Original work published 1981)
- Griffith, Allison I. (1992). Educational policy as text and action. *Educational Policy*, 6, 415-428.
- Hall, K. (1999). Understanding educational processes in an era of globalization: the view from anthropology and cultural studies. In E. Lagemann & Shulman L (Eds.), *Issues in education research: problems and possibilities* (pp. 121-156). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Harding, S. (2004). Rethinking standpoint epistemology. In S. Harding (Ed.), *The feminist standpoint theory reader: intellectual and political controversies* (pp. 127-140). New York: Routledge.
- Haraway, D. (2004). Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspectives. In S. Harding (Ed.), *The feminist standpoint theory reader: intellectual and political controversies* (pp. 81-101). New York: Routledge.
- Harris, C. I. (1995). Whiteness as property. In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, & K. Thomas (Eds.), *Critical race theory: the key writings that formed the movement* (pp. 276-291). New York: The New Press.
- Hawkesworth, Mary E. (1994). Policy studies within a feminist frame. *Policy Sciences*, 27, 97-114.
- Hess, F. M. (Ed.). (2008). *When research matters: how scholarship influences education policy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Honig, M. I. (Ed.). (2006). *New directions in education policy implementation: confronting complexity*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Hursh, D. (2007). Exacerbating inequality: the failed promise of the no child left behind act. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 10(3), 295-308.
- Knight, M. G. (2003). Through urban youth's eyes: negotiating k-16 policies, practices, and their futures. *Educational Policy*, 17(5), 531-557.
- Landson-Billings, G. (2004). Landing on the wrong note: the price we paid for Brown. *Educational Researcher*, 33(7), 3-13.

- Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt: understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher*, 35(7), 3-12.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education. In E. Taylor, D. Gillborn, & G. Ladson-Billings (Eds.), *Foundations of critical race theory in education* (pp. 17-36). New York: The New Press.
- Lather, P. (1997). Validity as incitement to discourse: qualitative research and the crisis of legitimation. In V. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (4th ed., pp. ?-?). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Lather, P. (1998). Critical pedagogy and its complicities: a praxis of stuck places. *Educational Theory*, 48(4), 487-497.
- Lather, P. (2001). Ethnography: of ruins, aporias, and angels. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland, & L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of ethnography* (pp. 477-492). London: Sage Publications.
- Lather, P. (2007). *Getting lost: feminist efforts toward a doubled science*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Lather, P. (2010). *Engaging science policy: from the side of the messy*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Leonardo, Z. (2007a). The war on schools: NCLB, nation creation and the educational construction of whiteness. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 10(3), 261-278.
- Leonardo, Z. (Ed.). (2007b). Special issue on no child left behind [Special issue]. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 10(3).
- Levinson, B. A. U., Cade, S. L., Padawer, A., & Elvir, A. (Eds.). (2002). *Ethnography and education policy across the americas*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

- Levinson, B. A. U., Cade, S. L., Padawer, A., & Elvir, A. (2002). Workshop discussion: ethnography and policy-the state of the art. In B. A. U. Levinson, S. L. Cade, A. Padawer, & A. Elvir (Eds.), *Ethnography and education policy across the americas* (pp. 157-171). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Levinson, B. A. U., Sutton, M., & Winstead, T. (2009). Education policy as a practice of power: theoretical tools, ethnographic methods, democratic options. *Educational Policy*, 23(6), 767-795.
- Lief Palley, M. (1976). Women and the study of public policy. *Policy Studies Journal*, 4(3), 288-296.
- Loveless, T. (1999). *The tracking wars: state reform meets school policy*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Lyotard, J. (1991). *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge* [La condition postmoderne: rappor sur le savoir]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1979)
- Marcus, G. E., & Fischer, M. M. J. (1986). *Anthropology as cultural critique: an experimental moment in the human sciences*. Chicago: Universit of Chicago Press.
- Marshall, C. (Ed.). (1997). *Feminist critical policy analysis I: a perspective from primary and secondary schooling* (Vol. 1). London: The Falmer Press.
- Matsuda, M., Lawrence, C., Delgado, R., & Crenshaw, K. (Eds.). (1993). *Words that wound: critical race theory, assaultive speech, and the first amendment*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Mazur, A. G. (2002). *Theorizing feminist policy*. Oxford, England: Oxford University.



- McDermott, R., & Hall, K. D. (2007). Reflections on the field: scientifically debased research on learning, 1854-2006. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 38(1), 9-15.
- Meadmore, D., Hatcher, C., & McWilliam, E. (2000). Getting tense about genealogy. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13(5), 463-476.
- Milner IV, H. R. (2008). Disrupting deficit notions of difference: counter-narratives of teachers and community in urban education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24, 1573-1598.
- No Child Left Behind Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301, (2001)
- Oakes, J. (2005a). *Keeping track: how schools structure inequality* (2nd ed.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. (Original work published 1985)
- Oakes, J. (2005b). Unlocking the tradition. In *Keeping track: how schools structure inequality* (2nd ed., pp. 15-39). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. (Original work published 1985)
- Oancea, A., & Pring, R. (2009). The importance of being thorough: on systematic accumulations of 'what works' in education research. In D. Bridges, P. Smeyers, & R. Smith (Eds.), *Evidence-based evidence policy: what evidence? what basis? whose policy?* (pp. 11-35). West Sussex, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Ohio Department of Education. (2008). *Columbus Alternative High School 2007-2008 School Year Report Card* (IRN# 023606). Columbus, OH: Ohio Department of Education.
- Retrieved May 16, 2009, from Ohio Department of Education Web site: <http://www.reportcard.ohio.gov>
- Pascall, G. (1997). *Social Policy: A new feminist analysis*. London: Routledge.

- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Penick v. Columbus Board of Education, 429 F Supp. 229. (1977).
- Penick v. Columbus, Board of Education, 583 F. 2d 787. (1978).
- Pillow, W. (1997). Decentering silences/troubling irony: teen pregnancy's challenge to policy analysis. In C. Marshall (Ed.), *Feminist critical policy analysis: a perspective from elementary and secondary schooling* (Vol. 1, pp. 54-72). London: Falmer Press.
- Pillow, W. (2003). 'Bodies are dangerous': using feminist genealogy as policy studies methodology. *Education Policy*, 18(2), 145-159.
- Pillow, W. (2004). *Unfit subjects: Educational policy and the teen mother*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- PLATO Learning. (2009, August). *PLATO learning secondary solutions: an efficacy report* (Descriptive White Paper). Bloomington, MN: PLATO Learning.
- Ravitch, D. (2009a, June 8). Time to kill 'no child left behind' [Electronic version]. *Education Week*, 28(33), 30-36.
- Ravitch, D. (2009b, June 13). Obama gives Bush a 3rd term in education. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved October 19, 2009, from Huffington Post Web site: [www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com)
- Reimers, F. (Ed.). (2000). *Unequal schools, unequal chances: the challenges of equal opportunity in the Americas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Reinharz, S. (1993). *On becoming a social scientist: from survey research and participant observation to experiential analysis*. New Brunswick, Canada: Transaction.

- Richardson, L. (1997). *Fields of play: constructing an academic life*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Rubin, B. (2008). Detracking in context: how local constructions of ability complicate equity-gearred reform. *Teachers College Record*, 110(3), 646-699.
- Rubin, B. C. (2006). Tracking and detracking: debates, evidence, and best practices for a heterogeneous world. *Theory Into Practice*, 45(1), 4-14.
- Saunders, L. (2009). Preface. In D. Bridges, P. Smeyers, & R. Smith (Eds.), *Evidence-based education policy: what evidence? what basis? whose policy?* (pp. xi-xiv). West Sussex, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Scheurich, J. J. (1994). Policy archeology: a new policy studies methodology. *Educational Policy*, 9(4), 297-316.
- Scheurich, J. J. (1997). *Research method in the postmodern*. London: Falmer.
- Sloan, K. (2007). High-stakes accountability, minority youth, and ethnography: assessing the multiple effects. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 38(1), 24-41.
- Smith, R. (2009). Proteus rising: re-imagining educational research. In *Evidence-based education policy: what evidence? what basis? whose policy?* (pp. 175-190). West Sussex, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Solorzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: the experiences of african american college students. *Journal of Negro Education*, 69(1), 60-73.

- Spivak, G. C. (1999). Appendix: the setting to work of deconstruction. In *A critique of postcolonial reason: toward a history of the vanishing present* (pp. 423-431). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- St. Pierre, E. A. (2000). Poststructural feminism in education: an overview. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13(5), 477-515.
- Sutton, M., & Levinson, B. A. U. (Eds.). (2001). *Policy as practice: toward a comparative sociocultural analysis of educational policy*. Westport, CT: Ablex.
- Sykes, G., Schneider, B., & Plank, D. N. (Eds.). (2009). *Handbook of education policy research*. New York: Routledge.
- Taylor, E. (2009). The foundations of critical race theory in education: an introduction. In E. Taylor, D. Gillborn, & G. Ladson-Billings (Eds.), *Foundations of critical race theory in education* (pp. 1-13). New York: Routledge.
- Tyack, D. B. (1993). Constructing difference: historical reflections on schooling and social diversity. *Teachers College Record*, 95(1), 8-34.
- Valenzuela, A., Prieto, L., & Hamilton, M. P. (Eds.). (2007). No child left behind (NCLB) and minority youth: what the qualitative evidence suggests [Special issue]. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 38(1).
- Valli, L., & Chambliss, M. (2007). Creating classroom cultures: one teacher, two lessons, and a high-stakes test. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 38(1), 57-75.
- Van Maanen, J. (1988). *Tales of the field*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Van Willigen, J., & Dewalt, B. R. (1985). *Training manual in policy ethnography*. Washington, D.C: American Anthropological Association.

- Walford, G. (2002). When policy moves fast, how long can ethnography take? In B. A. U. Levinson, S. L. Cade, A. Padawer, & Elvir A (Eds.), *Ethnography and education policy across the americas* (pp. 23-38). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Walford, G. (Series Ed.), & Walford, G. (Vol. Ed.). (2001). *Studies in educational ethnography volume 4: ethnography and education policy* (Vol. 4). Oxford, United Kingdom: JAI.
- Watanabe, M. (2006). "Some people think this school is tracked and some people don't": using inquiry groups to unpack teachers' perspectives on detracking. *Theory Into Practice*, 45(1), 24-31.
- Watanabe, M. (2007). Lessons from a teacher inquiry group about tracking: perceived student choice in course-taking and its implications for detracking reform. *Teachers College Record*, 109(9), 2136-2170.
- Watanabe, M. (2008). Tracking in the era of high-stakes accountability reform: case studies of classroom instruction in North Carolina. *Teachers College Record*, 110(3), 489-534.
- Welner, K. G. (2001). *Legal rights, local wrongs: when community control collides with educational equity*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Wheelock, A. (1992). *Crossing the tracks: how "untracking" can save America's schools*. NY, NY: The New Press.
- Wiggin, G. (2007). Race, school, achievement, and educational inequality: toward a student-based inquiry perspective. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(6), 310-333.
- Yonezawa, S., & Jones, M. (2006). Students' perspectives on tracking and detracking. *Theory Into Practice*, 45(1), 15-23.

## Appendix A: Data Samples

Demographics of Adult Interview and Focus Group Sample by Race and Gender (N=27)

	Race			Gender		
	N	African American	White	Asian	Female	Male
Teachers	10	2	8	0	5	5
Parents	11	3	8	0	9	2
Staff and Administrators	6	3	3	0	4	2

Demographics of Student Interview Sample by Race, Gender, and Course (N=13)

	Race				Gender	
	N	African American	White	Asian	Female	Male
Freshman Humanities	5	3	2	0	4	1
Sophomore Humanities	1	1	0	0	1	0
Junior Split	4	4	0	0	3	1
Senior AP	2	0	1	1	1	1
Junior/Senior IB	1	0	1	0	1	0

## Appendix B: Preliminary Report

### **On Their Own Terms: A Critical Case Study of a Successful Urban School**

#### Overarching Goal of Study:

The goal of this study was to produce a year-long ethnographic case study of a nationally ranked high-performance, high-poverty college preparatory public high school in Ohio. As a multi-sited qualitative study, it brings together field work, interviews, and focus groups with historical and policy document analysis. The purpose of this study is two-fold: 1) to examine how a complex set of federal and district policies is negotiated and re-appropriated by critical schooling actors as material practices aimed at supporting equity and excellence in student achievement, and 2) to provide a translational study that extends policy analysis beyond evaluation to help policy makers and policy actors understand how it effects teaching practice, curriculum, and student achievement.

#### Data Collection:

##### Observation

8 months of observation in 5 humanities classrooms in college prep, AP, and IB programs. Also observed science, special education, lunch, bus arrivals and departures, assemblies, PTA.

##### Interviews and focus groups

Interviewed 11 parents, 9 teachers, 6 Administrators/Staff, and 13 students

##### Documents

State and local report cards and policy documents, yearbooks and historical texts, ODE statistical reports, newspaper and magazine articles about the school and educational issues related to the school

#### Analysis:

Qualitative analysis using Nvivo software and manual coding



\*\*Pseudonyms were used for all participants; I refer to the school as Ohio Public High School

Context:

*What makes OPHS OPHS?*

Committed Teachers, Staff, and Parents

Exclusive College Preparatory Curriculum and Instruction

Unique population of high achieving students

No Interscholastic Sports Program

Local Negotiations of NCLB in ways that support student success

What else?

Under-resourced

Working with a predominantly African American, high poverty student population

Manage national recognition and the myth of "the boutique school" against common school issues plaguing other schools in the district

Rich history - magnet school originally implemented to combat the mass exodus of families leaving the district during desegregation and forced bussing that has now become an urban school success story (see figures)

Why/Who/How students/parents/guardians choose OPHS?

- Why - all the reasons above
  - IB and AP offerings
  - "the biggest bang for your buck" - unable to afford private school and OPHS meets or exceeds expectations
  - no sports
  - NCLB - high-stakes test scores, accountability rating, graduation and college attendance rates
  - Low-achieving and/or unsafe home school
- Who/How
  - Most AP and IB students have very engaged parents who entered their student into the lottery
  - Many students are advocating for themselves - particularly low-income students of color students who want to go to college and know that their home school

will not afford them the opportunity; They talked about learning about OPHS in middle school and then helping their parents complete the lottery forms. Many of these same students work between 30-40 hours a week.

Preliminary Findings/Analysis (work in progress)

### **1) Curriculum and Instruction as Policy as/in Practice**

- a. "State standards are the minimum of what we do here": Curriculum and instruction practices that subvert the constraining effects of NCLB and support student success**

*Note: There is a great deal of research and critical analysis of how NCLB narrows the curriculum, promotes "teaching to the test", undermines teacher morale and efficacy, encourages negative sanctions, penalizes schools who are successful as well as schools that aren't, and actually perpetuates the achievement gap between minority/poor students and white/affluent students. Therefore OPHS is a critical case study of how a school serving the very population of students NCLB intends to support is able to do that in spite of the constraints of the policy. This is a testament to the power and possibility of this school. It's an important story that other schools might be able to learn from.*

- b. District NCLB policy practices that undermine the success of OPHS : Credit Recovery (CR)**

*Note: Credit recovery was perceived by participants as undermining achievement at OPHS rather than supporting it. Part of the goal of CR is get students to pass courses they fail so that they can graduate. It is also to improve graduation rates under NCLB. Participants felt CR impacted them differently than at other schools - encouraged students to make different choices that impacted their success. Again this is about how policy effects practice in schools.*

- c. Over-Privileged and Under-Resourced: When Excellence Elides Disadvantage; Leaving Behind High Achieving Disadvantaged Students and Undercutting Success as NCLB Policy in Practice**

*Note: The veritable success of OPHS undermines its access to resources, and this is a direct result of how NCLB policy is*

written and applied in school districts. This is also something that other high achieving/high poverty schools experience, and I think you're story is important to add to this literature. OPHS is unique in that its high profile makes the reality of being under-resourced and working with a high poverty population "invisible" or hard for the public, other schools and the district to recognize.

## **2) Racialized enrollment as Policy as/in Practice**

### **a. Excellent Intentions: Racialized Enrollment Practices in Humanities, AP, and IB Programs**

Note: This next section is about the stratification of enrollment by race across the college prep, AP, and IB programs. **This is important, because there has been a lot of recent research on the re-segregation of students within schools as well as between schools as a result of NCLB policy and race relations in the US** - when students take academic risks, such as more challenging classes, schools fear it will impact test scores, classroom management, and grades. Even though this re-segregation is occurring, the racial subtext and notions of cultural deficits in communities of color and high-poverty provide an explanation that most of the US is comfortable with. We shift blame to students and families as opposed to government and policy.

**There is also a direct relationship between students' access to advancing levels of coursework in middle school and their ability to access the opportunities at OPHS.** Many students come in without adequate academic background, making it difficult for them to be eligible for AP or IB. Many students, particularly those who have disengaged parents, reported not understanding fully how AP/IB would benefit them and also feeling like they were counseled away from the course, because of the challenges and because the application emphasizes the need for parental support. They also feared that they couldn't meet the rigor of the course because they have work and child care responsibilities. **There is a complex web of structural reasons that help us understand why minority and high poverty students are concentrated in the college prep courses. Understanding these reasons also allows us to move from individual responsibility to looking for structural solutions so that all students have access to the opportunities that OPHS offers.** If the school is interested in moving in this direction, there are some great studies of schools that have "detacked" successfully and with amazing results.

**b. "The District is all about Equity": Demand, Overcrowding, and The Pre-Lottery**

*Note: This section is an analysis is about lack of resources and opportunity. With the increased demand for schools like OPHS but the lack of resources to create other programs, the district increased enrollment a few years ago without providing more staff or additional support. Participants perceived that this had a direct impact on the program and intensified the stress factors at the school. The pre-lottery was perceived by participants as a way the district attempted to calm down demand. The pre-lottery has the potential to undermine equity and diversity at OPHS precisely for the reasons discussed in the section above - lack of access to resources early on in the students' educational career.*

**3) Negotiations of Urban Student Identity as Policy as/in Practice**

*Note: The identity of OPHS as an "urban" school is an important tool. It is capitalized on to gain recognition and grant money. The district is proud of OPHS, because it is successful with its urban students. "Urban Identity" has a weight and meaning for students, parents, and staff, and they use this identity in different ways to negotiate school contexts.*

**a. Urban Cachet - How Critical Schooling Actors Negotiate Urban Student Identity**

*Note: By Urban Cache I am referring to the sense of identity and specialness that comes from identifying as an "urban" student or school and how this cachet is used*

**i. "It's a Strategy": How African American Families Negotiate Urban Student Identity**

*Note: Parents of color who do not see themselves as "urban", who may be middle class or working class, educated, and engaged, use the "urban" identity to help their child get into college*

**ii. "I wanted her to be of the world": How White Families Negotiate Urban Student Identity**

*Note: White parents who believe strongly in diversity and equity have a sense of pride about sending their white child to an "urban" school*

iii. **Achievement on their Own Terms:** How "Urban"

Students Negotiate Urban Student Identity

*Note: In this next section I use portraits and observation narratives to disrupt common understandings of what we think of as the "urban student". I look at what it means for these students to become high achieving on their own terms, how they manage and negotiate demanding home lives with the pressures of school, how they understand the meaning and importance of success, how the students at OPHS are both similar to other students and very special. They tell a story about urban education that is not what we typically hear. It is an important story to tell. And again it's a testament to the opportunity and possibilities that this school offers to all students.*

**1. Transformation, Promise, Breakthrough:  
NCLB and the production of Urban Students**

*Note: How NCLB policy produces traditional understandings of urban student identity*

**2. Accountable Students:** How Students  
Negotiate Academic Achievement on their  
Own Terms (A re-reading of the OPHS Report  
Card)

*Note: A reading of the NCLB report card as an indicator of student agency, motivation, perseverance in response to the **support, high expectations, and opportunities** afforded them by OPHS*

**3. Portraits**

**4. Incommensurability of Excellence and Disadvantage**

*Note: Final summary. OPHS can help us see urban students differently. OPHS can teach us about how policy impacts curriculum and instruction. OPHS can offer us a story of school success where teachers bring out the best in students, and yes it's difficult and complicated, but they do it. OPHS is also a story about how race continues to matter in public schooling, even in schools and districts where equity is the center of their mission. This history of race, both locally and in the*

*US, and our understandings of culture impact teaching and learning.*

**a. NCLB and the Local Production of Urban Identity:  
Fixing/ated on "Urban Students"; The (im)possibility  
of urban excellence on its own terms**

*Note: Can we conceive of urban excellence on its own terms? Not as a transformation, a promise, or a breakthrough, but as something else?*

**b. Excellent and Inequitable: The Failures of NCLB as  
an Equity Reform as Policy in Practice**

*Note: Though NCLB is written to "ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high quality education" it is failing in some very important ways. OPHS helps us think about the possibilities for equity and also the potential limits to it.*