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A Qualitative Exploration of the School Experiences of Middle-School Students in the Era of No Child Left Behind

Charles H. Hamilton
Utah State University

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A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

OF MIDDLE-SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THE ERA OF

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

by

Charles H. Hamilton

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

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Approved:

Martha T. Dever, Ed.D. Major Professor	Michael K. Freeman, Ed.D. Committee Member
Scott L. Hunsaker, Ph.D. Committee Member	Steven O. Laing, Ed.D. Committee Member
Tom C. Peterson, Ph.D. Committee Member	Byron R. Burnham, Ed.D. Dean of Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

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ABSTRACT

A Qualitative Exploration of the School Experiences of Middle School

Students in the Era of No Child Left Behind

by

Charles H. Hamilton, Doctor of Philosophy

Utah State University, 2009

Major Professor: Martha T. Dever, Ed.D.
Department: Education (Curriculum and Instruction)

Since the inception of the most recent iteration of the Elementary and Secondary

Education Act of 1965, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has drawn widespread study and

discussion. The majority of the research concerning NCLB has reported the perspective

of teachers and administrative staff in public schools. The purpose of this research study

was to add to the literature the voices of students. Participants in this qualitative research

study were six students at Galaxy Junior High. These six students were interviewed

multiple times. Based on a qualitative data analysis of their interview transcripts, and

follow-up communications, four main categories of student experiences emerged:

motivation in school, teaching methods, learning strategies, and connecting school and

life. Participants discussed what motivates them in school, including intrinsic as well as

extrinsic motivators; the method in which teachers teach; how they learn in school

through the use of both bookwork and homework; and how school is the gateway to their

future.

(91 pages)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER I

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In 2002, President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) into law. This legislation is the eighth reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). ESEA is the landmark federal law that was first passed in 1965 and includes basic programs like Title I (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). NCLB differs from its many predecessors in four key areas. First, NCLB requires states to develop annual assessments aligned with state standards to measure student achievement and to measure school accountability. Second, it mandates the disaggregation of scores on these assessments into subgroups. Third, NCLB requires states to have in place a statewide accountability system that applies to all public schools, including charter schools. Fourth, NCLB intends to ensure that all schools make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward having all students proficient in reading and mathematics by 2014 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

While studies (Berube, 2004; Dever & Carlston, in press; Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006; Epstein, 2005; International Reading Association [IRA], 2005; Sundermand, Orfield, & Kim, 2006) have addressed the experiences of school teachers and other professionals in schools, little is known about how students are experiencing school in this era of NCLB. The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experience of middle school students in this era of NCLB.

NCLB outlines five primary goals: (a) by 2013-2014, all students will reach high standards, at a minimum attaining proficiency or better in reading/language arts and

mathematics. (b) All limited English proficient students will become proficient in English and reach high academic standards, at a minimum attaining proficiency or better in reading/language arts and mathematics. (c) By 2005-2006, all students will be taught by highly qualified teachers. (d) All students will be educated in learning environments that are safe, drug-free, and conducive to learning. (3) All students will graduate from high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

NCLB has many important implications for education across the United States. Teachers are facing increasing regulation and oversight, high stakes testing (where high stakes testing is defined as "any testing program whose results have important consequences for students, teachers, schools, and/or districts") has increased, and even the curriculum of schools is being altered to better meet the requirements of NCLB (New Horizons for Learning, 2007, ¶ 35).

NCLB has its supporters and its critics. Supporters note that the legislation is intended to support student learning, monitor the achievement of subgroups of students, and ensure high-quality teachers in all classrooms (Epstein, 2005). Critics are concerned about overemphasis on standardized testing, unrealistic time lines and goals, and underfunding of the initiative (Dever & Carlston, in press; Epstein; Fritzberg, 2004; Rose, 2004).

In a report issued by the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Growth Research Database (Cronon, Kingsbury, McCall, & Bowe, 2005), certain positive trends have been reported since the implementation of NCLB. The report highlighted an overall growth in math scores among students studied, as well as a decreasing achievement gap

between minorities and majorities; although this gap still exists, NWEA asserted that it was not as pronounced.

Some scholars believe, however, that these mandates of NCLB are taking a toll on teachers, administrators, and students (Dever & Carlston in press; Rose, 2004). Teachers and administrators are feeling the pressure to ensure that all of their students reach the goals and mandates of NCLB (Klein, Zevenbergen, & Brown, 2006), and often students are left wondering why they are being tested more and more (Harriman, 2005).

Studies by Berube (2004), Dollarhide and Lemberger (2006), Dever and Carlston (in press), and Sundermand and colleagues (2006) reported that teachers and counselors were feeling disenfranchised by NCLB, as well as overwhelmed by its requirements. Some teachers reported feeling the need to narrow the curriculum and delete courses to better meet the mandates of NCLB.

Research has been conducted to address the impact NCLB has had upon education. The studies address issues such as: how NCLB has changed the climate of schooling across the country (Cimbricz, 2002; Cronin et al., 2005); and how NCLB has impacted schools, teachers, administrators, counselors, governments, and school districts (Fritzberg, 2004; Harriman, 2005). Not only do these studies often incorrectly infer causation, as though NCLB is the definitive cause of the issues studied, or that NCLB is 'impacting' these groups, but these studies leave out a vital voice in education, the students' voice.

An example from the literature of this incorrect inference comes from the study by Klein and colleagues (2006). In their study they focused on what they perceive is a

negative impact of standardized testing. They asserted that because of the standardized testing mandates of NCLB, those involved with schooling are feeling both overwhelmed and undereducated. First, not only did this study infer that standardized testing was the cause why those involved with schooling were both overwhelmed and undereducated, but also that this standardized testing was caused by NCLB. Standardized testing has been around for much longer than NCLB (Popham, 2001), and standardized testing was only a part of the NCLB legislation; so it is misleading of these researchers to blame NCLB for the frustration that the participants in their study expressed.

Limited research has been conducted concerning how students are experiencing school in the era of NCLB. Only a few studies report how students are experiencing school. Furthermore, these findings are based on comments made by the study participants, who are not students themselves but those who are somehow involved in the education of students (Klein et al., 2006; Orlich, 2004; Yea, 2006).

Mulvenon, Stegmen, and Ritter (2005) and Orlich (2004) addressed the issue of how NCLB was affecting students, yet the respondents in their studies were teachers, parents, and other school leaders. The data sources did not include reports from students directly.

The secondary and sometimes tertiary approach to discover students' voices has left a large gap in the literature, which needs to be addressed (Mulvenon et al., 2005). Students are being both directly and indirectly affected by NCLB—whether they are aware of it or not. Some researchers emphasized the positive aspects of NCLB, while others emphasized the negative; neither has adequately assessed how students were

experiencing school in this era of NCLB.

This absence of student voices in the research is what brought me to this study; therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of middle-level students during the NCLB era by actually talking to students. I wished to give students a voice that is theirs alone in the literature. I wanted them to be able to express the ways they were experiencing school—to tell their own story.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to understand how middle school students experience school in the era of NCLB. Using the tradition of phenomenology, students were interviewed about their lived experience in school in the era of No Child Left Behind.

Research Question

How do middle school students experience school in an era of No Child Left Behind?

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Overview of No Child Left Behind

In 2002, the Federal Government instituted the NCLB Act (U.S. Department of Education) that set certain standards that every child across America is to meet by 2014 (Fritzberg, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The expectation is that each student will perform at grade level in the core subjects—math, English, and science.

In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed. A major element of this legislation was the investment of money into economically disadvantaged schools; this became known as Title I money (Jennings, 2001). Every 4 years this legislation comes up for reauthorization. Each time it has been reauthorized, changes have been made.

The NCLB legislation, which is the eighth and most recent reauthorization of the ESEA, is intended to support student learning, monitor the achievement of subgroups of students, and ensure high-quality teachers in all classrooms (Epstein, 2005). It requires more assessment and accountability of both teachers and students. Each year, schools need to meet AYP, which is determined by both how well students perform on statewide assessment tests and the number of students tested. Each recognized population within the school must have adequate representation on the test. Test results are used to determine how well schools are performing their function to educate and, thereby, to determine the dispersion of federal Title I money (Fritzberg, 2000). The results of this

testing affect resources for all schools, not just Title I schools (Jennings, 2001).

The NCLB legislation places restrictions on schools that do not meet standards for AYP, which is determined by a rigorous testing schedule measuring each subgroup within the school (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). If a school does not achieve AYP for 4 years in a row, the school district must reorganize the school by reopening the school as a charter school, replacing the school principal and staff members, contracting with a private company to take over the school, having the state take over the school or some other method approved by NCLB. This restructuring must begin no later than the first day of the fifth year (Fritzberg, 2004).

No Child Left Behind Research

The NCLB Act has wide implications across the country (Fritzberg, 2004). While some research has been conducted involving this legislation, more is needed in order to better understand its effects, especially on those most involved with schooling (Rose, 2004).

The research studies reviewed for this study are divided into three main categories: (a) how students are experiencing NCLB; (b) how the assessment and accountability prescriptions of NCLB are influencing schooling practices; and (c) how NCLB is affecting school personnel, particularly teachers. While much research was found concerning the latter two categories, very limited research was found concerning the first; thus, further research is needed to better understand how this legislation is affecting students. A needed starting point is to understand how various stakeholders

experience schooling in the era of NCLB.

Students' Experiences

Research on how students experience NCLB is very limited. Only a few studies have been conducted, and in most of them students' experiences were not central to the study (Mulvenon et al., 2005). In addition to the dearth of studies conducted concerning students' attitudes towards school in the era of NCLB, most of what has been written does not qualify as research but as commentary or insights that the authors have had while researching other populations. This secondary and sometimes tertiary approach to students' voices has left a large gap in the literature (Mulvenon et al.).

The only study that directly addresses the experiences of students was published by Harriman (2005). The purpose of the study primarily focused on what the students know about NCLB and less on their school experiences. Thirty-seven seventh-grade social studies students were randomly selected from five seventh-grade social studies classes. They were asked to write their responses to five questions regarding NCLB and school. In general, the questions addressed whether or not they had any knowledge of NCLB and the role they felt it played in their schooling. Most of the students had at least some knowledge of the existence of NCLB. One student believed that if he did not achieve what he was expected to he would be sent away. When the students were asked whether schools should be held accountable for the test scores, the vast majority of students said no because, they said, students are all so very different.

School Personnel

Much of the research that has been conducted regarding NCLB concerns how this legislation is affecting school personnel (Berube, 2004; Dever & Carlston, in press; Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006; Sunderman et al., 2006). These school personnel include teachers, administrators, counselors, and support staff.

Dollarhide and Lemberger (2006) examined the role of counselors in the era of NCLB. They surveyed 210 school counselors from across the country. The open-ended survey consisted of two main questions: one to address counselor awareness of NCLB and the second to elicit responses from the counselors on how the NCLB legislation is affecting their work. Seventy-two percent of the respondents reported that they knew general information about NCLB, with 37% reporting that they knew many of the details of NCLB. Concerning the second purpose of the study, which asked the counselors to report how NCLB is affecting their work, 74% reported that they felt they were more involved with the mechanics of testing, proctoring, and reporting and that they had less time to devote to assisting students than they did before the implementation of NCLB. The researchers conclude by stating that unless checked, NCLB has the potential of shifting the school counselor's role permanently from one of assisting students to testing them (Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006).

A phenomenological study addressing the effects of NCLB on school personnel dealt with issues facing special education teachers. Harriman (2005) interviewed 15 special education teachers and administrators concerning their feelings and attitudes towards NCLB to better understand how special education teachers experience teaching

in the era of NCLB legislation. One major theme that emerged from the data was the conflict these teachers felt in reconciling the federal mandates with the state mandates. Harriman stated, "Many perceived the state's learning standards and related system of classroom-based authentic, teacher administered performance assessments to conflict with the No Child Left Behind's requirement that student progress be measured with standardized tests" (p. 67). Teachers were concerned that they were unable to focus on authentic assessment techniques such as written projects and reports because they felt compelled to prepare their students for the standardized tests required by NCLB legislation. One teacher expressed her concern that with the mandates of NCLB, the state standards will take a back seat. She expressed this concern because the mandates of NCLB do not match the special educational program of her state.

Another study that gives voice to those affected by NCLB was conducted by Valli and Buesse (2007), who implemented a longitudinal inquiry into how teachers' roles have changed with the implementation of NCLB. They conducted interviews with 84 teachers, 48 principals, 31 school-based specialists, and 13 staff developers with the focus being teachers' roles, both instructional and institutional. All of the participants were from one school district, representing elementary, middle, and high schools, and all had been involved with education both before and after the implementation of NCLB.

Valli and Buesse (2007) reported a salient theme—increased use of differentiated or individualized instruction in response to external accountability requirements as a result of NCLB. This differentiated instruction occurred in both reading and math classes, primarily in connection with frequent classroom assessments and small group work.

Participants reported that with the implementation of NCLB, a teacher's instructional role is increasingly regulated and observed through the myriad of assessments. This led to a decrease in freedom in what teachers chose to teach as well as how they chose to teach it. They report that because they feel no longer in control of what, or even how, they teach, instructional quality has declined. They also report that a teacher's institutional role has changed as a result of NCLB legislation. Whereas before, teachers collaborated to determine how to assist students, now they are spending a great deal of time discussing test preparation and test-taking strategies.

In a survey conducted by the IRA (2005), 4,000 members of the association were surveyed concerning key aspects of NCLB. The return rate was 37%. The respondents were asked if they felt that the benefits of NCLB outweigh any negative impacts of NCLB, 37.3% agreed with this while 42% disagreed, and 20.8% remaining neutral. When this same group was asked if they felt NCLB benefited the broader community, 27.8% agreed or strongly agreed, 42.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 29.4% remaining neutral. When teachers were asked if they agreed with the basic premises of the law, 77.9% agreed or strongly agreed, with only 9.7% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, 12.4% were neutral. Teachers agreed with the idea of ensuring that no student is left behind, but they did not agree on how it was to be done. It is interesting that while many teachers agree with the basic ideas behind NCLB, there is divergence as to how effective NCLB is at achieving these basics.

Dever and Carlston (in press) examined how kindergarten and primary grade teachers were experiencing teaching in the era of NCLB. They held focus group

interviews with 39 kindergarten and primary grade teachers from seven different schools in four different states. Participants' years of teaching experience varied from less than 5 to more than 20.

Teachers reported they were grateful for new resources (reading coaches, for example) made available as a result of the new expectations relative to NCLB. They also agreed with the basic premises of NCLB (i.e., that no child should be left behind); however, they felt a lack of autonomy in their own classroom as they struggled to teach district mandated programs. Teachers also noted that they had to narrow the curriculum and teach to the test to meet AYP. Teachers felt torn between the mandates of NCLB and what they felt were best practices to meet the needs of their students.

Counselors and teachers are not the only individuals being impacted; administrators too are grappling with NCLB. Sunderman and colleagues (2006) raised an interesting question in their article about the role of principals within the framework of NCLB. Although not a research study, the authors examined how NCLB emphasized the need of highly qualified teachers and increased scores, yet it said nothing about highly qualified administrators or even how the principal played a role in the implementation of the NCLB requirements included in the legislation.

Sunderman and colleagues (2006) referred to a previous study they conducted in which they interviewed teachers about the impact of NCLB. They found that teachers recognized the importance of a highly qualified administrator. They saw the administrator as the key to meeting the NCLB requirement of highly qualified teachers because they are responsible for hiring (Sunderman, Tracey, Kim, & Orfield, 2004). Sunderman and

colleagues (2004) highlighted that principals were put in a strange position with NCLB. They were held accountable for its implementation and subsequent results, yet the legislation was silent concerning them. Although there has been some research concerning some of the personnel involved in implementing NCLB, much of the research that has been conducted focuses on the accountability and assessment mandates of NCLB.

Accountability and Assessment

Two of the issues that have received much attention within the research community are the accountability and assessment factors of NCLB (Klein et al., 2006; Pederson, 2007; Rose, 2004) These two issues are often considered the *sine quo non* of NCLB (Berube, 2004), because the purpose of NCLB was to increase the accountability of schools and teachers measured by achievement tests. Following is an overview of the research that has been conducted which examines the accountability and assessment requirements of NCLB.

Pederson (2007) conducted a study highlighting some of the effects that the assessment and accountability standards of NCLB are having on other non-assessed subjects. In this study, fifty state assessment directors were invited to participate in a phone survey where they were asked about subjects tested for accountability and non-accountability purposes in 2001 and 2005. Forty-seven state assessment directors responded. They reported that several changes occurred from 2001 to 2005 regarding the assessment of subjects. Six states added science to their state assessment system while many states are discontinuing assessment of subject areas not mandated by NCLB. In

other words, subjects that at one time were assessed at the state level are no longer being assessed.

In 2001, 27 states assessed social studies; by 2005, that number had dropped to 19. In 2001, five states tested in the arts and humanities; by 2005, no state conducted such assessments. Pederson (2007) concluded by summarizing that from 2001 to 2005 school districts are adjusting which subjects will be assessed at the state level. Similarly Dever and Carlston (in press), found that teachers were experiencing a narrowing of the curriculum. Although this change could be attributed to many factors, Pederson points out that it is interesting that the shift is taking place over the same time period as the implementation of NCLB and in the direction of the mandates of NCLB.

In a study conducted in 2006 by Klein and colleagues, 200 questionnaires were placed in teachers' mailboxes in five schools in western New York State. While there was only a 10% return rate on the survey, the qualitative findings from this study are of interest.

The results of this study suggest two main points. First, when teachers were asked to respond to the question of how testing influences teaching, they responded that testing becomes so ingrained that every part of the curriculum becomes focused to help students achieve high scores on the tests. The second main point related to how teachers felt the tests were impacting students. Teachers reported that they felt that all of the focus on assessment and accountability is lowering the self-esteem of students, causing students to fear testing, and creating a general feeling of hopelessness. Although there is no direct investigation in this study into what students are experiencing there is a concession that

what students are experiencing as a result of NCLB is of interest (Harriman, 2005).

In a research project conducted on test anxiety since the implementation of NCLB, Mulvenon and colleagues (2005) found that test anxiety and its effect on students, teachers, and parents is a major issue surrounding the accountability and assessment mandates of NCLB concern. Students, parents, and teachers returned 392 surveys. The researchers discovered that much of the anxiety from testing arose out of the concern that students and parents were unaware of what impacts the tests were going to have. Parents were often unaware that their students were being tested; when they were aware, they were concerned with how the results of those tests would impact their students given the high-stakes nature of testing in the era of NCLB.

Even with the importance placed upon standardized testing by NCLB, there is still no conclusive evidence of the benefit of such testing (Lai & Waltman, 2008). In her meta-analysis of research on the impact of state-mandated testing, Cimbricz (2002) found that although there has been research conducted in this area, there is no clear consensus on how this testing is impacting educational practices. She reports that one of the major concerns regarding testing is that often the purpose of, or reason for, the test is not always made clear. Lawmakers assume that if the test is changed that this will change how teachers teach and, therefore, students will benefit, and if lawmakers are going to continue to assume that testing will change classroom instruction, then much more research on the impact of testing is needed to validate this policy.

Aside from assessment and accountability issues concerning high-stakes testing, the efficacy of such testing (Cimbritz, 2002; Klein et al., 2006) and how school personnel

are experiencing and being impacted by NCLB such as the narrowing of the curriculum,

and the feeling of disenfranchisement teachers are feeling (Dever & Carlston, in press;

Pederson, 2007), there is one other group whose voice is underrepresented in the

literature—the student.

Even though much more research is needed concerning teachers and the impact of

NCLB, the studies reviewed for this paper note that teachers are struggling with the

implementation of NCLB and how to best assist students. They are grateful for the extra

assistance that NCLB provides such as in funding and the push for highly qualified

educators, yet the additional oversight has led to some teachers struggling in an effort to

balance the curriculum with the mandates of NCLB.

Summary

Most of the NCLB research conducted addresses one of two categories: teachers

and assessment. While much of the research conducted concerns teachers and

assessment, limited research has been conducted concerning how students are

experiencing school in the era of NCLB. Researchers Mulvenon and colleagues (2005)

explored this topic but from the vantage point of others involved in schooling—not the

students. Researcher Harriman (2005) invited students to respond to surveys concerning

their knowledge of NCLB, but it did not explore their lived experience.

School personnel, especially teachers, have been the subject of many studies

concerning schooling in the era of NCLB (Berube, 2004; Dever & Carlston, in press;

Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006; Sunderman et al., 2006). These researchers discussed

how teachers are feeling disenfranchised in the classroom through the mandates of NCLB, as well as limited on what they can teach.

Much of the NCLB research concerns the accountability and assessment standards mandated by this legislation (Klein et al., 2001; Pederson, 2007; Rose, 2004). These studies addressed how the mandated testing of some subjects has lead to the diminished assessment of some subjects and the influence of this increased assessment on the classroom.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Population and Sample

The population from which the participants for this study were selected was the student population at Galaxy Junior High School in Cooper County (pseudonyms), located in the western United States. Cooper County School District is in a suburban area and serves approximately 15,000 students. Galaxy Junior High has a student population of 893, and is 73% Caucasian, 15% Hispanic, 5% African American, 3% Asian, and 1% American Indian. Ten percent of the students are English language learners, and 61% are on free or reduced school lunch. (These data were taken from the district's website but it is not referenced here to maintain confidentiality.)

After identifying this junior high, I contacted the principal to outline the study and seek his approval. I assured him that this study would not intrude into the day-to-day operations of the school, nor would the study in any way reflect his administration or the teaching abilities of his faculty. After securing his approval, I petitioned the school district for approval; the Cooper County School District (pseudonym) required proof of IRB approval as well as a written proposal before the study was approved. When I obtained approval, I informed the principal as well as the counselors at Galaxy Junior High, and contacted the counseling center there to assist me in compiling a list of students who met the requirements for participation in this study.

Participants were selected using a maximum variation sampling method. Selected

students varied across the following four criteria: (a) socioeconomic status (SES), (b) gender, (c) ethnicity, and (c) achievement level. To ensure maximum variation, I, along with the counselors, selected participants who represented students with both high and low GPA, male and female, low and high SES, and various ethnic backgrounds. To ensure participants were information-rich cases, teachers at Galaxy Junior High nominated participants across the four selection criteria whom they felt would be able and willing to discuss the phenomenon. The counselors and other administrative staff at the school helped communicate to the teachers that the purpose of the study was to understand the lived experiences of the participants and not to critique their teaching.

Once this pool of participants was identified, I selected the final six participants ensuring that maximum variation was achieved. This sampling method was used to provide diverse perspectives on students' experiences with school in the era of NCLB. Table 1 provides demographic data on each of the six chosen participants.

Shad

Shad was an outgoing social individual who values school and is very involved in

Table 1

Demographic Information of Interview Participants

Name	SES	Gender	Academic achievement	Ethnicity
Shad	Low	Male	High	Caucasian
Lana	High	Female	High	Caucasian
Paulo	Low	Male	Low	Hispanic
Mara	Low	Female	High	Hispanic
Robyn	High	Female	Low	Caucasian
Jay	High	Male	High	Caucasian

sports. He has lived in Cooper County his entire life. He comes from a low-level SES family and wanted to pursue a career in the military followed by a career in the private sector. He was well liked by other students and enjoyed life.

Lana

Lana was an extremely social individual who, like Shad, was also very involved athletically. She has lived all over the western United States and has lived in Cooper County for the past 3 years. She came from a high-SES family and wanted to go into the legal profession possibly as a lawyer. She came from a successful background in education.

Paulo

Paulo was a reserved individual who kept to himself. He came from a low-level SES family that emigrated from Mexico 3 years prior to this study. Although he struggled in school and at times did not want to attend, he wanted to graduate so that he could take better care of his family. He will be the first person in his family to graduate from high school in the United States. His siblings all spoke English, but his father and mother spoke and understood only Spanish.

Mara

Mara came from a low-level SES family from Brazil; she had been in the United States periodically for most of her life, except for some extended family vacation time back in Brazil. Her father recently announced that they might be moving back to Brazil because of his inability to find stable and substantive employment in America. She

wanted to be a music teacher.

Robyn

Robyn loved school; she loved to learn and experience new things. She has lived in the same neighborhood her entire life. She came from a high-level SES family. She especially enjoyed talking with her friends and fellow students from all walks of life. She wanted to learn all that she could so that she could, in her own words, "be a mother."

Jay

Jay did well in school although he did not enjoy it much. He has lived in Cooper County his entire life. He came from a high-level SES family and believed that many of the classes he took were not worth his time and that many of them were far too easy and repetitive. He wanted to pursue a career in the medical field, possibly as an orthopedic surgeon.

Researcher Frame of Reference

I have always been fascinated with education. I come from a long line of educators, and currently I teach religious education to middle, high school, and college students. As I have taught and noticed the constantly changing world of education, as well as education's connection to government, I have been interested in how these changes are affecting the students. I believe that the goal to educate is extremely important and that best practices based on research are needed to reach this goal. I have been keenly interested, therefore, in the role that the NCLB legislation is playing in

education. This interest in both the legislation and the student brought me to this study.

<div align="center">Design</div>

The aim of this research project was to determine how students are experiencing school in the era of NCLB. This qualitative research project followed the tradition of phenomenology. Phenomenology seeks to understand the emic perspective of those who have directly experienced the phenomena of interest. A phenomenological design allowed these six participants to share their lived experiences as middle school students in the era of NCLB. What emerged from these data are their words, which illustrate their understanding and feelings towards education without the intrusion of the suppositions or assumptions of others (Cresswell, 1994; Oiler, 1986).

<div align="center">Entry and Reciprocity</div>

Prior to the interviews, each participant and parent or guardian received two copies of the IRB informed consent form. They read through the form and had an opportunity to ask any questions or to withdraw from the study. Once these participants had been selected, and prior to the recorded portion of the interviews, we met and I introduced myself and shared the purpose of the study and reasons they had been selected to participate. To further develop trust, the participants were invited to ask questions about me or the study. At this meeting I explained that their identities would be kept confidential, that what they said would illuminate their experiences in the era of NCLB, and that their participation in this study would give voice to students regarding their

education. Refreshments were served at this meeting as well as all subsequent interviews.

Data Collection

The data for this study are transcriptions from individual interviews conducted with the six participants at Galaxy Junior High School. These participants were each interviewed twice, with the second interview taking place approximately one month after the first. Each interview lasted about 30-45 minutes. All of the interviews took place on school property in an advising office in the counseling center. For each interview, the participant and I were the only ones in the room, but there were large windows into the counseling center so that we could be observed at any time. There was always at least one other adult in the counseling center at all times during the course of the interviews. These interviews were tape recorded during school time. Using an unstructured interview protocol (Appendix A), interviews were continued until no new themes emerged.

The first round of interviews employed an open ended interview protocol. During the interviews, participants were asked about their current experience in school, what they liked and what they found challenging. I probed their responses for deeper understanding.

The second round of interviews conducted with these participants was separated by enough time to allow me to analyze the first interview transcripts. These interviews were conducted with each participant until data saturation was achieved. As data emerged and ongoing analysis was conducted, interview questions were focused to probe emerging themes during these subsequent interviews (see Appendix B). After both

interviews were conducted and transcribed, I contacted participants whose interviews were lacking in clarity in some areas. I also sought to deepen my understanding and probe for further understanding; this was done via multiple email communications. I used these email communications to explore such questions as why participants felt that teachers moved at such a quick pace, and asked if they felt that their teachers were overly concerned with tests and test scores. These email communications were continued until the needed clarification and data saturation was achieved.

Data Analysis

The purpose of data analysis is to bring meaning, structure, and order to data (Anafara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). Creswell (1998) stated, "Researchers search for essentials, invariant structure (or essence) or the central underlying meaning of the experience" (p. 52). I accomplished this analysis by first taking the recordings of the first round of interviews and transcribing them verbatim as soon as they were completed. While I was in the process of transcription, I utilized the process of memoing where I wrote down themes and insights that came from the participant interviews as well as from my own thought processes. This enabled me to begin to formulate possible themes from these data as well as to create follow up questions for the second round of interviews to probe the emerging themes. An example from Mara of how the category of teacher methods emerged from the data will better illustrate this process.

When I asked Mara in her first interview what she found challenging in school she said, "If you're having a problem in a certain area." I followed up with "What do you

do when you don't understand something?" She responded with,

> Well, I usually try to like think and think and think a lot, and then I just give up. Then I end up asking my friends, but then I won't go to the teacher, unless like, it's the last thing I do because I don't want to feel dumb or stupid.

At this point in my memoing cards, I noted that Mara was expressing some concern with not understanding the material in class as well as some anxiety about approaching her teacher. This helped me to continue to look for these topics in other transcriptions, as well as to follow up with this in subsequent interviews.

With a more focused interview protocol drawn from these data, emergent themes were probed during the subsequent round of interviews (see Appendix B). Participants were asked to elaborate on their previous responses. This elaboration allowed for the emergence of additional information. Once the second round of interviews was completed, the interviews were transcribed and the process of memoing continued. I will return to the previous example of Mara.

During the second interview I was asking her to elaborate on what material she doesn't understand in class. She said,

> I think it's watching videos, because like, I like videos but like, in U.S. History those videos are the most unnecessary thing because we weren't taking notes and most people were asleep, they just use the video to sleep, I was like aren't we supposed to be learning something.

In this interview, much like the first interview, Mara was expressing that she had times in class when she did not understand the material. However, from this second conversation I noticed that she also had an opinion on what instructional methods teachers use in the classroom. I followed up by asking, "Why do teachers make you watch [videos]" She responded with, "I guess they think that, or they expect that, we should be paying

attention and doing what we are supposed to do and memorizing or something, I don't know."

Here I began to see that within the theme of what teachers do in the classroom two subthemes emerged. First, she expressed her reluctance to approach a teacher with a concern (first transcription), and second, she was aware of the efficacy of her teachers' instructional methods (second transcription). At this point, I continued to probe her response but did not follow-up on my original question. This oversight is discussed further when I present my material on peer debriefing.

I probed both of these themes with further email communications with Mara with questions such as, "Why do you think your teachers use videos, and how could they use them better?" and "Why don't students go to their teachers when they have questions?"

The next phase of data analysis was horizontalization (Cresswell, 1998). Horizontalizaiton involved listing all non-overlapping statements that highlighted the participants' experience. Next, I grouped these statements into clusters of meaning and wrote descriptions of the participants' experiences. These clusters of meaning were given names based on what emerged from the data. Then using the participants' words I wrote a description of the experience, continually reviewing the data to look for additional insights and meanings (Creswell, 1994, 1998). Data analysis was ongoing until data saturation was achieved.

To illustrate this process, I will return to the example of Mara. I compiled her statements that emerged concerning her opinions about teacher methods and her reluctance to approach teachers. I then began to list her statements along with similar

comments made by other participants. I then labeled this theme "student-teacher interaction" with two sub themes, "teacher instruction" and "student concerns." However, the theme of student-teacher interaction changed. This change is explained in the following section.

Verification Strategies

Multiple verification strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. The primary verification strategy I used was data triangulation where data are triangulated via multiple conversations with multiple informants. This strategy entails gathering data through several samples so that slices of data at different times and social situations as well as from a variety of people are gathered. This goal was accomplished by conducting two interviews with each participant separated in time, as well as multiple follow up email communications with the participants.

I used a peer debriefer as a second verification strategy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Her qualifications to serve in this position include her degree in technical writing as well as her review of basic qualitative methodologies. This review was accomplished both by my explanation of qualitative methodologies, and by her study of research texts (Cresswell, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We met both formally and informally over the course of this study. Formal discussions were bi-monthly and discussed the coding of these data, horizontalization, and descriptive narrative, while informal discussions were quick conversations about the research process and individual insights. This peer debriefer reviewed my analysis of the first and second interviews to ascertain if my

coding was reasonable and consistent (see Appendix C). To demonstrate how this peer debriefer helped in a specific context, I will refer once again to the example of Mara.

I had come to the conclusion that the theme of student-teacher interaction was not a true representation of what the participants were saying; in consultation with my peer debriefer she questioned if I had coded Mara's comments accurately. She brought up the concern that the theme of student-teacher interaction was not specific enough. In consultation with her, I began to see how participants, although talking about student-teacher interaction, were more specific in their comments. I began to see that participants spoke consistently about the pedagogical methods their teachers employed, and that this emergent idea was different from the concern they expressed when they did not understand material in class. From this discussion, two major categories or themes emerged: teaching methods, and learning strategies, and those are now two of four themes that appear in this study.

A third verification strategy I used throughout this study was a research journal. I kept a journal of my experiences as I designed, received approval for, conducted, and analyzed this study. This journal was very helpful for me as I recorded thoughts and feelings I had as I went through this process. During the data analysis phase, I was able to check my bias better by reviewing personal thoughts about the emerging findings.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to describe the school experience of six middle

school students in this era of NCLB. Based on a qualitative data analysis of interview

transcripts and follow up communications, four main categories emerged: motivation in

school, teaching methods, learning strategies, and connecting school and life. A

presentation of the findings follows.

Motivation in School

Participants often discussed their motivation relative to academic endeavors. Data

analysis revealed two sub-categories, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Participants

reported being intrinsically motivated by both a love of learning and personal

accountability. Extrinsic motivators including tests and grades were also identified.

Intrinsic Motivation

Participants reported that they were often motivated from within to achieve in

school. They reported strong feelings about their education, and that those feelings drive

them to achieve. This internal, intrinsic motivation came from two identified sources: a

love of learning, and a feeling of personal accountability. This intrinsic motivation was

found in both high- and low-achieving participants.

Love of learning. Participants reported that one motivator for them to achieve in

school was a love of learning. Shad said, "What I like about school, is well, the learning part, I like to learn, you know learn new things, learn new skills." Later on he added, "Once you try your best and you know that you did your best and you succeeded, *it's just a feeling.*" He concluded this thought by saying "I want to learn to get as much knowledge as I can." When I asked him what was more important, getting good grades or learning the material, he replied, "Learning it." He added, "I just want to learn it, to get as much knowledge as I can."

Robyn's comments on this topic were interesting. She said, speaking about why she wants to learn, "I once heard that some people gather up all the knowledge they have and don't use it. I don't want to be like that."

When I asked what she would take out of the school curriculum, Lana, a self-confessed athlete, said, "Gym, I think it's kind of useless because you're not really learning anything."

Lana's perspective was consistent with others: that school is for learning, and that students want to learn, even to the exclusion of favorite activities. To follow up with Lana's comments about the uselessness of gym, I asked Shad what the purpose of gym class was in school, and he simply said, "Fun." In the eyes of these participants, school is a place of learning and nothing is learned in gym class. What is interesting here is that even though there are physical requirements and even physical tests in gym, participants did not view it as a learning environment.

Even participants who struggled in school expressed a similar love of learning. Paulo, a low achiever, said "I like to learn different stuff, like...chemicals and...about

volcanoes and like everything pretty much." Even though Paulo struggled, he still liked some of the learning aspects of school.

Mara, who had attended school outside of the United States, commented about her favorite subject, math, by saying, "Math has always been my favorite subject. I find so much interest in it, but at the same time I get frustrated because of the things I don't understand." Much like Paulo, even though math frustrated her, she still enjoyed learning about it. When I asked her why this was the case, she laughed and said, "I don't know. It's fun. I guess it is interesting to me." Even though Mara struggles, she enjoys the learning experience.

Personal accountability. Participants expressed that personal accountability, or the pressure to learn and succeed in the classroom, comes from them, rather than parents, teachers, or even peers. They have certain levels of expectation for themselves, and when they meet or exceed those expectations, they feel successful; when they feel they have failed to meet those expectations, they feel as though they have failed.

Lana said, "I want the satisfaction of knowing that I did my best." Then "I want to do good *personally*." Lana went on to say, "I feel like I could have worked harder and for some reason I didn't, instead I did something else, when I know that I could have personally been working harder." I asked her whose fault it is when she doesn't succeed in class. She said,

> I think it's completely my fault because I knew, I know that I could have, could have done more. I could have studied harder. I could have done my homework. It's not the teacher. She's doing all that she can to be able to teach us what we need to be learning and it's our fault if we're not paying attention and not doing our homework and not listening.

Paulo, an English-language learner, talked about feeling personally accountable yet acknowledged that he struggled with these expectations. School had challenges for him because he was not a native English speaker. I asked him whose desire is it to do well in school and he said,

> I guess it's mine, yeah cause sometimes I'm like o.k. from this point on I'm going to do my homework when I'm in class, and then when I get home, I don't want to do it, I just drop my backpack in my room and go do something else. When I come [to school] and [teachers] ask me for my homework and I don't have it, then I keep saying that I'm going to do my homework like when I get home, but I really don't. It's just hard I guess, 'cause I'm too lazy.

When Paulo spoke these words, particularly the last, his countenance changed, he dropped his shoulders and stared at the floor; when I asked Paulo why he felt this way, he said, "I'm just too lazy to do [homework], even at home—even when I do get it." I found this last comment interesting; even when Paulo understood the material enough to do it, he still struggled to complete the assignments at home, even though this caused him to feel upset with himself. There could be many reasons why Paulo was unable, or unwilling to complete the assignments at home, yet the only reason he gave was one of self-conviction; it was his own laziness. What elevates Paulo's comments here to being especially interesting is that Mara, the other participant from a foreign country said something very similar. Speaking of homework, she said, "I guess I would get rid of homework, but that is because I'm just lazy." Other participants discussed their dislike of homework, but no other participants self-convicted like these two here in this discussion of their love of learning.

Shad's comments on this subject revealed a high level of personal accountability. I asked him if he took the responsibility for learning on himself, and he replied, "Yes,

that's why I get so mad at myself." Later, when he was talking about why he fails to complete some assignments, he said, "It's like when you make the excuse like I'm too tired, so if you make that excuse then you know that you're not doing your best."

The participants were very hard on themselves when it came to what they expected of themselves. They have very high expectations for their achievement, and when they do not reach those expectations they feel as though they have failed.

Extrinsic Motivation

Participants identified tests and grades as extrinsic motivators to achieve in school. These motivators participants saw couched within the control of the teacher. How well they do on tests, as well as how good their grades are, motivate them to achieve.

Tests. The topic of testing came up in every interview I conducted. Participants talked about it in both positive and negative tones; they spoke of the frequency of testing, as well as what they believed is the purpose of testing. Some felt that it helped them to learn. Regardless of how they discussed it, testing was identified as a motivator for student achievement. Every participant brought up the topic of testing which suggests that testing is prominent and on participants' minds.

Shad had a rather interesting take on testing. He reported, "I like tests, if I know how to do them, but I think we have enough, we are tested every week." This frequency of testing was echoed by Lana. She said that she has tests "one every other week, or like if we get through the chapter faster then we'll like have one when it's over." I asked Lana if she felt this was enough and she responded with:

Well I think it's okay, but then I remember I'm in geometry now, and so I

remember in algebra we had one every Wednesday, and then the next week we'd have it on Friday, and then it swapped off, and so we were having one every week. I guess that wasn't that bad.

Robyn also responded about the frequency of testing. She said, "In math I think there's too many, but as a whole I think there's not enough." Jay's summative comments on the frequency of testing add to what the other participants said:

I have a lot of tests and quizzes. I have quizzes about once every week.... They make me a little nervous, but I think we maybe need even more tests because some things you never really learn until you get tested on them.

Mara was the first participant to actually bring up what she believed was the purpose of testing. She had the following to say about tests:

They actually help me; they help me review what I learn. I remember we were working on tessellations or something like that, and I thought it had to do with volume and all that stuff, and then we did the review test and like I tried to go through it and it explains a little bit and I was like, oh, "I get it now." I somehow made it through the test.

Paulo, who was the one participant who talked the least about testing, had only this to say about what he saw as the purpose of testing. "I've been taking end-of-level tests to see if we learned what [teachers] think we have learned." Robyn also talked about what she viewed as the purpose of testing. She said, "They show the teacher what the kids know, and what they need to work on."

Participants viewed testing as a way for teachers to measure what students have learned, as well as a way for students to gain a better understanding of what they have learned. However, when it came to the end of level testing or criterion referenced tests (CRTs) participants revealed that although they understood much about testing, the purpose of these specific tests was not as clearly explained to them, although they were

instructed that these tests are a part of NCLB. To further explore what these participants understood about these end-of-level tests and how they figured into schooling in the era of NCLB, I asked if any of them had heard of AYP, which is a requirement included in NCLB. While none of the participants had heard of the term AYP, many of them had heard from their teachers of NCLB, and although their understanding was limited, they had a rudimentary idea that it was connected with measured progress in certain areas.

Paulo said, "[NCLB] means you always have to keep up with everybody, if not, then you...stay back." Jay said, "I don't know what it means, maybe keeping everyone caught up." Robyn said, "It's like a program that makes sure that every child is...to learn certain things." I asked her what she meant, and she said, "It's testing where they make sure that you know everything that you need to know, so they know where to put you the next year." Mara said "It's some type of program I think, like the teachers...are to help each kid individually...and they need to have attention to learn certain stuff in certain areas." When asked how teachers are able to know if students know the material, each student returned with the simple answer "testing."

At the time of the interview, process participants were preparing to take CRTs in English, math, and science. These tests measure the level of competency on a given subject. I knew that participants had been prepped by their teachers for these tests, and I asked them about their CRTs. Their answers further illustrated participants' attitudes toward testing; that they are for teachers to gain insight into what the participants have learned as well as a vehicle to help students crystallize their learning.

When I asked Jay how his CRTs went, he said, "They were not bad. Math was

pretty hard though." I asked what he thought CRT stood for and he said, "I don't know."

When I followed up with what he thought they were for he said, "Just to see what you

know you've learned." Mara said, speaking of how her CRTs went, "I don't know, in

English I think I did pretty good. It wasn't that good, but I think it was okay. In Science I

think I did pretty good, but they never told me my score." When I asked what CRT stood

for, she said, "Um…something testing, I have no idea." Shad said "I have no idea what

CRT means." When I asked him how it went, he said, "Well, I don't know if it was the

teacher or not, but the whole class got under 20%." Paulo was the only participant to tell

me that he did not take CRTs, I asked him if he had been taking more tests than usual,

and he said, "Well, I have been taking the end of year tests to see if we learned what they

think we learned and if we got it." Clearly he had taken CRTs but had no idea that he

had.

Grades. Participants reported that one of the most powerful motivators for them

to achieve in school was grades. Interestingly though, grades were an end in themselves,

proof of good work. They were highly sought after, and bad grades caused problems.

Often a concern for grades trumped the importance of learning. Participants were quick to

explain that good grades were their ticket to future success because they needed those

grades to further their education.

Mara expressed the powerful hold that grades have over her when she said:

Oh, yeah, right now I have, I have all Bs and one A and one F and I am dying
because of that one F. I am about to kill myself, and it's in math [laugh]. Like,
I'm struggling so hard to get that F up. And it's hard but yeah, I worry a lot about
my grades. I can't, I just can't have below a C.

When I asked her why she could not get below a C, she continued to respond with

"I can't, I just can't." She did not add any other reason as to why the grades were important or even what they represented to her. The grade was an end in and of itself.

Shad talked about why grades motivate him when he said, "You get bad grades and you get stressed out. It just gets a lot harder." Later, when I asked what he looks forward to in school, he said, "Getting good grades, getting the satisfaction of knowing I did my best. I do my best when I get praised by others." Lana expressed how grades motivate her when she said, "I know that I have to get good grades and pay attention, and so it is kind of hard.... I can't goof off and...just like watch other students goof off. I have to be able to listen." Lana, however, did add one reason why grades were so important when she said, "It has to do with my family. My family wants me to be able to achieve and get good grades and stuff, so it's kind of like a requirement in my family to get good grades." Paulo also mentioned the interplay between grades and his family when he told of one of his experiences. He said,

> My parents expect a lot of me, and I'm like the only one who's going to graduate here, in the United States, so like I don't know. They just don't know anything about my grades, and that first 'F' I got, I was like, uh, that is for fabulous and they were like oh o.k. that's great. They didn't know until my sisters told them it meant failure and so I got in trouble.

What is so interesting is that every one of the participants viewed grades as the passport to a bright future. None of them allowed for the possibility that someone could get poor grades and still succeed or that that there was a possibility that someone with good grades could fail.

Robyn noted why she thinks that grades are important to a good future. She was telling me what she would say to anyone who was in charge of school, and she said,

I think I would tell them, I think that school is all right now, but that as things pile up, we begin to fall behind, and, as a result, we get bad grades because some people just can't keep up. So as a result they get bad grades and they don't end up with the future that they want.

Shad shared this sentiment. He said that he had seen what getting bad grades did to people. He said, "My sisters, they decided not to [get good grades] and now they are all drunk and have piercings." Although there were probably many factors playing into Shad's sisters' struggles, he viewed their failure to succeed as deriving directly from their poor grades.

This idea, that if they do not get the required grades, they will fail in life is a strong sentiment for these participants. Grades become an all-powerful end in themselves.

Participants reported that there are both extrinsic as well as intrinsic sources that motivate them in school. Although the participants came from different backgrounds and experiences, commonalities persist in their desire to learn, and in their sense of personal accountability. They also felt very similar in both their quest for good grades, and their feelings towards the testing environment in which they find themselves.

<center>Teaching Methods—What Teachers Do</center>

Participants spent a lot of time during the interviews talking about what teachers do in the classroom. Although not understanding all the pedagogical methods their teachers were using, participants had an innate sense of what worked, as well as what did not work, in the classroom. Data emerged in two categories: teacher interaction and what happens when students do not understand the material.

Teacher Interaction

One prominent theme was the importance that participants placed on teachers interacting with students in class. This interaction was seen as more than just classroom banter, but an instructional tool that successful teachers employed and to which students responded well. Participants enjoyed being in a class where there was interaction with the teacher.

Shad's words here are both introductory as well as summative to this topic. He was speaking about what he would tell teachers when he said "I would try to make it more interactive instead of like, 'Here is an assignment go and do it (book work)' because I think people learn better if they are interactive." Mara continued with this topic when she was talking about where she has seen a lack of teacher interaction; She said:

> I think it's watching videos because I like videos but in U.S. History those videos are the most unnecessary thing because we weren't taking notes and most people were asleep, they just use the video to sleep. I was like, "aren't we supposed to be learning something?"

When I asked why she was watching the video in class, she continued with "I guess they think that, or they expect that we should be paying attention and doing what we are supposed to do, and memorizing or something, I don't know." I then asked her what teachers could do to make video watching a more meaningful experience and she said,

> A lot of teachers put on a video, and just walk out of the classroom and leave the class there by itself. I think that maybe they should stay in the classroom and once in awhile stop the video, explain what exactly is going on, and let the students know that the purpose of the video is for them to learn something, and not just to waste time.

Participants reported feeling more engaged when teachers interacted with them.

Robyn said:

> Some teachers will walk us through the assignments and basically just let us know what's going on. Like they make sure that everyone is on the same page and make sure that everyone understands, and if they don't, then they go back and they make sure everyone understands it, and they work you through it until everyone understands what they're doing; I basically like the pace that they go at.

Robyn summarized her feelings when she was talking about what she liked about school. She said, "I like when the teachers will walk us through the assignments and let us know what's going on."

When the students and the teachers come together and interact in an environment of learning, students report enjoyment and a positive learning experience. Often though, this interaction is lacking and students struggle. This was discussed by the participants as happening in classes when they didn't understand the material.

When They Don't Understand

Another theme that emerged from the data was the conundrum that participants faced when they did not understand something in class. Participants felt frustrated when they did not understand something, and they shared reasons why they did not understand. They discussed what they do when they do not understand something in class. I assumed that most often the participants would turn to the teacher when they did not understand but, as the participants disclosed, the teacher is not often the first choice.

Paulo expressed why he gets confused in class when he said, "I don't know, maybe the way they teach I guess, because sometime it's kind of confusing because like they're talking about something and then they go to something totally on the other side of the world." I asked if he goes to the teacher when this happens, and he responded with

this interesting statement,

> No, not really, I mean I ask them, sometimes they get mad 'cause they say, "does somebody understand?" And they all say yes and then you're like the only one that doesn't say it, and you're like, "okay yeah, I guess." So when you ask them, they're like, "Oh I told you like a couple of times." So they like kind of tell you, but they confuse me more because they're telling it fast, and they're kind of mad because you're supposed to know it already.

I asked him if his teachers check to see if he understands the work in class, and he said,

> Yeah, like once a week, to see if you really do got it. If they see that you didn't get it, they come to you and tell you got it or something and then you say no, then you have to come in either after school or before school so they can help you, 'cause in between class it's because you're taking their time to teach the class to the kids that they got.

I asked Paulo to elaborate on how teachers know if the students "got it," understood the material. He said,

> Well they know that when you turn in your homework and what grade you got on your homework, and like once a week we have tests to see if you really do got it.

Here again is a theme that emerged throughout the interview process, participants discussing how testing is so interwoven into their educational world. Participants could not overemphasize the importance teachers placed on testing; in this instance it is the test that participants believe teachers use to gauge student progress.

Mara's perspective was similar to Paulo's. She said,

> Well I usually like try to like think and think and think a lot, and then I just give up. And then I end up asking my friends, but then I won't go to the teacher unless like, like it's the last thing I do because I don't want to feel stupid or dumb.

When I asked her why she would feel dumb, she said "'Cause everybody else gets it, I don't know it's, it's maybe it's like the easiest subject in the world, and I'm like struggling with it, so I don't know feel, I feel kind of weird." In a follow-up contact with

Mara, I asked her what teachers do that make her feel weird, or dumb in class. She said,

> Well in many cases teachers ask questions, and the whole class is completely silent and no one wants to answer because they are embarrassed they'll get it wrong or something, and so someone ends up answering and they might get it wrong and the teacher just gives them this look like, you should just not have said anything.

I asked Robyn if she has ever felt like the teacher made her feel dumb, and she said that sometimes teachers "roll their eyes, laugh at our answers, kinda make fun of us as if we have a blond moment." This experience has often led Robyn to keep from answering questions in class. She continued to explain that she knows other students do not participate in class "because they don't want to be humiliated or embarrassed and even sometimes the teachers seem too busy to help." This last comment was interesting because it reifies the issue mentioned earlier about the speed of the class that participants discussed. I asked Lana why she felt that teachers are this way, and she thinks that teachers do not help the students because "I think it is that [teachers] want us to get through the [material] where we are at and then take the test...so we can get through the chapter faster."

Here again is the idea that speed is viewed by participants as a motivating factor for the lack of teacher involvement. I asked Mara why teachers move so quickly through the material, and she said,

> I think that sometimes the teachers worry that they won't be able to get through all the material in time before the term or the semester ends, so they rush through the lessons, and sometimes give out tests too early because they want to make sure they get through everything in time.

When I followed up by asking if she felt this speed was directly tied to testing, she said, "Yes, because they want to be able to put in all the scores before the term ends, so they

rush through things."

Mara came back to the topic of not understanding later on. She added, "Other times the teachers just make you feel like they expect a lot more from the student than what the student can give them, so [students] feel dumb and don't want to participate." Mara mentions that students do not want to embarrass themselves in front of the teacher, but, as she said later, peer embarrassment also hampers their comments. When I talked to Mara about why students will not tell teachers that they do not understand something, she said, "I think the main reason is because they are scared to embarrass themselves in front of the whole class. They feel dumb or stupid."

Mara has good reason to feel confused in school. She explained it this way:

It is kind of difficult for me. Mainly because well in Argentina the things that we learn like when I came here division is totally different we divide from down up and so I get confused sometimes there or what happens I'm like say with my sisters we, they ask maybe they ask us to demonstrate 2 plus 2 and we end up doing a whole different thing about multiplication 'cause we think too much into it that's how my, our, parents raised us to think too much into it, but I'm like the dumb one of the family so I always get stressed out by that stuff but it's kind of difficult yeah.

This confusion of Mara's has led to an upsetting conclusion. She said,

Math, it's always been my favorite subject, but I always get like stressed out about it 'cause, I found so much interest in it, but at the same time I get frustrated because things I don't understand, so I guess that's my worst subject.

Much like Mara, Jay also turns to friends to help him when he gets stuck. He said, speaking of where he finds help when he does not understand the material, "In class where there [a friend] who will help you if you get stuck."

Robyn also has had times when she has not understood something in class and felt turned away by the teacher. She said,

> I think that some teachers, if you don't get something right then [teachers] become frustrated with you then you have this feeling that you need to get this done, and you and you get too stressed out, and you can't do it. And you need a break, but you can't have that break because you have so much that you need to do.

I asked the participants what the teacher could do to counter how uncomfortable students feel when they do not understand, and Mara summed up everyone's responses with "I think [teachers] could maybe talk to each student individually and see where they are struggling and in what areas they could use more help. Also they [teachers] could review over what they taught the next day or throughout the week."

Mara is asking for more one-on-one teacher involvement as well as more review by the teacher as part of class. This desire for more review by Mara was not a new topic. Paulo also mentioned that his teachers covered too much material too quickly. Paulo said, speaking of his teachers,

> They have to teach, they do it fast and they can't stay where they are [in the curriculum] and they can't get behind on what they are supposed to teach, because, as they tell us all the time, "Hey guys you have to learn this fast because if you don't, you're going to be behind."

This comment is very reminiscent of the comment of Lana from earlier on when she said that the reason for this speed is so "We can get through the chapter where we are at and then take the test."

Robyn said that if teachers will simply "earn their trust, do it in a fun way like something we would love to do instead of doing so much paper work."

Truly what the teacher does or does not do in class is noticed by the students. They know what works and enjoy interacting with the teacher in a learning environment. When this interaction is lacking it becomes a great stumbling block to students when they

don't understand the material. The teachers' important impact cannot be overstated.

Participants have a keen sense of what they like as well as what they don't like about the way that teachers teach. Participants report that they enjoy interaction with teachers; they want to be part of the discussion and be involved in the class. When they don't understand what is happening in class this interaction does not take place. Participants struggle with their teachers and the learning environment.

Learning Strategies—What Students Do

Throughout the interview process, it became apparent that participants knew and understood that they have a role in their education and some responsibility to learn. They discussed what they are asked to do by their teachers both inside as well as outside of class.

Participants had strong feelings about their responsibilities, discussing them with regard to bookwork—when they work from a textbook or worksheet in class; and homework—when they work from a textbook or worksheet at home. Participants also discussed how they get out of doing what they are expected to do, procrastination.

Bookwork

In contrast to teacher interaction, which participants reported as a positive teaching method when it took place, many participants were eager to express their feelings about a particular activity, when there is little or no teacher interaction. They referred to this most commonly as bookwork. Bookwork takes on two distinct forms, when it happens in class it is called bookwork, when it is assigned to be taken home it is

homework, both of which participants disliked.

When asked to define bookwork Shad said,

No interaction, no nothing just like here is the assignment go ahead and do it, I don't like that kind of work, I learn better through interaction, through like if you have to memorize something and we do it to a song or something or find some weird way to remember it.

He continued with:

Bookwork is not fun, it is basically not the teacher teaching you anything, the book teaches you and the teacher just assigns you an assignment and you just do it, there is no teaching involved, there is no interaction at all. It is just the most useless way of learning."

Paulo added:

[Teachers] give worksheets, like sometimes they don't even teach us that and they give us worksheets, and I don't really even know what to do, and I don't know I guess the way they do it, the way they teach, and all that.

When I asked Paulo why he thought that teachers assigned bookwork he said:

So they can teach it fast and they can go...where they are supposed to be so they don't stay behind on what they are supposed to teach because they tell us that all the time, 'cause like in math especially in math our teacher tells us our class, "Hey, you guys have to learn this fast because if you don't you're going to be behind," so he gives us a lot of worksheets, and then if we don't get it, he gives us more worksheets until we get it, and then he, he puts another thing on. It's even harder so he expects us to do it faster so it's like okay, I don't know how to do it anyways.

Lana came out with a different attitude about bookwork. She was asked to define

bookwork, and she said, "Like a book that has certain questions and you are assigned

certain questions and you do those." I then asked if this is good or bad and she responded

with,

I think it's okay 'cause, the book knows what you are supposed to be learning, so if you're learning stuff out of the book, then obviously you are learning what you should be learning.

This trust of the book, and even reliance on it, are similar to Mara's views on bookwork. She said, "It [the book] usually shows examples of how to do it and it is easier."

When I asked Robyn about how she felt about bookwork's effectiveness, she said,

> In some ways, it is effective. Sometimes you just kind of skim through and find the words that you need, and you don't really read it. I've done that, um, sometimes it is that you actually have to read it. I guess it depends on the assignment.

When teachers send bookwork home, it becomes homework and participants felt very strongly about homework.

Homework

Participants had a lot to say about homework. Most of their comments revolved around the issues of the amount of homework they are given, the assumed purposes behind it, and the impact that homework has upon their lives.

Robyn defined homework as, "That means that they send a book home with us and we have to copy things out of it, or we have to answer questions from that book." I asked how she felt about it and she said, "I don't think it's very effective." When I asked her how it was not effective, she said,

> I think it is the assignments that they make us do on a piece of paper, like when they send us home with worksheets, and they make us do them over and over again, and then we get a whole new thing...then we can't remember what we did before because we have this new thing, they're kind of useless because at home your focusing on a whole different subject, and then the next day you are on something completely different and you get lost sort of.

Participants also discussed the amount of homework that they have and how that impacts their life.

In speaking about the amount of homework he had Shad said, "I have like four hours of homework every night. The teachers just give out a lot of homework, and I can't understand it." He then mentioned, "When I get home after school I go the high school to work out. I like am really tired, and I don't want to do homework, but I'm like oh, I've got to do it."

Paulo said that his homework takes him "like two or three hours a night, but for him it is especially difficult. He said, "For me it's like kind of harder because to translate everything, and then I kind of figure it out myself." When I asked him if there was too much homework, he made this interesting point:

> I don't really care how much homework it is, as long as I know I can do it, 'cause if I can't do it, I don't do it, no matter how hard I try, I can't do it. I just won't do it, and I won't turn it in or anything.

Jay was the one anomaly when it came the amount of homework he said he had every night. He said, "I have about a half hour a night, sometimes more and sometimes less, but it averages at about a half an hour." It is important to note that Jay is a high achieving student and often finishes his homework in class.

Lana, who is also a high achieving student, said in speaking about the amount of homework that she has, "Probably an hour to an hour and a half. Most of its really not that hard, so like you can still get it done and not be overwhelmed by it. I have probably just the right amount." Lana added that she felt there was purpose to homework when she said, "Doing your homework can also be a form of studying. It can help you out because then you're like learning."

Mara said in speaking about homework, "Yeah, like every day we have

homework. Mainly in math. English I don't have homework at all and science sometimes we do, like two hours maybe, and I spend maybe an hour or hour and a half." When I asked her how she decides what homework to do, she said, "If I'm in the mood for doing homework, I'll do it all, and then no then I probably just practice my clarinet but, 'cause it's the easiest thing to do, that's it."

Robyn also talked about homework. She expressed that sometimes she feels that too much is assigned for students to do at home. When I asked her what she would change about school overall, she responded,

> I think I would change how many times a day a teacher assigns something because of the piling up thing like if like every teacher assigns like a little thing, that will slowly help us work up to do it because if they just give it all in one big package, it is really, really hard to get through.

She continued:

> Certain teachers, some teachers won't really give out that much homework but we learn everything in class, and I think I learn best in those classes. Because it's hands on, everyone's really in to it, but, if it's at home assignments, I get really confused.

I then asked how much time she is spending doing homework, and she said, "Um, I get home about 3, and so I normally spend until about 6:30." She then said how this much homework affects her life "like if the teacher assigns a really big assignment on Tuesday then, I'll be fine, but if it is on a Wednesday, then I can't go to other activities that I would like to."

I asked Robyn why she felt that teachers assigned so much homework to their students and she replied, "So that [students] understand the material [teachers] do in class and [students] can prepare for the next lesson."

Robyn returned to the subject of homework at the end of the first interview when I asked her if she could change anything about school what she would change. She responded with, "Oh, Um, I think I would change the like make the classes a little longer, like make sure that every single student knows [the material]. And so we don't have so much stuff when we go home." When I asked if she would go to school for a longer time in the day to make this happen, she said "Yes, yes, Yeah, because I have stuff I have to do at home, and my mom gets mad at me if I don't do my chores, so I have to do my homework and so."

Participants also discussed what happens when they do not want to do what has been assigned for them to do. They procrastinate.

Procrastination

Participants reported that often they procrastinate work assigned to them in school that they know they need to complete, and that this procrastination often leads to increased stress and difficulty. Participants reported that laziness, feelings of being overwhelmed, and other interests outside of school lead most often to procrastination. Shad defined procrastination by saying,

> It's like when you make an excuse. If you have to do homework, but you make the excuse like I'm too tired. So if you make that excuse, you know that you're not doing your best; you get stressed out; it just gets a lot harder . . . I put off something, and it's like, well that's just adding on to something else, and it's just getting bigger and bigger, and finally it's just getting so stressful that you have all of that, when it could have been alleviated if you had just done that one thing.

When I asked why and when this happens, he said, "It's my own fault leading to all this stress, usually if it's like a big project thing that's due in a couple of months, that's

usually when it happens." Shad's sentiment that it was his own fault was not his alone; many participants recognized that they were responsible for their procrastination and resulting stress.

Jay said that he procrastinates "when I like delay assignments or something I have to stay up late to get it done.... I have to stay up because I procrastinated."

Paulo also took ownership of his procrastination when he said, speaking about whose fault it is when he struggles in school:

> I guess it's mine, yeah, 'cause sometimes I'm like okay from this point on I'm going to do my homework when I'm in class and then when I get home I don't want to do it. I just drop my backpack in my room and go do something else when I come here, and they ask me for my homework, and I don't have it. Then I keep on saying that I'm going to do my homework like when I get home, but I really don't. It's just hard I guess.... I'm too lazy. When I do get it, I'm just too lazy to do it at home.

Lana offered one reason why she procrastinates. She said,

> If it's like a stupid assignment, no not stupid, it's never stupid, but if it's like really like an assignment that I could get done in like five minutes, it's like ugh I'll just do it later, and I'll just go play soccer instead or something. So if it's like something like that's really easy and I know I can get it done like sometime else or whatever, I'll just like pass it off, just push it off, to the side and come back to it later when I'm done doing what I want.

Robyn gave another possible reason for procrastination. She mentioned having so much work to do outside of class that she has to make difficult choices as to what to put off.

> I think it's the fact that everything piles up, like if you have something due tomorrow, then you have to get that done, and then you have all these other things to do, but you have to put those off in order to get that one thing done that needs to be done now. If you're trying to catch up on everything then it's harder to do things that you want. And so it's kind of a hard balance. You have to decide whether you are going to procrastinate, blow things off, or if you have to do the things that you want to do. So basically you just have to choose what you want to

do because yeah what's more important to you otherwise you won't have time to do the other things.

Participants know that they have a role in their learning, yet when it came to doing work that they felt was not very efficacious, they struggled and often procrastinated.

Connecting School and Life

The fourth theme that emerged from the data was how participants connected school as preparation for their future lives. What made this so interesting is that participants all reported valuing certain knowledge learned in school over other knowledge learned in school. This hierarchy of knowledge was the same for all participants interviewed. Participants also reported what goals they have for the future. What was interesting is that when those goals did not correlate to what was viewed by participants as the most important subjects in school, participants continued to validate the necessity of those core subjects.

Hierarchy of Learning

Every participant felt that certain subjects were of more importance that other subjects. What made this interesting is that every participant said the same thing, that Math, Science, and English are the most important subjects. Shad said,

> Math, science, like all my required classes, rather than my elective classes, are more important, like English, Math, Science.... Because they are the big kahunas, ...because like we are required to do them every year. Like, it wouldn't be there if we didn't have to do it. Like we can choose all our other classes, but we have to do those classes, and if we don't do those classes then.... They are the classes that have a lot of impact, like all of them. Like any career, you are going to need math,

English, science, all of them. Definitely need English.

Shad's comments were interesting because of the justifications he gave for these classes being so important, that they were required. When I asked him what that meant, he responded,

> A required class is a class you need; you have to have throughout all your years, like you know you can take electives and stuff,...so you can build up a career choice of what you want.

When I asked Robyn if some classes were more important that others, she responded with, "The basic ones, Science, Math, English, those that are required." I then asked why they are so important and she said, "Because those are the ones that are actually going to count when you get to college." I was curious at this point and asked her how she knows that these classes are the ones that she needed for college. She responded, "I've been told that my whole life.... I don't [know], I just know that I am supposed to know it." I found it interesting that she said that she really did not know the reason; it was just what she had been told. I asked her what would happen if she did not take these required classes, and she said,

> You would probably have a harder time, like if you were going to go into business or something like that, you would probably have a harder time, because for some things you need to know how to count and do math and, um, you are like writing a report to get into college or a job application, you need to know how to write.

I then asked her if there are classes that are not necessary, "I guess your electives I guess, like the classes you want to take, like gym I guess." I then asked her why electives were not necessary, and she said, "Because it is something that you choose to do during school to help you with your future career and stuff." This response surprised me because when she was talking about the required classes she mentioned that the only

reason, besides that they are required, that she needs to take those classes is because they

will help with a future career, yet this same justification was also used for electives. She

viewed all classes as helpful for her future.

When considering why some classes are required, and the overall purpose of

school, Jay said,

> Some of the classes don't really matter.... Some electives aren't going to help me
> later on in life, and stuff, it might be something you are interested in, but it won't
> help you get a job. I just think that the main purpose of school is to help you get
> an education and to be able to get a job. Not just to learn, some stuff is useless.... I
> guess they are things we are supposed to know, I guess it is to help us somehow
> but I don't know...I don't know really how knowing how old a rock is will help
> me. I don't know how that is going to help me.... I would get rid of Math because
> I am in Math right now, and I will never use it in life, you just never use it.

I then asked why he is supposed to take classes like Math, English, and Science, he

responded with "Because of college...English is important because to be able to learn

how to write...you can't write or read without it, you won't accomplish much." Much like

Robyn, Jay realized that the core subject classes he was taking had some purpose but was

not able to really say why.

Lana's comments explain why she felt Math, English, and Science were so

important. She said,

> Those [are] like required classes that we have to take, 'cause of colleges and stuff
> like [teachers] always tell us that you have to take these classes and get this many
> credits to get into college, so that's why I have just always figured.

I asked if there are other classes that should be as important as these three and she said,

> There probably is like yeah if it depends on like what career. Like, for me I want
> to be a lawyer, and so like I know that in high school I'm taking like business law,
> and like I think those classes are really important, because like they say, you use
> math all the time, but like what's math really going to help that much with, well if
> I don't know like the laws of like being a lawyer, so those classes for me would

be important. I guess it just depends on like what you're wanting to be when you get older.

Here again, like Jay and Shad, Lana connected school with her future career plans, even if that meant that some classes that were not the required classes were more important. Lana spoke more about how she wished that more classes were offered besides the required classes. She said,

> I would like more classes, like a different variety of classes. I was talking to my friend, and in her junior high she has a bunch of classes that we don't have at our school. And so I'm like that's weird. She has a child development class that I know we don't have at ours. You have to wait until high school to take that and so maybe like adding like more broad area or like more different classes, not just like the basics, 'cause we, 'cause we really do like just have the basics and then like ceramics, art. Like, we don't really have like big broad classes.

When I asked her why she thought this was the case, she said,

> Maybe just to get us prepared for what's coming towards us and what we're going to be looking at in the future and like the classes we are going to need to take and stuff like that. 'Cause, for the most part they are what you will be using the most of. Like English, you are going to be reading, like most things you are going to do when you get older or anything with math. They say that you use math a lot. It would be smart to take those classes, classes, that are going to like help you do what you want to do, and stuff like that. I guess like the classes that are going to help me go on in life, and do like get a good job and be successful.

Paulo also talked about the importance of school as a vehicle for a future career when he said,

> It really depends on what career you're going to take. I mean they all need math, and stuff you know, but like I think math is probably the one you need the most out of all of them, 'cause, you're always going to need math, no matter where you're working, 'cause like I want to be an auto mechanic, and you need math like a lot of math, and I like totally don't like math, and I'm really bad at math, but like I mean it depends on you on how hard you try.

I then asked him if there were classes that he did not need, and he said,

> I guess history. I don't think we need that because we don't really use it. I mean I

don't think we really use it. I mean I'm not going to use it in auto mechanics I think, I mean that kind of stuff.

The merit of a class in Paulo's mind was based on utility. Because he could see no use for history, it had no value, whereas math, even though he struggled with it, had greater utility. I was curious where this sense of utility for some classes and not others come from. I asked him more about why some classes were more important than others,

Because I think that they are the most important that there is, like English you need to know how to speak and write it right, and then science you can learn more about the world and stuff around you, and then math you're always going to use math no matter what like in your job to add and stuff.

He returned to what had been echoed by previous participants, that education was not an end in and of itself but a means to a good job and future. He continued,

Yeah, well you can use that a lot even when you're writing letters to your boss or someone or stuff like that. You're always going to need it so you can like write a letter right, you know, and then you know how to do everything right and how to say stuff, and then the right way to say it. I guess you can need it a lot...and I guess like math, because like in most every job, you're going to use math.

I also asked Mara for her opinions about what classes are the most important and why she felt that they were so important. She said, "I think they are like extra important, something like that." When I asked her what was important, she said "English, math and science." With her saying this, every participant without exception listed these three classes as the only required classes, even though other required classes exist, such as Health, History, and Physical Education. When I asked her why they were important, she said,

Because of credits, because I want to graduate and go to college, and in order to be accepted or something you have to have good grades, and you have to like I guess you like have to pay extra attention in certain subjects.

I then talked with Lana about what would happen if she failed a required class as opposed to an elective class. She said,

> I would have to take them over because they're that important, and like if I failed ceramics, it'd be a big deal to me 'cause like failing's bad, and I guess it wouldn't be like as bad because it's not required, but like if I fail math, and I'd knew that I'd have to take that over because that is like a big deal, it's like a required class that I have to be able to take and pass it, and then I don't get my credit, and if I don't get my credit for that class, then I'm down a credit.

After this comment, she continued to elaborate and, like all the other participants, connected her schooling with her later life.

> Well like English, because well we like live in America and you have to know how to speak English and use proper grammar and stuff. Math, every job requires to know some kind of math and science.

Like Lana before her, Mara mentioned that there were other classes that should be as important as the required classes because they were important to the student's future career goals. She said, speaking of elective classes, "Like art classes I guess, I think they should be necessary because that's like, whenever you choose those classes, it's because it something that you want to be when you're older, and so."

Somewhere within these participants' scholastic experience, they have learned that some education or knowledge is of more value than other knowledge. Although participants could not elucidate on where they had learned this, the fact that all of them reported the same thing implies that a similar education has taken place.

Goal for Life

I asked participants what the purpose of education was and what would happen if they did not succeed in their educational pursuits. They anticipated a very grim future if

they did not do well in school. They also discussed their goals for life and whether or not

the education they were receiving was helping them to reach these goals.

Shad talked about what would happen if he did not graduate from school. He said,

"I know if I don't, if I can't pass graduation, then I'll flip burgers the rest of my life, and

it won't be very good." Mara shared very similar sentiments as she discussed what would

happen if she did not graduate. She said,

> I would be a failure. I don't know, live on the streets probably. Well, I know my
> parents wouldn't kick me out of the house, but I know I wouldn't go far at all,
> probably, wouldn't even be able to work at McDonalds or anything.

In a subsequent interview with Mara, I asked her what is it about getting an education

that is so important and she responded with an interesting analogy. She said,

> Getting an education trains people with skills that a person who did not go to
> college would not have. Having these skills makes them a more valuable person.
> They will be able to get a better job than in fast food because of those skills. Also,
> studying for years in college gives a person more responsibility. Someone who
> went to college and studied without the immediate gratification of money...works
> harder and has shown they can be trusted.

> Take Batman, for example. Through his years of training, he has acquired all the
> skills necessary to bring real change to the world. Without him, Gotham would
> be a wreck in shambles. We all owe a lot to the higher education of Bruce Wayne.

> The point she made was valid. She believed that going to college would give a

person skills that simply the act of studying in college is going to enhance those skills.

Both of these participants expressed concern over what would happen if they

didn't succeed in school. Although people do succeed without formal education, these

participants do not believe they would be able to do that. I asked Robyn what would

happen if she did not succeed in school and she said. "I don't know. That's what scares

me."

Although the participants felt that graduation from school was essential to their future success, they did not necessarily feel that what they were studying in school was going to prepare them for their future career plans. Jay was very succinct when he was talking about his future plans of becoming a doctor. I asked if school was preparing him for that. He said, "I don't think it helps me that much."

Although he was unable to explain why he felt this way, another participant, Lana added to this discussion. Asked if the classes she is taking are going to help her in her future career, and she said,

> No, not necessarily, like for me in high school, I am taking business law classes, and those aren't required at all, but they are the classes that I want to take, because those ones will be more important for me and what I want to do.

Mara also discussed her future career plans when she said what she wanted to study, "Psychology I guess, I want to, I want to deal a lot with kids especially or teenagers." I then asked if she felt what she was studying in school was preparing her for that and she said, "Probably, not, maybe my English class to be able to communicate better certain things, but no."

Even Robyn, who was one of the two most complimentary of how the education she was receiving is helping her to reach her goals, was critical of what she was learning. When talking about her future plans, Robyn said,

> Personally what I've always wanted to do, I want to be a mom, because being a mom's everything. She's a teacher; she's a nurse; she's a cook, basically everything, but if I had to chose a career, it would like an editor or music teacher or something like that.

Continuing on she said,

> Well, with what I personally want to do [what I am learning in school] probably

could [help] because I could help my kids with what they need to do. But with the, if I had to pick a certain specific career, um, in music you really need to know math, so that is the only reason, like if I have to do fractions or something like that with the notes. I've never had any lessons in music, so I had to teach myself, and so, that so like, that, I forgot where I was. Um, I guess it kind of could like say you wanted to become an accountant or something like that. Then you would have to know Math, but if like you not, then there's no point in knowing that.

I then asked her if she would change the classes she was taking to help her further her

career goals, and she said,

Yes, um, I think I would change math but keep it on a more basic level, instead of like geometry and really hard stuff. Yeah just keep it like that. I would have more music classes like voice lesson classes. And for becoming an editor there would be like book writing classes.

When I asked Robyn why she felt that some classes are required and some are

not, she said, "Because in the required classes you learn things that you need to know for

college or for jobs. I guess they just want you to have some kind of knowledge if you do

not go to college. In the classes not required, you can learn what you want so you can do

what you want in the future."

Paulo was the most positive about his education and how it is going to help him in

his future. He was not born in America and spent many years in a foreign country. Even

though he was the one participant who supported what he was learning in school, he was

the one who struggled most in school. He had this to say:

I mean I like school 'cause like, especially like for let's say, Central American people. Like, here we have a lot of opportunities we can take, and like I look in school and like not all of us take the same opportunities. We like have a lot. In our country we don't really have any. We have to like pay for school and every month, it's like a lot money. We like the schools I used to because I was in private schools, and then you don't really get a lot of opportunities you get here. I mean here, just, I mean you don't have to pay for school like the only thing you have to do is study, and then you'll get grades and a great career, You know it's like really easy, I mean, it's, you, it's your choice to do it or not.

I asked him if he wanted to continue with his schooling and he said,

> I actually do, like right after, like uh high school I'm going to follow in my brothers steps, and I'm going to go to BYU, then graduate, then find careers, something that I like to do.

I asked him how his schooling is going to help him reach his goals, and he said,

> It's helping me a lot, especially with the English, being like a second language. So since I'm here like most of the day, I practice my English so it's getting better, so later on in the future I'm going to speak more. Like, my parents, they don't speak English at all. I mean, they say, "I don't want to see you working like us in restaurants or something, when you can speak English." So they say that. I mean I look at it this way, I speak English. I can get a better career than what they can, and so they can be proud of me. Then, knowing that when we were in the other country, they paid for something that was going to help me for my life. The teachers, I guess, like they're just, I don't know especially right now in ninth grade, they push you a lot for everything. They say if you don't graduate you're not going to get credit. Then you won't get a high school diploma, and then like it's different. Like, the old teachers are telling you why do you have to do it. I mean you always have to do it. It's your choice, but they're just telling you have to do it to get the credits to go to high school, so it's like I just don't like them to be pushy that much.

Participants valued certain types of knowledge over other types of knowledge. They all mentioned that the classes of most worth were math, English, and science; yet, almost all of the participants talked about how this knowledge, which is so emphasized, is not preparing them for what they would like to do.

Summary of Findings

In general, the experiences of participants in this study lead to the following perceptions: (a) teachers were in a hurry to cover the material; (b) English, math, and science were deemed the most important subjects—they are the NCLB subjects; (c) the purpose of school was to prepare students for life; (d) learning was important and was

best fostered when teachers engaged the students in the learning process; and (e) testing

was a method for teachers to assess the progress and placement of students.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore how middle school students were experiencing school during the era of NCLB. There have been studies that have examined many different facets of NCLB, but little to no research concerning how students are experiencing school in the era of NCLB (Harriman, 2005). Within some existing studies, researchers often asked teachers or other non-student participants to provide opinions about how they felt students were experiencing school, but students were not directly queried. This secondary and even tertiary accounting of how students are feeling in school leaves a large gap in the literature (Mulvenon et al., 2005).

This study provided some insight into how middle school students were experiencing school in the era of NCLB via two interviews with each of six participants and follow up e-mail communications to further explore emergent themes. The six participants were all ninth grade students at Galaxy Junior High School (pseudonym). Each interview lasted approximately thirty to forty-five minutes. I found the participants willing to participate in this study and almost eager to share what their experiences have been in school. Following is a discussion comparing and contrasting what others have said about their experiences in the era of NCLB, and that of the participants in this study. This discussion is framed by four major themes that emerged from the study: motivation in school, teaching methods, learning strategies and connecting school and life.

Motivation in School

The participants in this study spent time discussing what motivates them in school. They discussed their motivation relative to academic endeavors. Data analysis revealed two subcategories, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Participants reported being intrinsically motivated by both a love of learning and personal accountability. Extrinsic motivators including tests and grades were also identified.

One of the purposes of NCLB is to increase the accountability of schools and teachers measured by testing (Pederson, 2004; Rose, 2004). Klein and colleagues (2006) discussed how teachers are concerned that students were being adversely affected by all of the testing mandates of NCLB. Teachers in that study reported that students might have lower self-esteem, fear testing, and that testing might create a general feeling of hopelessness. In contrast to this conjecture by teachers in the Klein et al. study, participants in the present study had a different perspective related to testing. As they talked about testing, no one expressed lower self esteem, or fear, or hopelessness derived from testing, quite the opposite. Mara summarized well the feelings of the other participants when she said "They actually help me; they help me review what I learn." Students were not concerned with taking tests; they expect tests and even have some understanding of their purpose. Robyn said, "[Tests] show the teacher what the kids know, and what they need to work on." This too is in contrast to what the literature has reported. Mulvenon and colleagues (2005) studied how the testing mandates of NCLB are affecting students, teachers, and parents. They reported that students were fearful of testing because they did not know the purpose of the testing. Although the participants in

this study might not know all of the implications and ramifications of testing, they did have an understanding that testing allowed their teachers to assess students' educational progression. While this study demonstrates a level of participant understanding concerning tests, it is unclear if they think about "tests" in the way "tests" are discussed in the literature (e.g., Mulvenon et al.). It is possible that participants in this study are were not concerned about testing because they did not differentiate between end of level tests and teacher created tests. Teachers could build on this perspective by explaining the purpose of various tests to students and encouraging them to perform well on tests.

Teaching Methods

Participants spent a lot of time during the interviews talking about what teachers do in the classroom. Although not understanding all the pedagogical methods their teachers were using, they had an innate sense of what worked as well as what did not work in the classroom. Data emerged in two categories: teacher interaction and what happens when students do not understand the material.

One of the concerns that other relevant groups have raised is that because of the mandates of NCLB teachers felt compelled to get through the material quickly, and that this quick pace was brought on by a need cover the material on the test (Valli & Buesse, 2007). In the study by Dever and Carlston (in press), teachers reported that they felt a lack of autonomy relative to curriculum development, and that they felt like they were teaching to the test.

Findings from Dever and Carlston (in press) and Vallie and Buesse (2007)

revealed teachers' concerns that they felt increasingly regulated through a myriad of assessments, even to the point that they felt that they were no longer in control of what they were to teach.

In support of these concerns raised by teachers and other relevant groups, the participants in this study believed that teachers kept such a swift educational pace to indeed cover the material on the test. Lana expressed why she felt that teachers move at such a fast pace. She said, "[Teachers teach fast so] we can get through the chapter where we are at and then take the test." Here again it is possible that participants in this study define test differently than teachers (see for example, Cimbricz, 2002).

Participants noted that teachers "want us to get through the [material] faster." They also noted, "Sometimes the teachers worry that they won't be able to get through all the material in time before the term or the semester ends." Participants felt that teachers were driven to avoid getting "behind what they were supposed to teach," and if the teacher was behind then "[the students are] going to be behind."

This study offers credence to the concerns and conclusions of teachers involving classroom pacing and teaching to the test. Students are sharing in the anxiety teachers are feeling by the mandates of NCLB. Although the participants in this study demonstrated no knowledge of those mandates, they are feeling the repercussions. Teachers and administrators could develop strategies to better pace their instruction, which could mitigate some of the concerns of the students. Teachers could also use the understanding that participants reported in this study to aid them in discussing with the students the purposes of classroom pacing, and find ways to help students keep up with the class.

Learning Strategies

Participants in this study knew and understood that they have a role in their education, some responsibility to learn. They discussed what they are asked to do by their teachers both inside as well as outside of class.

Dever and Carlston (in press) and Valli and Buesse (2007) found that teachers perceive a decline in instructional quality and feel they are no longer in control of what they were to teach. Teachers are spending a great deal of time discussing test preparation and test taking strategies. Dever and Carlston reported further that teachers were concerned that they were unable to focus on authentic assessment techniques such as written projects and reports because they felt compelled to prepare their students for the standardized tests required by NCLB legislation.

Participants in the present study speak to some of the same concerns. They felt teachers were so consumed with preparing students for tests that teachers had little time for one-on-one interaction with students. They commented not only on how learning was important but that it was fostered when teachers engaged students in the learning process. Shad said, "What I like about school is, well, the learning part. I like to learn, you know, learn new things, learn new skills."

However, when asked what hindered his learning, he said, "[When there is] no interaction, no nothing just like here is the assignment go ahead and do it."

Participants felt as though their learning was hindered when teachers spent too much time preparing them for tests and not in individualized instruction. Paulo said, "[Teachers] sometimes don't even teach us.... They give us worksheets, and I don't really

even know what to do." When I asked why they give so many worksheets, he said, "So they can teach it fast, and they can go...where they are supposed to be, so they don't stay behind on what they are supposed to teach." These worksheets might have kept the teacher on pace, but participants did not appreciate the trade off. Teachers might be able to employ different methods of instruction to better assist students, but time continued to be a concern that both students and teachers were feeling.

<div align="center">Connecting School and Life</div>

Participants perceived school as preparation for their future lives. What made this so interesting was that participants reported valuing certain knowledge learned in school over other knowledge learned in school. This hierarchy of knowledge was the same for all participants, English, math, and science. They also shared goals they have for the future, such as careers in Law, Medicine, and Homemaking. When those goals did not correlate to what was viewed by participants as the most important subjects in school, they continued to validate the necessity of those core subjects.

The expectation of the NCLB legislation is that each student will perform at grade level in the core subjects, Math, English, and Science. These three subjects are outlined in NCLB as the most important knowledge for students to master (Fritzberg, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Similarly, every participant in this study felt that certain subjects were of more importance than other subjects were; each noted that the most important classes are the same subjects assessed through NCLB—math, English and science.

One of the concerns highlighted in a study by Pederson (2007) was that in the wake of the assessment mandates of NCLB, many states are placing greater emphasis on math, English, and science, and states are discontinuing the assessment of subject areas not mandated by NCLB. In other words, subjects that at one time were assessed, or at least taught, are no longer being assessed because they are not NCLB subjects. Further, Dever and Carlston (in press) found that teachers feel the curriculum has been narrowed to focus primarily on NCLB subjects. In the present study participants firmly believed that the three subjects mandated by NCLB were of more value than any other classes, even if those other classes were required. For example, Lana, a self-confessed athlete, believed that physical education was one of the most useless classes in school even though at Galaxy Jr. High it was a required class, and, therefore, necessary for graduation. As a point of fact, participants did not believe that any other subject taught in school was as important as math, English, and science.

Participants in this study were validating a concern that teachers have expressed; that of narrowing the curriculum. However, in contrast to what teachers have said in other studies (Dever & Carlston, in press; Pederson, 2007), participants in this study did not believe that state-mandated testing was the impetus for this narrowed curriculum; rather, they believed that these classes were the ones necessary for them to succeed in life and that without them they would fail.

Much like in Harriman's study (2005), participants believed that failure to achieve in school would have serious consequences. They noted that the consequences would be great and lead to a dismal future. Shad said, "I know if I don't, if I can't pass graduation

then I'll flip burgers the rest of my life, and it won't be very good." Mara also discussed what would happen if she did not graduate. She said, "I would be a failure, I don't know live, on the streets probably, probably wouldn't even be able to work at McDonalds or anything."

An interesting note here is how these comments align with what school counselors had stated. In Dollarhide and Lemberger's study (2006), school counselors were asked how NCLB was affecting their work. They reported that with the testing mandates of NCLB they were devoting less and less of their time to assisting students. Counselors have traditionally helped students plan for the future and assisted them in career planning (Dollarhide & Lemberger,). Participants in this study had a somewhat myopic view of the future, and assistance from school counselors could be a great benefit to them. Counselors can play a key role in student guidance. They, along with administrators, could find ways to mitigate their testing responsibilities and help them get back into the guidance business. School counselors are ironically feeling that by devoting so much of their time to testing mandates of NCLB they are unable to assist students in their planning, and students are being left behind.

Transferability

Transferability, or the degree to which the results of this study can be transferred to other settings, is determined by individual readers. I have tried to enhance transferability through the use of thick description, a nominated sample, and demographic and situational explanation. The reader is responsible for making the judgment of

whether the research contained in this study can transfer to their particular contexts

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Future Research Questions

Throughout the course of this study, many interesting ideas were raised that

would be interesting studies to conduct, and would further add to the voice of the student

in the literature. Following are questions for potential future research.

What are students' attitudes and beliefs about assessment in school? In the present

study, much was said by the students about their experiences with assessment. However,

a more focused study on assessment would help to explore this topic. For example,

participants in this study discussed grades; more research could be conducted to further

explore how students feel about grades, and what pressure they feel to achieve good

grades. In addition, researchers could explore what, if any, role cheating plays. In this

study, participants discussed testing but further research could explore if students define

testing the same way that teachers define testing. Students could also be interviewed to

assess their understanding of learning including when and how it occurs.

What do students view as the purpose of school? Participants in the present shared

how they are experiencing school in the era of NCLB. An interesting area to further

explore with students would be their attitudes and feelings concerning the overall purpose

of school. Do they feel it is merely a social experience or a training ground for future

careers, or something else? Researchers could ask students if they believe school is

necessary, if so why, and how they would make school better. In the present study

students discussed that some classes were not necessary while other classes were necessary. Researchers could explore why students felt that way, as well as probe further how and when students determined that some classes were more necessary than others.

What is the lived experience of students in high school, and elementary school in the era of NCLB? This study was limited to the participants in Galaxy Junior High. A broader area of inquiry would be to take the present study and expand it to include both high school, and elementary students. This would help determine if students in these different educational settings are having similar experiences to the participants in this study. This expanded study could explore the emic perspective of those just beginning their education, as well as those who, at the end of their schooling, are looking to the future.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

I'd like to begin by thanking you for taking the time to help me with our research study. Our discussion should take about 45 minutes. As I mentioned, the objective of our discussion today is to discuss your feelings and attitudes towards school.

I'd like to audio tape our discussion so I don't have to take a lot of notes. I will be the only person who will listen to the tape, and it will only be used to help me write my report on the findings from this study. As soon as I am finished with my report, the tape will be destroyed.

Our discussion today is confidential in nature. No one will be advised of your specific comments. Rather, your comments will be combined with the comments from others that I interview, to protect everyone's identity that is taking part in this study. Do you have any questions before we begin?

- I'd like to begin by asking you about school, what do you like?

- What do you find challenging?

- Is there anything that you would change about school?

- How would you change it?

- How do you like your classes in school?

Thank you for your participation in this study.

Appendix B

Subsequent Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me for a follow up interview, once again our discussion should take about 45 minutes. As I mentioned, the objective of our discussion today is to discuss your feelings and attitudes towards school.

I'd like to audio tape our discussion so I don't have to take a lot of notes. I will be the only person

who will listen to the tape, and it will only be used to help me write my report on the findings from

this study. As soon as I am finished with my report, the tape will be destroyed.

Our discussion today is confidential in nature. No one will be advised of your specific comments. Rather, your comments will be combined with the comments from others that I interview, to protect everyone's identity that is taking part in this study. Do you have any questions before we begin?

- In you first interview you said . . . what did you mean by that?
- Many students discussed the pace that their teachers move in class. Why do you think teachers move so quickly?
- Why do you think that teachers are so concerned with tests?
- What is bookwork?
- What are the required classes in school?
- Why are they required?
- What would happen in you failed school?
- Have you heard of No Child Left Behind?

Thank you for your participation in this study.

Appendix C

Peer Debriefer

I worked with Charles throughout his research study. I talked with him about his interview questions, and then read through the interview transcripts to be certain he was not leading on the participants. I did not find any. As I read through his transcripts and reviewed his memoing cards from the first transcriptions, I suggested possible questions that he might probe deeper in the next interview. For example I was interested in how the students talked about the pacing of class, and why they felt that their teachers moved as such a quick pace. I believed that there needed to be more description by the participants concerning this topic. I also thought a question concerning NCLB should be added, and Charles agreed.

As I read through his coding of the data, I was interested to ensure that the codes came out of the data and were not artificial to the study. At one point the two topics of stress and testing were developed into individual codes, yet as I looked, I did not see enough evidence to sustain two separate sections, one for each topic. I instead thought that the topic of testing fit better in the section on external motivation, and that stress was more of an emotion of the participants, and not an individual code. This adjustment was then made by Charles in his study. I also worked with him to define the four main categories used in this study.

When it came to the writing up of his study, I helped by reviewing the sections as they were completed, looking for bias, and a thick description of the participants experience. One element which I continued to question him on was his causal inferences. He made frequent value judgments which I helped to winnow out.

Shea Gibson Hamilton