

Copyright © 2013

Patrick Pepan Giple Sr.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

A CASE STUDY OF URBAN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS'
PERSPECTIVES OF THEIR SCHOOL AS 'IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT' UNDER
NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND (NCLB)

By

PATRICK PEPAN GIPLE SR.

A dissertation

submitted to

The Graduate School of Education
Rutgers-The State University of New Jersey,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree

Doctor of Education

Graduate Program in Educational Administration and Leadership

Approved by

Catherine A. Lugg, Ph. D, Chair

William A. Firestone, Ph. D.

Carol F. Karpinski, Ed. D

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

A Case Study of Urban Public High School Students' Perspectives of Their School as 'In Need of Improvement' Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

By PATRICK PEPAN GIPLE SR.

Dissertation Chairperson: Catherine A. Lugg, Ph. D.

Since its implementation in 2002, NCLB, through its expectations and sanctions, has created a state of urgency among school leaders and instructional staff in most urban public high schools. While there is significant literature on urban school reform promoting the academic performance of urban high school students, the perspectives of students—those most directly affected by NCLB state-mandated assessments—remain unexplored. The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of students in an urban public high school on their level of awareness of their school's status as 'in need of improvement', the impact of teaching and learning on students' academic performance, and their suggestions for corrective practices. The study employed a qualitative case study design in order to generate a thick, in-depth description of the perspectives of twelve purposely selected students. Data collected and analyzed from documentary evidence, focus group and one-to-one interviews, as well as informal observations were triangulated to enhance credibility and transferability of the findings. The study's findings that students were inadequately informed about their school's overall academic status, that disruptive classroom behavior was the primary factor contributing to students' poor academic performance, and that students desired more student-based, project-based, interactive instructional practices underscored the usefulness of student voice in the school reform process. The study argues for a meaningful involvement of students in

their education and the creation, in urban public high schools, of classroom environments that are productive in terms of student learning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I give thanks to God, first and foremost, for giving me the life, health, wisdom, and humility that I needed to come this far.

I am enormously grateful to my wife, Esther, for not only being unceasing in encouraging me to complete this work, but for taking great pride in every accomplishment I have made throughout each stage of this dissertation process. To my children for whom I was determined to achieve this accomplishment, I hope the completion of this dissertation will encourage each of them to be determined in pursuing and achieving their own goals in life knowing that effort and determination are essential ingredients of success.

To my dissertation chair, Dr. Catherine Lugg, I extend my profound gratitude for the guidance, support and continuous encouragement she gave me from the very beginning of this dissertation process. I would like to extend special thanks to Dr. William Firestone who took the time to meet with me whenever necessary and helped me reflect critically on all areas of this work. I am deeply appreciative to Dr. Carol Karpinski for not only taking the time to evaluate and critique my work, but for also suggesting several important resources that were useful in completing this study.

To the twelve urban high school students who participated in the interviews of this study, I will always remain grateful for the interest and courage they demonstrated in making their voices heard. Without their participation this work would not have been completed. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the members of the guidance department of the school in which I conducted this research for their logistical assistance and for helping me navigate the system in order to gather data.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
TABLES.....	vi
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	10
Conceptual Framework.....	11
NCLB: Schools ‘In Need of Improvement’	12
School Reform Strategies.....	16
Cultural Capital.....	19
Student Voice.....	26
Definition of Student Voice.....	26
Usefulness of Student Voice.....	27
New Role of Students.....	28
Student Voice vis-à-vis Teaching and Learning.....	31
Student Voice vis-à-vis Teacher interactions.....	33
Obstacles to Student Voice.....	37
Summary.....	41
III. METHODOLOGY.....	43
Case Study Design.....	43
Research Site.....	44
Research Sample.....	47
Sample Selection Process.....	49
Types of Data Collection	50
Data Compilation and Analysis.....	54
Issues of Validity and Reliability.....	56
Significance.....	59
Limitations.....	60
Summary.....	61
IV. FINDINGS.....	62

Research Question 1.....	62
Summary of research Question 1.....	72
Research Question 2.....	73
Summary of Research Question 2.....	87
Research Question 3.....	88
Summary of Research Question 3.....	96
NHS Students vs. LP Students.....	97
Summary of Findings.....	99
 V. DISCUSSION.....	 101
Contribution to Literature.....	108
Implications for Practice.....	110
Limitations of Study.....	111
Questions for Future Research.....	113
 VI. CONCLUSION.....	 114
REFERENCES.....	115
 APPENDICES	
A. Parent Consent Form.....	124
B. Student Assent Form.....	126
C. Approved IRB Form.....	130

LIST OF TABLES

1. Conceptual Framework.....	12
2. School Improvement Continuum Chart.....	14
3. Research Participants Data Sheet.....	48

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Over the past several decades school leaders, in their search for effective educational reforms, have focused almost exclusively on school organizational structures, teachers and administrators. While extensive research in principal leadership (Mangin, 2007; Marks & Printy, 2003; Reitzug, et al., 2008; Wahlstrom, & Louis, 2008), teachers' professional development (Anderson, et al., 2006; Desimone, 2009; Garet, et al., 2001; Scribner, 1999), curriculum design (Armstrong, 1989; Jacobs, 1989; Schubert, 1986; Short, 1991; Shutes, & Petersen, 1994; Tanner, & Tanner, 2007), and school-community partnerships (Epstein, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 1997; Sanders, 2002), have greatly contributed to the school improvement continuum, in most failing urban public high schools more and more students are disengaged from learning (Cushman, 2003; Mitra, 2008; Wilson, & Corbett, 2001). As a result their performance has been mostly inadequate in meeting the achievement benchmark of their states (NCES, 2007). But in public school settings it is the students who are required to learn and it is students who are required to perform. Their performance on state mandated standardized assessments holds great significance for their schools, districts, states, and even the national government in this age of accountability. Under the federal No Child Left Behind-Title I School Improvement Continuum, when the performances of students within a school fail to meet the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) benchmark set by the state for two or more consecutive years the school is designated as 'in need of improvement' (20 U.S.C. 6301

et. seq.). While interventions, such as parental notification, supplemental educational services, and technical assistance from the district, become the required first step toward school improvement for such schools, the perspectives of students on *why* their schools are ‘in need of improvement’ have received little consideration, if any, toward finding effective solutions for school success. The purpose of this dissertation study is to explore the perspectives of students in an urban public high school on their level of awareness of their school status, the impact of teaching and learning on their academic performance, as well as their suggestions for corrective practices.

Educators, in general, have failed to recognize that “it is students who experience and are served by schools,” (Doyle & Feldman, 2006, p. 369). It is students who constitute a critical part of our schools and our educational system (Cushman, 2003; Dewey, 1938; Hatchman & Rolland, 2001; Rudduck & Demetriou, 2003). In fact, it is students who “are most directly affected by, but least often consulted about, educational policy and practice” (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 3). Research has shown that students, because of their unique role in the educational system, are uniquely positioned through their experiences to inform school leaders and teachers with unique insights about schools and the technology of learning (Mitra, 2003; Weis & Fine, 1993). Furthermore, research indicates that when school leaders and teachers take students seriously by involving them as knowledgeable partners in school reform or school improvement practices students feel empowered and become productive in meeting school goals (Doyle & Feldman, 2006; Hudson-Ross, Cleary, & Casey, 1993; Lee, 1999; Mitra & Gross, 2009). Yet, the voice of students, who are the objects of our educational goals, has

received very little attention in the discourse on urban school improvement (Cook-Sather, 2002; Lee, 1999; Zion, 2009).

No reform, however, is effective if it does not engage the recipients of that reform as main contributors in the process (Wilson & Corbett, 2001). If educators seek meaningful change, they must engage students as active and empowered partners in the complex task of school improvement. Therefore, student involvement is central to meaningful school improvement because students are the producers of school outcome (Levin, 2000).

While student voice in general may encompass the broad scope of perspectives, decisions and actions of students regarding school reform, in this study student voice is limited to the perspectives of students about teaching and learning within the classroom and how the quality of instruction students receive affects their performance specifically on state-mandated assessments. This singular focus of student voice is intended to elicit from students factors pertaining to teaching and learning within the classroom that influence their academic performance. For example, in this study, through student voice students were provided with an opportunity to evaluate how teachers' teach and how students learn in order to ascertain factors that positively and negatively affect instruction and student learning. Also, through student voice, students were empowered to make meaningful suggestions on how to improve their performance on state-mandated assessments. Thus, this study focuses on exploring what works and does not work in the classroom from the point of view of students—the key participants of the instructional process.

In addition, student voice in this study is conceptualized as an educational motivational construct (Schmakel, 2008): an important factor in students' academic performance (Cook-Sather, 2002; Cushman, 2003; Oldfather, 1995; Wilson & Corbett, 2001). As an educational motivational construct this study explored how students were motivated within the classroom toward the goal of achieving high academic performance. For example, students were asked about classroom factors that encouraged or motivated them to learn as well as factors that discouraged them from learning. The conceptualization of student voice as an educational motivational construct in this study is not intended to minimize the potency of other areas of student voice in school or outside of school.

Based on the importance of student voice to the school reform agenda and the overwhelming influence of NCLB in an age of accountability, this study is focused on gaining insight into the efficacy of student voice in the academic achievement of students. Therefore, I proposed the following research questions:

1. What are students' perceptions of their school as 'in need of improvement'?
2. What are students' perspectives on teaching and learning within their school in terms of NCLB assessments?
3. What corrective actions do students' propose to improve their school's overall academic achievement in terms of student learning and school improvement?

Method

From the moment the idea of this study was conceived, I intended to find out *from students* their perspectives of why students in their school (Roosevelt High School) have performed poorly on state-mandated assessments. The focus was not to find out the number of students that have failed—a statistical or quantitative approach—but the reasons students may have as to why their school continues to be a failing school. Therefore, this study appropriately employed a qualitative case study methodology in order to gain an in-depth description of circumstances that may affect the poor academic performance of students in an urban public high school on state-mandated assessments. Twelve students—six high performing students and six low performing student—were purposely selected from a pool of students in grades 11 and 12—grade levels that are tested on the state-mandated High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) in New Jersey. The perspectives of the twelve students on their school as a school ‘in need of improvement’ were explored using focus group and one-to-one interviews. Two focus group interviews were conducted: one with the high performing students and the other with the low performing students. During the focus group interviews each group of students was asked about their perspectives on their school as ‘in need of improvement’, and about what corrective practices they believe can produce the desired improvement in students’ academic performance on the HSPA. This was intended to give students voice in offering suggestions for the improvement of their school. In the one-to-one interviews students were asked to be more specific in describing classroom experiences that both negatively and positively affected their learning. Here, the intent was to probe for an in-depth understanding of instructional and organizational factors that may have affected

student performance. Data collected from the interviews were coded and analyzed using Nvivo9—a qualitative data analysis software program. Also documents on school demographics and NCLB reports were collected as contextual data and analyzed. The variety of data collection methods was not only intended to achieve triangulation of data for analysis, but also to attain in-depth perspectives, beliefs, and interpretations from students. Using data analysis methods of Creswell (2008), Patton (2002), and Miles and Huberman (1994) the coded data were developed into themes, and member checked to ensure reliability.

Plan of Dissertation

Chapter I consists of the introduction to this study. It lays out the purpose and significance of the study as well as the three research questions that guided this study. It offers a brief description of the study's methodology, sample selection, and limitations. As an introduction the chapter is a synopsis of the various sections and highlights of this study.

Chapter II reviews the literature that underpins the conceptual framework of this study. The chapter provides a description of the influence of external factors, such as NCLB and cultural capital, on school organization structure. It reviews and underscores the importance of student voice in terms of teaching and learning as well as the efficacy of student voice as a paradigm for school improvement.

Chapter III, which consists of the methodology, begins by substantiating the appropriateness of the study's qualitative case study design. It discusses more thoroughly the study's site selection, sample size, and sample selection process. Also, a detailed and procedural description of the collection and analysis of the study's multiple sources of

data is presented. Issues pertaining to the study's validity and reliability are evaluated using a qualitative framework.

Chapter IV highlights the findings. In this chapter students' responses to questions aligned to the research questions are presented in a manner that is reader-friendly, yet authentic. Although the interviews that elicited students' responses were initially semi-structured, students were probed when ever necessary for more detailed explanations. The intent was to saturate an issue in order to offer a rich, in-depth description of students' perspectives.

Chapter V is a discussion of the findings. In this chapter, findings that were significant from the study are discussed. Also, implications and suggestions for future research based on the findings are presented.

Limitations

The paucity of this study's sample size, a sample of twelve students, limits the generalizability of the findings. However, the study's focus on an in-depth description and interpretation of the twelve students' perspectives do offer insights that are significant to the school improvement efforts of other such poor-performing schools. Another limitation of this study was its dependency on students' willingness to participate in the study. I would have liked to have included in my sample students from a cross-section of the ethnic distribution of the students at the school. While the twelve that were finally selected were made up of mostly African-American students, the school's growing Hispanic population was not proportionally represented. This was due mainly to the study's plan of only seeking students who were really interested in the study and who were willing to meet after school for the interviews. This study's goal

would have been contradicted if students in such a failing school were asked to be interviewed during school hours. Even though the twelve students selected participated voluntarily and were committed to the study, some degree of patience was necessary on occasions when a few students were not punctual. Also, because the study focuses entirely on students' perspectives, it excludes the perspectives of teachers and school administrators who also may have important knowledge of why the school has failed to meet the state's performance benchmark. The exclusion of the perspectives of teachers and school administrators was not intended to minimize the importance of their knowledge on school improvement efforts, but rather the intent was to give voice singularly to students—those who are required to perform on state-mandated assessments and whose performance determine the school's academic status.

Significance

This study is significant in that its singular focus on students' perspectives may help reinforce the importance of student voice in the discourse on school improvement. More significantly, the study's findings from students' perspectives on classroom conditions that promote student learning and those that create learning-bereft environments could offer meaningful insights on how to create the type of learning environment that urban public high school students need to succeed. Also, in spite of their school's poor academic status, the positive attitudes of the students who were committed to this study seem to indicate that urban high school students do really care about their school and about being successful. This positive attitude is the hope that ought to encourage teachers and school administrators of the potential for success. This study is also significant because it explores the perspectives of two groups of students: high

achieving students and low-achieving students. I was interested in finding out from high performing students their perspectives and experiences of attending a failing school.

These are students whose views on what it takes to be successful in a failing school are important for such a study. Also the study explored the perspectives and experiences of low-performing students—students whose poor academic performance is perceived to be the cause of the school’s failing status. Similarities and differences in the perspectives and experiences of high and low performing students should offer insights into how to address the needs of different learners.

Summary

In this age of accountability, spurred by the mandates of NCLB, the academic performance of students bears great significance on a school’s status. Most urban public high schools are ‘in need of improvement’ because students in these schools continue to struggle to meet the academic performance benchmark on state-mandated assessments. By giving voice to students at an urban public high school to offer their perspectives on their school’s poor academic status and to make meaningful suggestions on how to improve their performance, this study underscores the importance of students as constructive partners in any school improvement efforts. The perspectives of the twelve students elicited through focus group and one-to-one interviews should shed light on conditions in failing urban public high schools that contribute to students’ academic performance and school status.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature review to this study began with the conceptual framework that guided this study. Conceptually, the study identified and is focused on the dynamic influence of two external factors (NCLB and Cultural Capital) and the reformative agency of student voice on school organizational structure. The review of the literature highlighted how these factors impact student academic performance. Under NCLB the study is focused specifically on the performance benchmark standards by which schools are designated as ‘in need of improvement.’ The literature underscored the influence of cultural capital based mainly on Bourdieu’s theory of the transmission of cultural capital. More specifically, the literature discussed the impact of cultural capital on urban students whose parents are of the lower class or low socio-economic status. The section on student voice is more expansive: it offered a definition to student voice, and it discussed the new role of students, the dynamics of student voice vis-à-vis teaching and learning as well as student-teacher interactions. For a balanced approach a discussion of the barriers to student voice is also presented.

If NCLB sets the standard by which student achievement is measured and ranked, and cultural capital provides a deeper understanding into the contextual circumstances that may affect student achievement, then student voice is an empowering tool students can use to improve student achievement. While urban public high school students are challenged to attain high academic performance through NCLB mandates, they are limited in their level of cultural capital due to their unique socio-economic background.

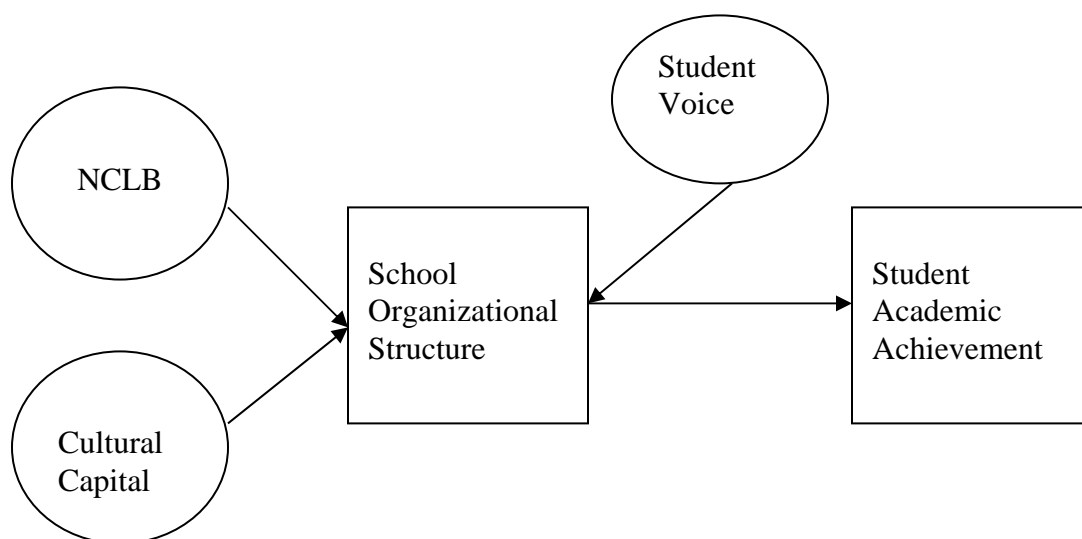
However, through the empowering agency of student voice students can become co-constructors with teachers and school administrators in achieving high academic standards.

Conceptual Framework

The level, quality, or efficacy of student voice continues to gain credence as critical to meaningful and sustainable school improvement efforts (Fletcher, 2005; Kushman, & Shanessey, 1997). This study highlighted two key factors: The effect of federal and state legislation and mandates (specifically NCLB) on education and the school environment, and the socio-cultural impact of cultural capital on students and schools as institutions. When a public school is designated as ‘in need of improvement’ through federal legislation and state mandated assessments the entire school environment is affected. Consequently, because students are an essential part of the school environment, students’ level of participation in school life—their learning and opportunity to make meaningful contribution toward their educational future—is greatly affected. Also students’ ability to perform proficiently on state mandated standards-based assessments in school is influenced by the level and quality of cultural capital available to them (Sanders, 2000; Stringfield & Land, 2002). In other words, students in high poverty urban public schools are, in general, disadvantaged in schools because they do not possess the cultural and linguistic abilities and norms institutionalized by schools (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau, 2003). However, through human agency, manifested and driven in part by student voice opportunities student success and overall school improvements are and can be made possible. Thus, student voice can have a significant impact on

school organizational structure for improving student academic achievement (Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2008; Mitra, & Gross, 2009).

Table 1: Conceptual framework



NCLB and Schools In Need of Improvement

In understanding the urgency of addressing the challenges of Schools In Need of Improvement (SINI), it is necessary to begin with an overview of the intent and goals of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was reauthorized in 2001 as the No Child Left Behind Act. It had a clear purpose “to

ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (20 U.S.C. 6301 et seq.). It has as its intent the equalization of educational opportunities for poor and disadvantaged children. Through the development and implementation of state academic standards-based assessments, states are to identify failing schools and implement school-based reform initiatives to ensure high-quality education. NCLB mandates that states increase incrementally student proficiency levels from the baseline level to 100% proficiency by 2014. More specifically, to ensure that all students are accounted for both the total student population and each subgroup (students with disabilities, limited English proficient, economically disadvantaged, white, African-American, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Native American, Hispanic, and other) must perform proficiently. States are required to adjust the proficiency targets in equal increments every three years until 100% proficiency is reached by 2014. The central measure of success and failure for high schools under NCLB is a school’s ability to make AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) toward both academic and graduation goals. In New Jersey public high schools may use the dropout rate as a secondary measure in the absence of a four-year span in graduation rates. Also measured along with the secondary indicator is test participation. That is at least 95% of the student both in the total population and in each subgroup must take the test for the school to make AYP. If a school successfully meets or exceeds statewide academic performance and participation goals, including its secondary indicator, that school has made AYP. A school can, however, also make AYP via Safe Harbor if it reduces by 10% the number of students who are partially proficient.

Table 2 School Improvement Continuum Chart

Year	Status	Sanctions for Title I Schools
Year 1	Early Warning – Did not make AYP for one year	None
Year 2	First year of school in need of improvement status. Did not make AYP for two consecutive years in the same content area.	Public school choice, school improvement plan, technical assistance from district.
Year 3	Second year of school in need of improvement status. Did not make AYP for three consecutive years in the same content area.	Public school choice, supplemental educational services, school improvement plan, technical assistance from district.
Year 4	Third year of school in need of improvement status – corrective action. Did not make AYP for four consecutive years in the same content area.	Public school choice, supplemental educational services, school improvement plan, technical assistance from district and state, corrective action, participation in CAPA.
Year 5	Fourth year of school in need of improvement status – school restructuring plan. Did not make AYP for five consecutive years in the same content area.	Public school choice, supplemental educational services, school improvement plan, technical assistance from district and state, development of restructuring plan.
Year 6	Fifth year of school in need of improvement status – implementation of restructuring plan. Did not make AYP for six consecutive years in the same content area.	Public school choice, supplemental educational services, school improvement plan, technical assistance from district and state, implementation of restructuring plan.

Source: New Jersey Department of Education

Making AYP is important because schools that fail to make AYP for two consecutive years or more in the same content area (Language Arts Literacy or Mathematics) are categorized as ‘In Need of Improvement’—a particular interest of this study. One of the research interests of this study is to ascertain the extent to which the high school students in the study were aware of their school as In Need of Improvement. Also, this study seeks to know students’ reactions to their school’s poor academic status under NCLB as well their suggestions of corrective practices to improve student achievement and school success. It is important to concentrate on the plethora of school reform strategies and models that have been offered to address the plight of high-poverty urban high schools that are ‘in need of improvement’. Knowing what is available and being implemented in some of the nation’s public high schools with similar status will help put in perspective the context of student voice in terms of school reform.

While some researchers have questioned the value of using AYP as a national tool to identify schools in need of improvement on the grounds that states continue to establish their own performance standards, design their own assessments, and establish the pace at which students must improve to reach 100% proficiency (Balfanz, Legters, West, & Weber, 2007), the focus of this study is not on the justification of NCLB mandated standard-based assessments as *the* criteria of student achievement, or AYP as *the* school-level proficiency benchmark, but the perspectives of students on why there is continual failure in their high school to meet the minimum proficiency benchmarks mandated by their state in its implementation of standards-based assessments.

School Reform Strategies

There is significant consensus that authentic and meaningful school reform is complex and time consuming. Authentic reform for the realization of significant gains in student achievement and school success entails years of planning and implementation. According to Balfanz and colleagues et al, (2007) and Legters and colleagues (2002) meaningful school reform is not fast, easy or cheap because such reform means increased student-teacher relationships, student outreach, high expectation or standards, intensive instructional programs, improved teacher quality, relevant professional development, engaging school programs, and enhanced connection between schools and colleges. More specifically, for failing urban high schools educators need to concentrate on reconceptualizing safe harbor to focus on the key points where students fall off the graduation path. Balfanz and colleagues, (2007) argue that it is not as easy as focusing on a very few students simply to make safe harbor, but focusing on a sustained and comprehensive school achievement program that concentrates on improving the whole school. The prevalent piecemeal approach to urban school reform does not yield meaningful results in the long run.

Also emphasizing the importance of whole school reform was the groundbreaking reform model of the Bay Area School Reform Collaboration (BASRC). As a five-year comprehensive reform effort that seeks to ‘reculture’ schools by supporting whole school reform it emphasized that reform work at schools must be accomplished collectively by those at the school level—a call for distributed leadership (Copland, 2003). As opposed to a role-based model BASRC was a goal or inquiry-based model that accentuated building and sustaining capacity for whole school improvement. Not only is

effective school reform an ongoing process or a process of continual inquiry, its collective efforts must be relentlessly focused on the learning of all students.

Additionally, in support of leadership and organizational capacity as critical to improving persistently low-performing schools Orr, Berg, Shore, and Meier (2008) identified five thematic areas in need of continuous improvement: instructional leadership integrity, distributed leadership and professional collaboration, consensus on good instruction and ways to foster continuous improvement, valuing, trusting, and exhibiting confidence in the learning capacity of students and staff, as well as school-region-city relationships.

Too often urban educators in their quest to find a panacea for their ailing schools have adopted and implemented too many unrelated, unsustainable improvement programs (Newman, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001). According to Newman and colleagues, effective school reform requires school leaders to coordinate all interrelated instructional programs for optimal student and staff development. All interrelated programs must be guided by a common framework for curriculum, instruction, and assessment climate pursued for a sustained period of time. So essential is program coherency that without effective instructional program coherence any school reform effort to improve student achievement in failing schools may fail.

Since its implementation in 2002, NCLB through its expectations and sanctions has created a state of urgency among school leaders to address the academic achievements of all students (Balfanz, Letgers, West & Weber, 2007; Orr, Berg, Shore & Meier, 2008). Thus a key reform strategy embraced by several urban school leaders under pressure to turn failing schools into citadels of academic success is the practice of narrowing the curriculum. Simply put, it is the practice of teaching to the test. The

challenges of NCLB have created a pattern of scripted lessons and mandated curriculum (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). The real but unintended consequences of such practice are that it stifles creativity and undermines teacher autonomy. Moreover, compliance to implementation of new programs, which sometimes are substitutes for the curriculum or which dictate the curriculum, in urban schools reduces the definition of an effective learning environment to that of a classroom adorned with the artifacts of the curriculum of the program. Teachers in compliance with such practice are more preoccupied with ensuring that specific artifacts are in place and visible for administrative review than the art of re-crafting lessons for meaningful pedagogy. Instruction become more meaningful when teachers are given the time to identify students academic needs through feedbacks from informal classroom assessments. When teachers are being told how to teach, what to teach, and how to arrange their classrooms their creativity and autonomy become stunted. Not only does narrowing the curriculum limit teachers' pedagogical options, it affects teachers' ability to foster interpersonal relationships with students because of its mechanistic approach. Contrary to any mechanistic approach to instructional practice, research shows that when teachers establish rapport with their students and determine what best motivates them classroom management challenges tend to dissipate (Crocco & Cosigan, 2007, : Cushman, 2003; Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2001). According to Crocco, and Costigan (2007), if unchecked the mechanistic pedagogical practices of teaching to the test may in the end sabotage the retention of high-quality teachers.

Public schools that are designated as 'in need of improvement' are schools that have failed to make AYP for two years or more. Many urban public high schools fall within this category (NCES). In an effort to improve the poor academic performances of

most urban public high school students, a plethora of school improvement efforts have been designed and implemented. Yet, these efforts have failed in large part due to the lack of either the time for planning in order to achieve meaningful school reform (Balfanz, Legters, West & Weber, 2007), the lack of program coherency resulting in the implementation of several unrelated, unsustained improvement programs (Newman, Allensworth & Bryk, 2001), or the common practice of teaching to the test which tends to stifle teacher creativity and autonomy for effective pedagogy (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; English, 2010). Despite the implementation of some effective research-based school improvement programs in some urban public schools for improving the academic achievement levels of students (Copland, 2003), this study acknowledges the influence of the level of cultural capital students bring to the educational environment (Bourdieu, 1986; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Lareau, 2003).

Cultural Capital

From the abundant literature on school failure and school improvement, Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital has had and continues to have extensive influence on how researchers have attempted to explain the phenomenon of inequality in schools in terms of student performance on standardized test and overall student achievement (Lareau, 2003). If we are to understand why some schools continue to fail then we ought to examine the level of cultural capital available to students within their specific context.

Cultural capital can be defined as non-financial social assets, such as educational or intellectual assets, which might promote social mobility beyond economic means (Bourdieu, 1986; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Lareau, 2003). It consists of specific form of

knowledge, skills, education, and advantages that an individual possesses which can lead to higher status in society. While there are variations in the definition of cultural capital, Bourdieu's detailed description of cultural capital deepens our understanding of the concept. Cultural capital, as a sociological concept, exists in three states. In the embodied state it encompasses the styles, cultural preferences, affinities and mannerism (Monkman et al, 2005) that are distinctive of a social class and its social interaction with external organizations. It consists of the consciously acquired and passively inherited properties of one's self gained primarily through family socialization. Cultural capital, unlike a gift, is not transmissible; rather it is generally acquired over a long period of time. Time is important because it must impress itself upon one's habitus (one's character or way of thinking). As Bourdieu (1986) put it, cultural capital exists in an embodied state when "external wealth is converted into an integral part of the person, into a habitus (that) cannot be transmitted instantaneously...." (p. 48).

Cultural capital can also exist in an objectified state, that is, the physical objects or artifacts that define one's culture. Types of literature, music, dance forms, as well as writings, paintings, monuments, museums and historical sites are all examples of objectified cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Monkman et al, 2005). Objectified cultural capital enhances embodied capital depending on the individual's manner of appropriation and level of mastery of objectified capital. Thus, while anyone can possess objectified capital through economic means not everyone truly appreciates the value of objectified capital to invest in its acquisition. As a result those who appreciate and invest in objectified capital are more likely to enhance their embodied capital than those who do not. In terms of education children of lower class parents possess a low level of embodied

capital because their parents do not value or invest in the acquisition of objectified capital.

However, it is cultural capital in its institutionalized state that clearly signifies one's distinction. The institutionalized cultural capital refers to academic credentials and educational qualifications. These academic credentials constitute 'a certificate of cultural competence' (Bourdieu, 1986) which guarantees material and symbolic profits. Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) argued that schools, through their formal and informal evaluation of students, enact and give value only to particular knowledge, dispositions, modes of thought and experiences as well as linguistic behavior and styles. By doing so, schools institutionalize such competences and experiences. Since these institutionalized values favor the dominant class the cultural capital of the lower classes are consequently undermined and devalued. Schools, therefore, become the sociological settings or 'fields' for the production, transmission, and accumulation of cultural capital (Swartz, 1997). Within the context of the dynamics of the effects of cultural capital in education, schooling is nothing more than the prescribed usage of behaviors and practices that are institutionally defined and socially accepted (Meyer & Rowan, 1978). In the end, schools determine and assign rewards and sanctions depending on how students conform to the values in society that are institutionalized by schools.

According to Bourdieu (1986) students from lower social classes (who constitute the majority of the population in urban public schools) experience low scholastic achievement because they do not possess the 'legitimate' cultural capital when compared to students from the middle and upper class. In other words, because schools are known to transmit or 'institutionalize' the cultural capital (the cultural background, knowledge,

and skills) of the dominant group within society, students who do not belong to the dominant group are disadvantaged because they find themselves unfamiliar to the culture and linguistic practices of schools. When schools institutionalize the cultural capital of the dominant class they allow the dominant few to gain educational capital in the form of qualifications. By legitimizing the cultural capital of the dominant few, schools, in effect, demand from lower-class students what it does not give to them.

The acquisition of cultural capital by students influences school success and academic achievement. In other words, the values, knowledge, and skills of students from the upper class in society are those that are valued or 'institutionalized' by schools. Therefore, in order for students of the lower class to succeed (most specifically the majority of urban public school students) they must acquire for example a level of fluency in English that is comparable to that of students of upper class parents. Also most urban primary school students begin school with an inadequate level of vocabulary and reading skills than their suburban counterparts (Chatterji, 2006; Dearing, et al., 2006). This is because suburban parents have a dominant habitus; they read to their children more frequently due to the value they place on education (Bourdieu, 1986; De Graf, 1986; De Graf, De Graf, & Kraaykamp, 2000). Children whose parents read to them more frequently have a much richer vocabulary and perform better in school than children whose parents do not read to them as frequently (De Graf, De Graf, & Kraaykamp, 2000). In addition, according to Bourdieu's theory of transmission of cultural capital to acquire the expected qualification of the dominant class, children of lower class parents must exchange their own working class cultural capital for that of the dominant class. Complicated by the class ethos of lower class students, the exchange

entails not only the learning of a new way of 'being' or a new way of using language, but acting in a manner contrary to their instincts and expectations. When the subjective expectations of the lower class encounters the objective structures found in schools where cultural and social reproduction are perpetuated less privileged students tend to eliminate themselves from the system resulting in fewer and fewer underprivileged students receiving quality education (Bourdieu, 1986).

In a study of 1,560 schools in Virginia, Wilkins (2000) identified four types of capital that influence student achievement, namely financial capital (the fiscal resources that enable parents to provide the basic necessities of life for their families), human capital (level of parent educational attainment), cultural capital (embodiment of status associated with knowledge, skills, and education of the dominant class), and geographical capital (the level of urban influence on the learning environment). Wilkins found from the study that only human and cultural capital had predictive powers over student academic outcome in high schools. He concluded that variances in students passing rates on standardized tests are not determined by economic opportunity structures, but by demographic opportunity structures such as cultural, human, financial, and geographical capital. He further argued that if schools cannot control demographic opportunity structures (DOS) why should schools be held accountable for student performance.

From a more practical perspective other researchers have associated cultural capital with parental involvement or the home environment (Clark, 1983; Coleman, 1987; Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1996; Franklin, 2000). According to Franklin (2000) it is the home environment through the establishment of positive values about education, homework rituals and routines, support for school-related functions and programs, and

high academic expectations that the sense of efficacy of a child in an academic setting is shaped and established. Therefore, families, regardless of their composition, must focus on creating supportive environments that promote student achievement and success.

Closely connected to familial influences in the discourse on cultural capital is the potency of the community, such that even when the home no longer serves as a protection, the community and community-based groups can act as buffers to the child in providing the necessary social capital for student success (Coleman, 1987). Simply put, the efficacy of community involvement through the formal and informal actions of community organizations like businesses, churches, service providers and even schools cannot be underestimated in its influence on student achievement. But negative or dysfunctional family and community influences are what constitute the educational context from which poor and minority students come. It is what explains why so many students in high poverty urban districts place very little value on education and academic achievement. Mickelson (1990) warns against overlooking this attitudinal connection that many urban students hold about the significance of education and upward mobility in society because it ultimately affects their attitudes toward their studies and academic performance as well as their relationship with their teachers and school administrators.

Embedded in the theory of cultural capital is the resiliency of human agency which is a product of the dichotomy within schools between structure and agency. It is grounded in the belief that objective structures determine an individual's chances through the habitus—the structure of the mind characterized by a set of acquired sensibilities, dispositions and tastes. Because habitus is formed and influenced by an individual's position in various fields, their family and their daily experiences, one's class position

does not determine one's life chances, although it does play an important part. It must be noted that while agency refers to "people's capacity for making a difference in the conditions of their lives" (Auerbach, 2007, p. 255) it remains essentially an individual experience. For example, Wiggan (2007) argued that it is by listening to student voice that students of lower social class in failing urban schools can begin to acquire the cultural capital they need to succeed academically. In the achievement debate the explanations or perspectives of students are critical to finding solutions to the low achievement levels of urban students.

To understand the generally poor academic performance of most urban public high school students which is the reason why their schools are 'in need of improvement', it is important to also understand the contextual circumstances that realistically impact the lives of these students. Most urban public high school students come from homes that are economically deprived (Anyon, 1995; Kozol, 1991), and socially dysfunctional (Lareau, 2003). Generally, because of these conditions parents of children from poor lower class do not invest in the cultural capital institutionalized in schools (Bourdieu, 1986). As a result the low level of cultural capital available to urban students in public secondary schools has an adverse effect on their academic performance in schools (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau, 2003). While schools may not have all the resources to augment urban public high school students level of cultural capital, by listening to students and empowering students as partners in school improvement efforts, urban schools can acquire the level of cultural capital students in urban public high schools need to succeed academically (Wiggan, 2007).

Student Voice

While NCLB, through its mandated academic performance benchmarks, sets the standard for student achievement and students' level of academic attainment is greatly influenced by the transmission of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Scherger & Savage, 2010), student voice has become one effective tool that schools can use to provide, in large part, the cultural capital that urban public school students need to succeed (Wiggan, 2007). With students being the most important stakeholders in the school environment the significance of their role as important partners in any school improvement efforts can no longer be ignored. They are an essential part of the tripartite paradigm of school partnership—teachers, students, parents (Epstein, 2001; Sanders, 2002) When schools are in need of reform to improve students academic performance, then students—those whose performance in large part determine the quality of education at a school—must be consulted in a collaborative effort for meaningful school improvement. Students need to be empowered to assume collective responsibility for their school's academic performance (Mitra, 2005). In most urban public high schools where students are generally disengaged academically promoting student voice provide students with a stronger sense of ownership in their schools (Fine, 1991; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko & Fernandez, 1989). According to Beattie (2012), “partnership (with students) fosters ownership; ownership sparks motivation; motivation drives learning” (p. 2).

Toward a Definition

Rogers (2005) offered perhaps the most practical definition of student voice as “the active opportunity for students to express their opinions and make decisions regarding the planning, implementation, and evaluation of their learning experiences” (p.

3). In conceptualizing a framework for meaningful student involvement in schools, Adam Fletcher (2005) defined student voice as “the individual and collective perspective and actions of young people within the context of learning and education” (p. 3). Much of the clarity to his definition can be assigned to the distinction he makes about what student voice *is not*. It is not student participation- the mere commitment of students to conduct an activity or project in school, nor is it pupil consultation- when educators simply listen to students’ opinions or ideas about school. It is a clear departure from the traditional approach to student participation as tokenism, to participation as partnership. According to Fletcher (2005) student voice consists of meaningful student involvement, the process whereby students are engaged as partners with educators in every facet of school reform in order to strengthen their commitment to education, community, and democracy. For Mitra (2005) student voice is a tool that empowers students to seek improvement in key areas of school life such as instruction, curriculum, assessment, teacher-student relationship, and student-centered teachers’ professional development. Because this study is about student academic performance which is in need of improvement student voice

Usefulness of Student voice

While “student voice” is a relatively new construct and its definition remains open to future conceptualization through research, the usefulness of student voice is significant. One of the usefulness of student voice is that as a research and evaluative tool it has as its goal the need to challenge educators about their understanding and assumptions regarding low-performing students as well as those students silenced and marginalized by the structures of school (Lee, 1999). Teachers and administrators can benefit greatly from student voice because through student voice important information

about the real needs and interests of students are easily uncovered. According to Doyle and Feldman (2006), how else shall we know “what helps students learn and how to deliver those practices” (p. 394). In other words, while most teachers may have a sincere desire to teach students, students feel teachers need to understand them in order to teach them properly and effectively.

New Role of Students

The emergent role of students signifies a new era of student engagement. Historically, in the continuum (Kurth-Schai, 1988) of the role of students during the period of the industrial revolution children were perceived as victims of adult society exploited for economic purposes and in need of adult protection. In the mid twentieth century the perceptions of youth changed dramatically. Children were now perceived not as victims, but as threats to adult society. According to Kurth-Schai (1988) this period was characterized by the shocking stories of classroom violence in the 1970s and the intrusion of gang activities in school settings during the 1980s. Just prior to the last two decades was the emergence of the perception of students as learners of adult society. Influenced by 20th century models of child development youth were perceived in terms of incapacities and inabilities, as immature and incompetent, and incapable of proper development without adult intervention. However, within the last two decades, given the accountability mandates of NCLB, the research on effective organizational models (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Bunker & Alban, 2006; Elmore, & Associates 1990; Helgesen, 1995), and the shift in societal context, the need for reconceptualization of student role in school and society has gained credence. There has been a paradigmatic shift of the role of students as receptacles of knowledge to students as “*creator, disseminators, and*

implementers of knowledge” (Kurth-Schai, 1988, p.124). Research shows an increase in educators’ solicitation of the participation of students in the selection, design, and implementation of curriculum, as well as in other factors that students identify as contributing to their academic performance (Kurth-Schai, 1988; Lee, 1999; Mitra, 2005; Rubin & Jones 2007; Zion, 2009). Kurth-Schai (1988) even went on to sublimate the role of student to that of the educatorchild who in addition to designing and implementing curriculum is capable of implementing effective pedagogical strategies to help teach his or her peers. For example, some students tend to understand some concepts better from explanations by other students instead of the teacher. Higher still is the possible role of students as the scholarchild, one who no longer must assume the traditional role of students as the subjects of research, but student as the researcher—one who is given the opportunity to conduct all facets of the research process on issues critical to student development and school improvement.

The role of students is significantly affected by the level of advocacy of student voice within a school (Fielding, 2001; Levin, 2000; Oldfather, 1995). Influenced by the conditions of multiple accountabilities that impinge on today’s school environment there has been a shift in the role of students from passive recipients of teaching to active contributors of school change. Thus, traditional roles of students such as hall monitors, teacher helpers, and student council members are now deemed inconsequential to authentic school reform (Cook-Sather, 2002). According to Cook-Sather the new role of students is enormously influenced by the proliferation of information technology, youth cultural media, and the trends of globalization. The new role of students is supported by the increasing recognition of the interdependence of roles between students and educators

in the effort to improve schools (Kushman & Shanessey, 1997; Rubin & Silva, 2003).

Some researchers have described the role of students as change agents rather than products of change—a more traditional model (Cook-Sather, 2002; Kushman & Shanessey, 1997).

This conception of the new role of students has also been influenced by constructivism. Some progressivists (Dewey, 1938), constructivists (Von Glasersfeld, 1989, 1995) and developmental psychologists (Vygotsky, 1978), in terms of knowledge, have also described students as co-creators of knowledge. No longer must students be perceived as passive receptacles of knowledge, but as co-constructors of knowledge and of their learning environment (Joselowsky, 2007). By this the vital participation of students in the construction of knowledge is critical to their learning. Students are seen as unique, complex, and multidimensional beings who construct knowledge out of their experiences in an active and dynamic process. The influence of constructivism in placing the responsibility of learning on the learner is critical in the design of effective school reform for student achievement (Von Glasersfeld, 1989). When students feel responsible for their learning they are motivated to learn and their academic performance is enhanced (Schmakel, 2008).

The new role of students hinges on the concept of empowerment, not mere participation. Therefore, while listening to students is the necessary first step, educators are increasingly realizing that in order to meaningfully tackle the issues of school reform they must empower students as partners (Cook-Sather, 2002; Kurth-Schai, 1988; Mitra, 2003; Oldfather, 1995a; Rubin & Jones, 2007). The empowerment of students, when sustained, enables students to alter the dynamics of schools and more importantly

improve teaching and learning. The perspectives of students must be the foundation upon which school leaders can plan, develop, implement, and sustain ways to improve schools (Gransden & Clarke, 2001).

Student Voice vis-à-vis Teaching and Learning

In terms of teaching and learning research on student voice shows that students can be an important resource to teachers on what works and does not work in the classroom (Cushman, 2003), or what practices best promote student learning and how to deliver those best practices (Doyle & Feldman, 2006). If the central focus of pedagogy is on student engagement the quality of learning improves (Tolman, Ford, & Irby, 2003).

In her analysis of student voice on instruction Schmakel (2008) discovered that to understand how students mediate classroom events it is important to understand the underlying relationships between their motivation, instructional process, and academic outcome. Although the study was focused on four ethnically diverse parochial schools and the sample size was limited, the study's urban setting as well as the experiences and perspectives of the students proffer valuable insights for school leaders in terms of instructional reform. The nine motivational instruction constructs developed by Schmakel (2008) have been recognized as valuable tools for the analysis of the experiences and perspectives of students regarding teaching and learning

Students in the study emphasized that they value *fun* in learning, that boring instructional practices do cause them to lose interest in some subjects, and consequently in academics. Under the construct of *interest* students of all achievement levels acknowledged that variables in the learning environment of students, such as interesting activities, interesting teachers, improved student learning, and better grades, are definitely

connected (2008). Under the third construct, the *effective use of time*, students suggested that departmental content area teachers be required to switch classes instead of students and that students' school days be spread out throughout the school year (2008). This is particularly important for high poverty urban students who cannot afford the luxuries of educational summer camps and interesting vacations. An emphasis on Individualized instruction, whereby teachers are available to provide extra help to students, was one important concerns of students captured under the construct of *individual help* (2008). Under the fifth construct, *challenge*, students understood and appreciated the goals of schools to set high academic expectations. What they disliked was the practice of teachers who give students excessive bookwork, worksheets, and repetitive assignments (2008). In terms of the sixth construct, *use of student time*, most students desired being part of the decision making process in schools. Students believed this motivate them to care more about their school, to learn more, and to improve academically (2008). In reference to the seventh construct, *updated materials*, students emphasized the importance of having better textbooks, more educational materials, and a preference for technological equipments such as laptops for their convenience and portability (2008). The eighth construct, *working in groups*, was based on students' desire for social interaction during learning. Students overwhelmingly agreed that working together with classmates on assignments or projects increased their understanding of the subject matter, motivated them to learn more, and improved their grades. Students, however, also recognized the pitfalls of working in groups: that is, without teacher monitoring, group work can become loud, unfocused, and unproductive (2008). The ninth and final motivational instruction construct, *combined mastery and performance goal orientation*,

referred to the preference of students for some competitive or ability-focused activities in the process of learning (2008). In other words, the infusion of activities or games engages students and helps sustain their concentration in the classroom.

When students are engaged emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally in their education they are less likely to be alienated from school. They become more connected to school. This can lead to increased motivation to learn. Generally, whenever students are motivated to learn their academic performance increases (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Student Voice vis-à-vis teacher interaction

In addition to exploring students' perspectives on how best they learn in terms of the learning environment and the communication of knowledge, students also know that a teacher's personality, knowledge of content, and level of rapport with students directly affect how they learn and what they learn (Cushman, 2003; McLaughlin, & Talbert, 1993). Student's perspectives of the kind of teachers they want and the relationship they expect from their teachers are powerfully portrayed in one group of eighth-and ninth graders' job description (Cushman, 2003) of what students want in a teacher:

WANTED: ONE TEACHER—MUST BE ABLE TO LISTEN, EVEN WHEN
MAD.

“Must have a sense of humor; must not make students feel bad about themselves; must be fair and not treat some students better than others; must know how to make schoolwork interesting; must keep some students from picking on others; must not jump to conclusions; must let students take a break sometimes; must let students know them; must get to know students; must encourage students when they have a hard time; must tell students if they do a good job or try really

hard; must not scream; must not call home unless it's really important; must smile; must help students with their problems *if* they ask; must not talk about students to other people; must be patient; must really know what they are teaching; if it's a lady, it would be good if she is pretty"(p. xv).

Indeed, not only do students know the type of teachers that create a comfortable and student-friendly environment for them to learn, but they also know the relationship that must exist between teachers and students for teaching and learning to be effective or productive.

One of the most salient characteristics in the literature on student voice about teacher-student relationship is that for students, the teachers' ability to teach is equally about relationship as it is about academics. An effective teacher is one who not only demonstrates mastery of knowledge of subject matter, but also knows and is sensitive to the contextual circumstances of the needs of the students in order to communicate that knowledge in a way that is meaningful. In a qualitative study by Morgan and Morris (1999) that explored the perspectives of both teachers and students on good teaching and student learning the findings indicated that while teachers and administrators tend to believe that students' academic performance in school is highly related to students' ability, gender, and home background, from students' perspectives the teachers' teaching methods and classroom relationship are factors that greatly influence their learning. Thus, having a great rapport with students enhances student ability to learn and succeed in that subject (Coleman, 1968; Cook-Sather, & Schultz, 2001). Research shows that when a teacher creates a classroom environment that is comfortable, students feel liked and

motivated to learn in those environments (Cushman, 2003; Rudduck & Flutter, 2003). What students hate is favoritism—it poisons the classroom environment and creates an uncomfortable atmosphere for the favored and the disfavored alike (Wilson, & Corbett, 2001).

Hidden in the actions and reactions of students in the classroom is the effect of students' liking of teachers. In the longitudinal study of six Philadelphia urban schools conducted by Wilson and Corbett (2001) students, with an instructional focus, described the type of teachers they wanted as those who consistently offered encouragement to students by never giving up on them, who are strict and fair in controlling students' disruptive behavior without taking too much time away from student learning, who provide opportunities for students to make up work when necessary, who patiently explain things until all students have understood it, who are adept in employing a variety of instructional strategies to keep students interested in learning, and who are able to connect with students and make the content of the lesson relevant to students' lives. From this seminal work on student voice in Philadelphia, Wilson and Corbett (2001) reported that while students in general prefer teachers who are strict and fair, they can even put in extra effort in their studies if they like a teacher. Students' sentiment of liking or not liking their teachers is not formed in a vacuum. Instead it is developed out of the impressions teachers make on students from the very first day of school. Teachers who are fair win students' affection, whereas teachers who are unfair only get students' reactions of resentment and disrespect. Grading students fairly is important to students liking of teachers because students care about their grades. They show this by how they constantly compare their papers and grades with each other. They observed that while

some students may openly confront a teacher about their grades, quiet students who perceive favoritism in grading practices may internalize and nurse their feeling of resentment for such teachers. For some quiet students this may lead to sudden lack of interest or effort in the subject as well as nonverbal acts of disrespect.

Students are also constantly and critically watching teachers in how they handle disruptive behavior in the classroom. According to Wilson and Corbett (2001) both quiet and disruptive students appreciate teachers who are fair and consistent in handling disruptive behavior. A lesson for teachers is that fairness with students regardless of their race, gender, or class wins students' trust and respect (Cushman, 2003). After several years of research on student voice, Wilson and Corbett (2001) concluded that the majority of students in disruptive classrooms disliked being in such classrooms. This is because most students see "themselves as controllable and willing to be controlled, if only the teacher knew how" (p. 75). As a result teachers who engage in classroom management strategies, such as refusing to continue instruction until the class is quiet as well as directing instruction only to well-behaved students while ignoring disruptive students, never really gain student confidence and their ability to maintain order in the classroom. Grnasden and Clarke (2001) described what students desire in their teachers using six criteria: (i) Someone they can relate to, (ii) someone who has mastery of his/her subject area and can explain difficult concepts clearly for student to understand them, (iii) someone whose style of teaching encourages students to learn and participate, (iv) someone who can deal appropriately and fairly with incidents of disruptive classroom behavior, (v) someone who sets high academic expectations and, (vi) someone whose routine for assigning and checking work is consistent. In all, the interactions between

teachers and students are critical to the effectiveness of a school. When a school develops and sustains productive interactions between teachers and students, then students in that school are more likely to be successful.

Obstacles to Student Voice

The blueprint to the development of student voice that is effective and meaningful certainly has its challenges. One of the challenges to student voice development is the issue of time. Adequate time is needed to create meaningful student voice because the construction of effective student voice or meaningful student involvement requires the development of a solid foundation of trust and openness between students and teachers (Rudduck, 2007). Bragg (2007) emphasized that the development of authentic student voice is about building relationships not systems. It is about building a listening culture which takes time. It is not a construct that comes into being spontaneously; rather it is one that must be constructed with care as it is necessary for multiple strategies to be developed through which students can express themselves.

Another impediment to the development of student voice is the lack of institutional commitment. For example, in most school settings the development of student voice is encouraged or promoted either by a single teacher or as a departmental practice. For the most part, it is never really promoted as a school-wide or systemic practice (Bragg, 2007). This is partly due to the hierarchical organizational structures of schools that create very few opportunities for collaborative practice. It is important that teachers and students create collaborative and nurturing relationships of trust, respect, and sharing when schools are, to a large extent, constrained by the by-products of hierarchical organizational structures. According to Bragg (2007) isolation, divisiveness,

disconnection and separateness in teacher-student, inter-teacher, school-parent relationships are examples of dysfunctional organizational structures in schools that continue to constrain the development of meaningful student involvement or authentic student voice. Unless such school organizational malaises are addressed the development of a systemic framework that promotes authentic student voice will remain, according to Rudduck (2007), an elusive construct.

A third factor that constrains the development of student voice is the lack of appropriate adjustment to the shift in power relations that is engendered as a result of student voice advocacy (Bragg, 2007). Inherent in the hierarchical organizational structures of school are hierarchical power relationships. In the traditional power relation between teachers and students, teachers are positioned as the custodians of knowledge and students as unknowing neophytes who must depend on teachers and administrators for knowledge and guidance. With such a power divide teachers and school administrators will never truly appreciate the reason students want to have voice in what they learn and how they learn (Levin, 2000). We know, for example, that in a constructivist learning environment the relationships between teachers and students become opportunities for learning where the teacher is seen as a facilitator of student learning, as opposed to being an infallible authority on knowledge. But teachers cannot truly 'know' their students when based upon the status-oriented framework of the traditional structures of schools, teachers are distrustful even of any constructive criticism of their instructional practices made by students. Therefore, any skepticism teachers may have of students' perception of teachers' instructional practices is rooted in their own perception of students as incompetent and intellectually immature. Power-oriented

relationships are harmful to students because, at a minimum, they impede students' desire to make themselves 'knowable' to teachers for fear of retaliation. Research shows that students thrive better in an environment that fosters trust, care, and mutual respect (Cushman, 2003; Bragg, 2007; Rudduck, 2007).

A fourth factor that makes student voice difficult to implement and sustain is the absence of authenticity. Rudduck (2007) defined authenticity as the communication of "a genuine interest in what students have to say" (p. 604). In the psychology of adolescence young people acquire, among other things, critical cognitive development and personal identity making it essential that students recognize their ability to think abstractly—that is their ability to engage in higher order thinking (Christie & Viner, 2005). Students at this age need their ideas, thoughts, and feelings acknowledged and in a sense 'respected'. It is important, according to Fielding (2001), to engage students in a genuine dialogue that leads to mutual identification and articulation of important issues by both teachers and students. It is also important to students that such genuine dialogue leads to action or tangible results. Authenticity embraces diversity. In embracing diversity it must not only seek diverse opinions or ideas, but respect the contributions of the marginalized and the voiceless. In sum, for teachers the development of authentic student voice requires not only "time to do things thoughtfully, courage to do things differently, but also the commitment to do things reflectively" (Rudduck, 2007, p. 604). The lack of inclusion is the fifth impediment to developing and sustaining student voice identified by Rudduck. Some researchers (Mitra, 2001; Silva, 2003) have brought to the fore through extensive fieldwork the feelings of exclusion experienced by certain groups of students in school consultative conversation for school improvement. Either because of the lack of linguistic

competence or being informally ostracized by the dominance of the articulate elite some students have expressed being marginalized by those who are outspoken or of a higher social class. For example, in urban settings with the proliferation of a large immigrant population it is important to offer equal access to all subgroups. One specific group is the group of students with limited English proficiency. Thus, great care must be taken in hearing the voice of the marginalized. Moreover, as NCLB mandates the attainment of minimum proficiency for all subgroups, then it is only fitting that all subgroups within a school be given an opportunity to be represented or at least be heard.

The usefulness of student voice to student academic achievement has gained credence through contemporary research (Cushman, 2003; Doyle & Feldman, 2006; Kushman & Shanessey, 1997; Wilson & Corbett, 2001). For example student voice can serve as an important evaluative tool in enabling educators to uncover the real needs and interests of students (Doyle & Feldman, 2006). Through student voice students are empowered to be active participants in the “planning, implementation and evaluation of their learning experiences” (Rogers, 2005, p. 10). Also, the role of students in schools has evidently transitioned from the traditional conceptualization of students as passive recipients of teaching to active contributors of school change (Cook-Sather, 2002). As active contributors of school change students have used their voices to inform researchers, school leaders, and teachers about what works and does not work in terms of classroom instructional practices (Cushman, 2003; Doyle & Feldman, 2006). For example, through student voice researchers are able to uncover that a teacher’s rapport with students, teacher trustworthiness, and students liking of teacher directly affect how students learn and what they learn (Cushman, 2003; Wilson & Corbett, 2001). Listening

to student voice is one effective way of making students feel important and valuable. When students are listened to or heard school become meaningful (Fletcher, 2005). This is particularly important for urban students who come to school with limited cultural capital and who need to be motivated to stay in school and to succeed (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The motivation to succeed that is propelled by the empowerment of student voice is one that must be cultivated by school leaders to achieve meaningful academic success for students (Fletcher, 2005).

Summary

Since its implementation in 2002 NCLB, through its expectations and sanctions, has created a state of urgency among school leaders and instructional staff in most urban public high schools due to the persistently low academic performances of most urban public high school students. This study is focused on urban public high schools designated under NCLB as ‘in need of improvement’—a designation assigned to schools that have failed to make AYP for two or more consecutive years. Most public urban schools, like CHS, are designated as ‘in need of improvement’. School leaders and teachers in such urban school districts experience a sense of urgency to have their schools make AYP. In this quest many urban school leaders have implemented a variety of school reform practices. Most of these urban school reform practices lacked sustained and comprehensive school improvement programs (Balfanz, Legters, West & Weber, 2007), lacked instructional program coherency (Newman, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001), and offer limited creativity and autonomy to teachers in terms of implementation of the curriculum (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). Yet students—those most affected by teaching and learning, those whose performance on NCLB assessments directly determines the

NCLB status of their schools—are those least consulted about school improvement efforts. This study affirms the importance of student voice as a vital resource for informing school leaders and teachers about how students learn and the efficacy of teacher instructional practices (Cook-Sather, 2002; Fletcher, 2005; Lee, 1999; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Rudduck & Flutter, 2003; Wilson & Corbett, 2001). The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore the perspectives of high school students at an urban public high school designated as ‘in need of improvement’.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Based on the research questions, this study was focused not on the statistical data that substantiate the poor academic performance of students at RHS, but on the perspectives and experiences of students on their school's 'in need of improvement' status. Focusing on the reasons students may have for their school's failing status provides an opportunity for an in-depth and detailed interpretation from students' perspective about their school's failing status. Employing such an interpretive lens is the central focus of qualitative studies. Also the study's focus of collecting rich, contextual data generally limits the number of participants, making the adopting of a case study design appropriate.

Qualitative Case Study Design

Since the research literature is silent as to what constitutes urban high school students' perspectives on NCLB state-mandated assessments such as New Jersey HSPA and their school's status as 'in need of improvement' (Cushman, 2003; Mitra, & Gross, 2009; Schmakel, 2008; Wilson, & Corbett, 2001) in this study I adopted a posteriori as opposed to an a priori approach (Patton, 2002). It is by observing students' interactions in their setting (out of the classroom) and most especially by conducting focus-group and one-to-one interviews that I was able to explore in depth the inner thoughts, beliefs, and experiences of students on these issues. It is this inductive approach that made a qualitative research methodology most appropriate (Patton, 2002). Since this study sought to generate rich, contextual data of the participants of a study, it clearly fell within the domain of qualitative case study research.

In this study extensive data were collected from two focus group interviews of six students each lasting about sixty minutes as well as twelve one-to-one interviews each lasting forty-five to sixty minutes. According to Creswell (2008), a case study is “an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., an activity, event, process, or individuals) based on extensive data collection” (p. 476). Also, a case study design was appropriate because as a qualitative analysis process the manner by which data is collected, organized, and analyzed under case study design produces a comprehensive, in-depth explanation of a study (Patton, 2002). This was consistent with the purpose of this study which was to provide an information-rich, in-depth description of high school students’ perspectives. The decision to adopt a case study design was also consistent with Yin’s (2003) technical definition of a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13).

Research Site

In selecting the high school for this study, two key criteria were used. First, the school must be an urban high school within a district with some form of official designation as a poor district. Secondly, in terms of student academic achievement on NCLB state-mandated assessments the school had to have the status ‘in need of improvement’.

The high school selected, Roosevelt High School (RHS), is an urban high school located in New Jersey. The New Jersey District Factor Group (DFG) criteria were used in determining that the district is an urban district. Developed in 1975 DFG is an index for ranking school districts in New Jersey by their socioeconomic status rather than on a

geographic basis (N J Department of Education, 2004). Under the DFG model schools are ranked alphabetically from A to J with A representing school district with the lowest socioeconomic status to J representing schools with the highest socioeconomic status or SES. Proponents of the DFG model of district classification believed that there is a strong relationship between SES and educational outcome; and that, although SES cannot be measured directly there are various socioeconomic traits that determine SES and thus influences academic outcomes. The seven key socioeconomic traits or indices developed were i) percent of population with no high school diploma, ii) percentage of population with some high school diploma, iii) occupational status, iv) population density, v) median family income, vi) unemployment rate, and vii) percentage of individuals in poverty (New Jersey Department of Education). While RHS is a 'B' district the actual difference between schools in 'B' district and schools in 'A' districts in terms of SES is infinitesimal. In fact, in using the DFG model as a criterion schools in both 'A' and 'B' districts were designated as *Abbott Districts*. This is important to establish similarities in demographics in the student population of both types of districts. RHS is located in a district in New Jersey that is designated as an *Abbott Districts*. Thirty-one in all, *Abbott Districts* are comprised of schools described by the New Jersey Supreme Court (*Abbott v. Burke*) in 1985 to be in poor communities and that the quality of the primary and secondary education offered to children in such schools is unconstitutionally substandard. To be considered an *Abbott District*, school districts must meet the following four criteria: (i) assignment to the lowest categories using the New Jersey Department of Education DFG index, (ii) continual failure to show evidence of a thorough and efficient education including failure to pass the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA), (iii)

existence of a large percentage of disadvantaged students (i.e., students in need of supplemental education, and (iv) existence of a municipal tax that is excessive considering the median income of the residents within the locality of the district so designated. Using these criteria RHS can rightly be referred to as urban district.

The second criterion that was used in selecting the site for this study was that the school must demonstrate evidence of sustained failure. There must be evidence that the school had failed to make AYP for multiple years. RHS was purposefully selected because the school was in year 7 of 'in need of improvement' status. In terms of student academic achievement within all subgroups RHS had failed to make AYP for the past seven years. Schools that are in year 7 of 'in need of improvement' status are in need of corrective action. Therefore, the district to which RHS belongs must plan for alternative governance. Due to the status of RHS this study was relevant because the findings of this study can offer from students' perspectives significant insights that school leaders and policy makers in schools similar to RHS can use to improve the academic achievement of their students.

Also as an urban district RHS has a student population of about 58% African-Americans and about 40% Hispanics. The graduation rate of its seniors was slightly above 87% compared to a state average of 92%. While the school may be lacking in the number of teachers who hold national certifications in content areas, the number of teachers meeting NCLB 'highly qualified teachers' requirements was 96% with little less than half holding advanced degrees. RHS current instability in principal leadership was reflective of the district's record of administrative turbulence.

Research Sample

For this study twelve students were purposely selected. Six students were selected from a pool of National Honors Society (NHS) students at RHS and the remaining six were selected from a pool of low performing (LP) students. The group of six students from the NHS was selected because they are students who have been nationally recognized for demonstrating “excellence in the area of Scholarship, Leadership, Service, and Character” (www.nhs.us, 2008, Article I). Research shows that students who demonstrate these quality traits are also students who are highly engaged in the academic and social life of their schools (Steinberg, 1996). Also according to Herbert and Reis (1999) it is high achieving students who are the most resilient to the negative influences of the urban environment such as economic hardship, the pervasiveness of drug use and drug-related activities, and the overwhelming influence of negative peer pressure. They understand the urban condition because they live it, like all other students in their schools; yet, their response is one of accepting the challenges with a resolve to excel. Therefore, the exploration of the perspectives of these students in terms of their beliefs and experiences of their school as ‘in need of improvement’, the quality of teaching and learning at RHS, and their suggestions for improvement of student achievement is important in order to understand students’ point of view. Instead of selecting students who are average performers, six students who are low performing students were also selected. Selecting these students was intended to hear and give voice to the other half—a group that is a contrast to the high achievers. As a school that has sustained years of academic failure it is important to also hear from students at RHS who are actually

experiencing academic failure on a daily basis as well as in their performance on state-mandated assessments.

Although the initial intent was to employ maximum random sampling in order to select student participants representative of the ethnic distribution of students at RHS, due to the voluntary nature of this case study which relied solely on students' decision to participate, the ethnic distribution of the final number of students selected did not reflect that of the school. In fact, it was not necessary; although effort was made to solicit participation from more Hispanic students.

Table 3: Research Participants Data sheet

Pseudonym of Participants	Sex	Grade Level	Ethnicity
National Honors Society(NHS)Students			
1. David	M	12	African
2. Esther	F	11	African-American
3. Stephen	M	11	African
4. Veronica	F	11	African-American
5. Martha	F	11	African-American
6. Sarah	F	11	African-American
Low Performing(LP) Students			
1. Gabriel	M	11	African-American
2. Daniel	M	11	African-American
3. Ann	F	11	African-American
4. Solomon	M	11	African-American
5. Peter	M	11	African-American
6.. Chris	M	11	Hispanic

Sample Selection Process

This study, in terms of student selection, was specifically limited to students at RHS who were eligible to take the New Jersey High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) because these were the students whose performances on state-mandated assessments in their high schools affect their schools' performance status under NCLB. Therefore, only juniors and senior were eligible to participate with freshmen and sophomores excluded.

With the assistance of the school's NHS coordinator I met with NHS students at RHS during two of their regular monthly meetings. At each time I informed the students about the research study, its purpose, students' confidentiality, and the school's status as "in need of improvement." Because the students were minors Parent Consent Forms (Appendix A) and Student Assent Forms (Appendix B) were distributed to the students present. Students were informed that they were under no obligation to participate and that there would be no monetary compensation for participation. Of the 16 forms distributed to NHS students only 6 returned their forms signed before the deadline. In the case of the selection of LP students, I was directed by the guidance office to the director of a program that aims to provide college opportunities for economically disadvantaged kids and the school's guidance counselor for juniors and seniors. The students from both groups were informed about the research study, its purpose, students' confidentiality, and the school's status as 'in need of improvement'. Because the students were minors Parent Consent Forms (Appendix A) and Student Assent Forms (Appendix B) were distributed to the students present. Students were also informed that they were under no obligation to participate and that there would be no monetary compensation for participation. Of the

eight who returned their forms signed, one could not be available for any meetings after school and the other was available, but did not want to be recorded. These two students were dropped resulting in six LP students available for the study.

Types of Data Collection

Data for this study were collected from the school's NCLB assessment-related documentation, two semi-structured focus-group interviews, twelve one-to-one interviews, informal observations, and participants' feedback sessions.

Collection of Documents

Documentation—the collection of records, documents, artifacts, and archives—constitutes an essential part of the data collection process because according to Yin (2003) documentation when applied to case studies serves to verify and support evidence or data from other sources. Yin pointed out that documentation is, as a source of evidence, stable and unobtrusive (or objective) in that it can be viewed repeatedly and its existence is independent of any case study. In this study documentation was collected to corroborate the data collected from the other sources mentioned above.

In terms of documentary evidence, data was collected and examined from the following: (i) students' data on HSPA assessments for the past seven years, (ii) documents from the school pertaining to RHS preparatory practices for HSPA and, (iii) reports from New Jersey Department of Education to RHS that pertains to NCLB accountability. Data from HSPA assessments pertaining to RHS was, for the most part, retrieved from the State of New Jersey Department of Education official website. HSPA test scores on RHS over the course of seven years in tabular and graphical formats were collected from the school's secretary. Variations in students' HSPA test scores were

analyzed to gain understanding of the overall student performance trends on the HSPA assessments. Also, other data contextual to student academic performance, such as data on drop out rates, and general attendance were collected.

To capture an in-depth or rich description of students' perspectives it is important to cover exhaustively those issues that are significant to answering the research questions of this study. Therefore, whenever necessary during the interviews students were probed after an initial response for specificity. By doing so I intended to achieve what Strauss (1987) described as the 'theoretical saturation' of the evidence available. As part of my data collection protocol, analytical memos and content summaries were written immediately after each focus group interview and one-to-one interview so as not to leave to memory any words or interactions that are integral to the study. In addition to the formal transcription of all the interviews, the analytical memos and contact summaries were written describing the setting and all nonverbal student interactions so as to capture the contextual significance of each observation and interview. This process served as a valuable tool during the analysis and interpretation phases to the study (Maxwell, 2005).

The study relied heavily on two focus group interviews and twelve one-to-one interviews. The central purpose of interviewing, according to Patton (2002), is to find out from those being interviewed those things that cannot be observed directly. More specifically, through interview we "enter into the other person's perspective" (p. 341). As the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of students cannot be adequately observed directly, conducting an interview enabled me to explore the perspectives of the twelve purposefully sampled high school students on the status of their school and possible remedies for school improvement. More importantly, interviewing as a qualitative data

collection tool reinforces the assumption that the perspectives of others are important, meaningful, and explicable.

Given the limitation of time to conduct this study coupled with the general tendency of participants to be hesitant in providing information for general interviews (Creswell, 2005), I employed first a focus group interview as a specific type of interview for this qualitative study. According to Kreuger (1988) a focus group interview allows for a “carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions in a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (p. 18). In order to know in this study students’ deep thinking about the status of their school, focus group interview was adopted as a qualitative research data collection method, to focus on the words and observations of interview respondents as they express reality in a nurturing environment. As opposed to data gathering methods in quantitative research, qualitative data collection method such as focus group interview focuses on the attitudes and perspectives of respondents whose number is often predetermined and specific (Kreuger, 1988). Also the decision to employ focus group interview was based on the fact that it allowed me to not only elicit responses from every individual as a group, but to gain feedback as to whether there was a consensus or lack thereof on each of the issues that are the focus of this study. In other words, I was interested in knowing whether the group had any shared or common perspective on an issue. Conducting the focus group interviews was critical to collecting the required data for this study because while some students may lack confidence to articulate their thoughts in a one-on-one interview they may with the support of the other students find confidence to express their thoughts in a focus group interview. In a focus group interview it is the atmosphere of comfortableness created by

the presence of other students with similar interest that is conducive for a confident response (Kreuger, 1988; Patton, 2002). In fact, the snowballing effect of the focus group interviews enabled the response of one student to most likely trigger a response from another student creating an opportunity for a more in-depth discussion. Moreover, the forum for open exchanges of ideas that is characteristic of focus group interview can provide the excitement and clarity needed to spur a more deliberative discussion. According to Merton et al (1990), a focus group interview in this sense “will yield a more diversified array of responses and afford a more extended basis both for designing research on the situation at hand” (p. 125).

In this study I conducted two focus group interviews (see Appendix C). The two focus group interviews, one with NHS students, (these are high performing students who are members of the school’s National Honors Society) and the other with LP students (students at the school who are struggling academically), focused on students’ perspectives on NCLB state-mandated assessments, their school’s performance, the status of their school as ‘In Need of Improvement’ as well as students suggestions for corrective actions that would improve the school academic performance and status. If students do care about their academic performance and about education then they will have some suggestions as to what can be done to improve their school which stands ‘in need of improvement’. Thus, exploring from their perspective what they believe will improve their academic performance and the overall performance of their school is relevant. I also conducted twelve one-to-one interviews covering both NHS and LP students selected for this study. Each one-to-one interview explored the students’ perspectives of their school in terms of teaching and learning—the core technology of education. Since the students

belonged to a school that was experiencing academic failure under NCLB standards it is important to explore how the quality of teaching and opportunities for student learning within RHS affected their performance on NCLB state-mandated assessments. Since there is very little literature, if any, on high school students' perspectives on NCLB state-mandated assessments this study seeks to explore what students really think of these assessments and its evaluative effect in determining school status.

Data Compilation and Analysis

General focus group questions as well as one-to-one interview questions can be found in Appendices C. As with all interviews, the actual questions and time allotted for each question varied depending on the extent of probing necessary. However, the questions listed for both focus group and one-to-one interviews reflect only the general scope and sequence of questions asked.

Each of the focus group and one-to-one interviews was audiotaped in order to capture with authenticity the verbal responses of each respondent. Nonverbal interactions, such as facial expressions and body language, if significant, were included in the field notes. Doing so helped in unveiling the contextual circumstances necessary for authentic analysis and interpretation of the data. Also during the focus group interviews in order to ensure clarity or the avoidance of ambiguity in the transcription of data, given the multiple respondents that are the participants of this study, each respondent was asked at the beginning of his/her response to say clearly his/her four digit identification number.

While there is no specific formula for the analysis of qualitative case studies, many qualitative researchers have suggested that the quality of the analytical process in qualitative research depends on the purpose of the study, the researcher's analytical skills,

the research questions and the conceptual framework of the study (Creswell, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). There are, however, general analytical strategies that promote intellectual rigor and enhance the analytical skills of the researcher. With the understanding that data analysis of qualitative data is an eclectic process (Creswell, 2008), for the purpose of this study, I judiciously applied some of these strategies.

The data collected from documentary evidence, informal observations, as well as focus-group and one-to-one interviews were analyzed by first seeking some form of pattern recognition. For example, in analyzing the data collected on students' perspectives of their school as in need of improvement, some patterns emerged such as students' level of knowledge of the school status, students' reaction to knowledge of the school status, and possible parental reaction from students' perspectives. The methodological strategy of critical and continuous review of data in search of patterns was applied to the entire collection of data. Also this analytical process began from the moment the first data were collected. This is consistent with best practices in the analysis of qualitative data where the process of collecting and analyzing data is a simultaneous one (Creswell, 2008; Patton, 2002). In addition to compiling all transcripts of audiotaped evidence from the focus group and one-to-one interviews, the data were coded by the process of marking up transcripts and fieldnotes for patterns. This consisted of the process of identifying that which was common in terms of the perspectives of students on state-mandated assessments, teaching and learning in the classroom, as well as their suggestions for school improvement. For example, during the process of analyzing the data on students' reactions pertaining to their school's failing status over multiple years marking up the data revealed the existence of significant commonalities in students'

reactions. Along with the coding of common trends or commonalities, I also identified and coded differences in students' perspectives on an issue so as to achieve comprehensiveness and authenticity in the reporting and interpretation of student voice on the issues that are the focus of this study.

When series of patterns were identified, I contextualized the similarity of multiple patterns into themes. Creswell (2008) described themes as “similar codes aggregated together to form a major idea in the database (p. 252).” The development of themes was intended to cover all possible interpretations of the data collected in this study. In order to ensure the process of coding was accurate and reliable, the use of more than one code for the same set of data was employed. This allowed for the capture of nuances in the rich, thick description of the evidence that constitutes student perspectives on each of the research questions of this study.

Issues of Validity and Reliability

There are four basic criteria used to evaluate social research studies: internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In keeping with the spirit of qualitative case studies, internal validity is referred to as ‘Credibility’, external validity as ‘Transferability’, reliability as ‘Dependability’, and objectivity as ‘Confirmability’ (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Therefore, in this study, issues of validity and reliability were addressed using qualitative evaluative constructs.

To establish the credibility of this study, it was necessary to identify and describe the authenticity of the participants or subjects of this study. Credibility is primarily established through the process of triangulation of sources. As no single source of data

collection can guarantee a comprehensive perspective of a school reality (Patton, 2002), I checked for consistency through the multiple sources of data collection methods described in this study: documentation, focus-group interviews, one-to-one interviews, informal observations of the school environment, and students' feedback sessions. By cross-checking the evidence gathered from these sources I was able to triangulate the data for credibility. The advantage of such triangulation of sources is that the weakness of one data source can be complemented and strengthened by the strength of another source. Moreover, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2005) to ensure credibility (internal validity) in the interpretation of the data the triangulation of sources is necessary. Furthermore, the credibility of this study was enhanced by the detailed in-depth description provided of the perspectives of the twelve participants in this study. I reported as accurately as possible what the students think and believe about their school as 'in need of improvement,' about the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom, and about their suggestions for the improvement of students' academic achievement. In addition, along with emphasizing the conceptual framework of this study, the description of the demographical, as well as the socio-economic context of the setting and the participants set the parameters and limitations of this study. This level of specificity was intended to improve the study's credibility.

Secondly, to ensure the transferability of the findings of this study, one must establish that the conclusions of this study will have a larger import (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To demonstrate that the findings of this study will be useful or applicable to other similar settings this study made connections through the conceptual framework to other similar settings beyond this immediate study. The description of the data collection and

data analysis methods which are guided by the conceptual framework of the study enhances the transferability of this study. Also the sample of this study, more in terms of the diversity in the sex of the participants and the specificity of grade levels included should encourage a broader application of the findings of this study. Moreover, there are multiple public high schools in New Jersey urban districts (specifically former *Abbott* districts) with similar concentration of Black and Hispanic student population and that have failed to make AYP for more than seven years (www.njdoe.gov, 2004). In fact the demographics, socio-economic status, and academic performance of the participants of this study are very similar to those of many urban districts within the country (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). Furthermore, the triangulation of sources mentioned previously can be used to enhance the study's transferability as the use of more than one data collecting method actually strengthens the applicability of a study to other similar settings (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Rossman & Wilson, 1994).

The third criterion, dependability, pertains to the consistency of the findings of the study. Because case studies are conducted in social contexts and because social contexts are always in a state of flux it is important to demonstrate awareness of and provide appropriate explanations for the changing conditions that are characteristic of qualitative case studies (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In this study the questions for the focus-group interviews were essentially semi-structured allowing for flexibility based on the responses of the participants. For example, during the actual interviews I might have begun with specific questions to focus the interview in the direction of the research questions, yet I remained flexible by asking other questions based on students' responses

to the initial questions. Such probing enabled me to truly capture the mutable contextual realities of the study which led to a rich, thick description. This process allowed me to continually refine the study based on relevant emerging evidence. As a result I was able to gain and demonstrate a deeper understanding of the setting.

Finally, evidence must be provided to demonstrate the study's confirmability, that is, that the conclusions of this study can be confirmed by another. Therefore, I kept in an organized and retrievable manner all records from documentary evidence, all transcriptions from both focus group and one-to-one interviews, and all fieldnotes from informal observations so as to give access to others who wish to inspect this study and its methodological procedures. To ensure that the data collected were secured and available for review I created duplicate files to every document that is important to this study. Also, I described the study's analytical and interpretation processes for the review of those interested in how the data in this study were analyzed and interpreted.

Significance of Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study methodology as the process by which data pertaining to the research questions were collected, analyzed, and interpreted. The qualitative nature of the study was relevant in meeting the need of explaining students' perspectives as opposed to the collection and analysis of mere statistical data. The case study approach added focus and specificity by requiring less in terms of sample size, but demanding more in terms of in-depth explanations of the school's academic status. This study's specific focus, of exploring urban high school students' perspectives about their school's status as 'in need of improvement' and students' offering of suggestions for school improvement, was best served by the interpretive lens of a

qualitative case study design. In addition, the section of RHS using the criteria of New Jersey District Factor Group (DFG) as well as NCLB designation of a school ‘in need of improvement’ provided the parameters and identification of the study’s targeted group: an urban public high school that is ‘in need of improvement.’

Limitations of Methodology

What this study achieved through an interpretative lens with its in-depth contextual data, it lacked quantitatively in its failure to achieve the consensus of all the students. For example, a survey would have provided data of a general nature about the opinion of the majority of students at RHS about their schools academic status. However, the objective was not about quantity, but about quality. The study also failed to include in its sample selection of twelve students a middle category of students—average achievers. These are students who scored ‘proficient’ on the HSPA. This category was purposefully excluded because these students did not make up the majority of students who took the test at RHS. Based on the school’s assessment records students scoring partially proficient (or low performing students) constituted the majority of the students who took the assessments each year from 2003 to 2010. This study had to include low performing (LP) students because these were students whose performance contributed the most to the school’s failing status. Getting an in-depth perspective from LP students about their school’s academic status seemed highly relevant. The input of high performing students who were NHS students was sought because these were students who were highly motivated about learning and were the most passionate about educational issues. In fact, during the focus group and one-to-one interviews high performing NHS students always

arrived on time, spoke at length and in depth on issues pertaining to the RHS academic status. They did not hesitate to stay longer to finish the interview, when necessary.

Summary

In the search for detail explanations from student's perspectives on their school's failure to make AYP for seven consecutive years, this study appropriately adopted a qualitative case study design. Using the criteria of DFG and NCLB's performance benchmarks the school selected, Roosevelt High School (RHS), is an urban high school that has been designated as 'in need of improvement.' Two focus group interview and twelve one-to-one interviews were used to explore the perspectives of twelve students—six National Honors Society students and six low-performing students. The data collected were coded, in large part, with the use of NVivo9; a qualitative research software. The common themes that emerged after analysis of the coded data served as the resource from which the research questions were addressed. Issues of the study's credibility, from a qualitative perspective, were addressed basically through the triangulation of data from three general categories: documentary evidence, focus group interviews and one-to-one interviews.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The findings of this study are presented in a format that addresses each of the research questions in numerical sequence. However, it must be noted that questions developed to explore each research question are related, making students' responses to a specific question relevant not only to that question, but to other questions as well, and even sometimes to questions constructed for a different research question category. Cases of such overlapping questions and responses are characteristic of qualitative research since the intent of such research is to probe for deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2008; Patton, 2002).

Research Question1: What are students' perspectives of their school as 'in need of improvement'?

In exploring students' perspectives of their school as 'in need of improvement' three themes emerged that address this objective: (i) students' level of awareness of their school's status, (ii) students' perspectives of the implications of their school's status and finally, (iii) students' perspectives on the level of parental awareness of their school's status and the importance of such awareness. The third theme, the level of parental awareness, is important because while it is a given that teachers and administrators are fully aware of the school status the same cannot be said of parents. Also, while parental level of awareness of a school's academic performance is not directly related to students' academic performance, it is highly related to parental participation and involvement which influences students' academic performance and school efficacy (Levin, 2000; Sanders, 2000).

Students' Level of Awareness of School Status

To ensure that every student understood the meaning and implications of their school's status, I started by explaining to every student the full meaning of AYP, the academic conditions that warrant the designation of 'in need of improvement', and the significance of the designation. Students were only partially aware that their school was 'in need of improvement' since it has failed to make AYP for at least two consecutive years. More importantly, students were completely unaware of the severity of the situation—that their school has not made AYP for seven consecutive years. Integrally linked to students' level of awareness of their school's status were students' reactions to knowing of RHS as a school 'in need of improvement'.

Students' perspectives and reactions upon knowing of their school's status were varied. For a student like Esther the concern was why RHS had been left to remain in a failing state for such a long period of time. She was appalled that the situation had yet to be remedied.

I didn't know that we didn't make this requirement for seven years.

I only knew about the seniors last year and the seniors before then and the fact that we haven't made the requirement for so long, I think everybody needs to step back and really think about why we haven't done that. (Esther)

Veronica and Peter, upon fully understanding their school's status in terms of NCLB, reacted with feelings of embarrassment and shame. They felt strongly that people in the surrounding towns and even beyond would perceive *all* students who attend RHS as being unintelligent and dumb. Students at RHS would now be perceived as being of no

match academically to students of other schools in the area. That was embarrassing.

David added that because of RHS academic status students from other cities would be discouraged from coming to a school like RHS. In fact, district's record indicated that many eighth grade students from the district's middle schools and K-8 centers applied each year to be accepted in the county's highly reputable magnet and vocational schools or as a second choice to the district's more talent-based smaller high schools.

Most students knew only vaguely that RHS was a failing school. In fact, not a single student knew that RHS had failed to make AYP for the past seven years. Although none of the students were surprised that their school was not the best school academically in the area, knowing now that RHS has been a failing school for so long elicited a feeling of embarrassment from the students. If students did not know specifically their school's current status then the expectation that they would know their school's performance over multiple years is highly unlikely. The lack of awareness, or inadequate levels of awareness among students is not uncommon in schools where student voice remains undeveloped (Cushman, 2003; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Wilson & Corbett, 2001).

Students' Perspectives on the Implications of their School Status

To explore students' perspectives on what it means to be aware of their school's status as a failing school, students were first asked whether it made a difference or not to be aware of one's school status. In other words, why is it important for students to know their school's academic status in terms of NCLB? Eleven of the 12 students unequivocally affirmed the importance of being fully aware of their school status. Though in general their responses were mixed, students gave several reasons for the importance of knowing their school status. Martha, Ann, Veronica, Sarah and Peter were

convinced of the importance of knowing their school's status because it would now encourage them now to work harder both individually and collectively for the good of their school. These students exhibited a progressive spirit; they refused to feel hopeless about their school's failing status. Rather, they were optimistic in offering suggestions on what to do to improve the school's academic situation. To be more specific, according to Sarah you could improve the school by helping your classmates academically and by being more involved in taking classes that would help you perform better on the HSPA.

In offering a second reason for the importance of such knowledge, Peter and Sarah reminded students of the public implications of the school's academic rating. They believed the general public makes stereotypical assumptions about the intelligence of students who attend poorly performing schools. They noted that since the public already perceives RHS as a failing school, it would also perceive students at RHS as being unintelligent and academically inferior. They felt this was unfair because they knew that there were many smart students at RHS. But at the moment they all agreed that something must be done to improve the school's academic record and improve the image of RHS within the community.

Offering a third perspective, David believed that having knowledge about their school's status only really mattered if students themselves view it as important and are willing as individuals to do something about it. This student described himself as a highly motivated student who values academic achievement and was willing to do whatever it takes to succeed. He adopted a more individualistic approach. He was more concerned about students being successful as individuals even though the school they attended was a failing school. David believed that a student can still be successful in a failing school like

RHS if that student optimizes the positive instructional or educational opportunities that the school provides. There are, in fact, some noticeably positive educational opportunities at RHS, such as a well-organized National Honors Society and the availability of Honors as well AP classes taught by highly qualified teachers. Thus, in the end, according to David knowledge about the school's failing status will only matter to those students who cared about their academic achievement.

Esther, who was singular in her dissent, believed that while it may be important for students to be aware of their school's academic performance, the power to change schools did not lie with students, but with school administrators and parents. Such a view assigns the responsibility of a school's academic performance to school administrators who have traditionally been viewed as the sole authority on school matters. The student also believed that parents are also principal agents of school change, because when parents are informed about their children's school status they will be motivated to help and be more involved in promoting the success of the school. The seminal works of Epstein (2001) and Sanders (2002) on the tripartite partnerships of school, family, and community support this view.

Another perspective brought out by Veronica and David was that knowing their school's status was important also for purely comparative purposes. They believed that their school's academic standards and performance were only meaningful when compared to other schools.

To me it's important to know where my school stands because you know it's like when I get out of this school how I'll compare to other people....When we like compare to other people we might not

be like as advanced as them, so it's important to know where we stand in this world. (Veronica)

These students were more concerned about how their school compared to other schools; that way they could ascertain what their school was 'worth' academically. It was in this comparative context that students evaluated the quality of the education they were receiving at RHS. For David, in particular, this comparative approach was even more personal. He had, at one point, transferred to another school and was able to actually experience the effect of the differences in academic expectations and performance that exist between the two schools. So he understood fully the quality of education he was currently receiving at RHS as compared to the quality of education that exists in other surrounding schools. He concluded that the quality of education at RHS was substandard.

In addition, students' responses about the significance of having knowledge about their school's status were centered more on the effect of their school's status on the image of the school. Students were more concerned about how the general public would begin to perceive their school as a failing school.

I think it's very bad that we didn't make AYP, because it makes students from other cities, countries not want to come to RHS,

Roosevelt High school. (Daniel)

All the students in general shared Daniel's point of view. They understood that the status of the school has direct impact on the school's collective image. More specifically, these students perceived the academic status of RHS as a reflection of the productivity of their school as a collective body of students, faculty, staff, and the community. Because they were more concerned about their school's

collective image, they were also concerned about finding solutions for improving their school. Even upon knowing that their school is a failing school, out of a sense of ownership and collective responsibility students expressed a willingness to be actively engaged in finding meaningful solutions to end the pattern of systemic failure that is characteristic of their school. It was evident from their responses that in spite of the negative experiences associated with attending a failing school, resigning into a state of hopelessness was not the path to be taken. In fact, some students believed that knowledge about their school's failing status would encourage them to work even harder both individually and collectively for the good of their school.

To further explore the implications of students' awareness of their school as a school in need of improvement, students were asked about any negative implications related to their school's status. Their responses reflected both a sense of disappointment and of the negative and stereotypical perception associated with students who attend poorly performing urban schools. Stephen, for example, feared that the negative implications of attending a failing school may be even more profound and damaging both now and in the future. Knowing of their school's consistently poor academic performance may make some students who are trying their best academically become discouraged and not want to try harder. If not addressed, the implication is that this could have a debilitating effect on the school's potential for success in the future. In addition, according to David, even teachers could be affected by a school's consistently poor academic performance. From the students' perspectives the negative effect

of a school's consistently poor academic performance was not only limited to students, but to the teachers as well—who may become discouraged and fail to teach with high academic expectations, let alone teach with enthusiasm. The students provided examples of how some of their teachers began teaching at RHS with great zeal and the love of teaching. These teachers have now slid into a state of hopelessness, a state void of any belief that things can get better at RHS.

Adding along to what the previous speaker said, it makes teachers, some teachers not even want to try; because they are going to say, 'Why even bother, because they are going to fail anyway, and I get paid so why do I have to put that much effort into it'. (David)

Students' Perspectives on the Level of Parental Awareness

The third theme addresses the level of awareness among one of RHS principal stakeholders—parents. First, students were asked if parents should be aware of the school's status. Secondly, students were asked to explore possible parental reactions to the school's status. Since students did not know fully their school's academic status in terms of NCLB prior to these interviews, from students responses about the school's status it was evident that their parents also would not know, but should know. Most of these students knew that they were the principal source, or in some cases the only source, of information on school matters for their parents.

Although every student believed in the importance of parental awareness of the school's status, the explanations students gave for why parents did not know the school's current academic status were quite notable. Firstly, students at RHS do not inform their

parents about what really goes on in school. Secondly, while the school communicated to parents about the academic performance of their children, it did not go far enough to inform parents about the school's overall academic performance. The students reminded me of how little they knew about their school's overall academic status. They did not know that RHS had not made AYP for the past years, and they were convinced that their parent did not know also.

Third, some students believed that some parents had negative dispositions toward education. They believed there were parents who did not care enough to want to know about the school's academic status. They believed some students come from homes where the parents did not appreciate the value of formal education. These are parents who, because they were surviving economically without a higher education, did not see any practical usefulness of formal education especially for their teenage children whom they believed were of age to work.

Some parents they, they're not very involved. Some parents, they didn't even finish high school so maybe education is not a top priority to them and they might say 'you can drop out of school and get a job, you're old enough', or 'like you don't need that.

There're other ways you can support yourself' and they just give up on their children. (Sarah)

Fourth, from another student's perspective it could really be because parents are not educated about the issues which is necessary in order for parents to effectively advocate the interests of their children and the improvement of the school. This is consistent with

Lareau's (2003) 'sense of constraint' which is characteristic of working and low income families.

It is clear that students think parents do not know fully the school's NCLB status. The students had also given several possible reasons why parents did not know the academic status of the school their children were attending. But because the ultimate goal of this study is to offer suggestions for school improvement it was important to explore from students' perspectives parents' possible reactions not of the individual performances of students, but of the school's overall academic performance over multiple years. The students stated that their parents would be highly upset and disappointed upon knowing the school's current academic status. They were, however, quick in adding possible actions their parents would take. The possible parental actions they proffered ranged widely from transferring their children out of the school system, to working harder with other stakeholders to change the system, to individually reinforcing for their own children high academic standards so that their children can succeed as individuals in spite of the school's low academic performance. Esther was frustratingly emphatic in expressing how a parent's socioeconomic status affects a child's educational opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau, 2003). This student was frustrated about how her parent's low socioeconomic situation had limited her educational opportunities as she now attends a school such as RHS.

I don't think she wouldn't want better for me; it's just a simple fact that I'm stuck in this town. It's really no other places that I can go because of financial, my financial situation or just transportation or whatever the problem may be. (Esther)

Summary of Research Question One

To summarize, while students were very much aware that their school was substandard in comparison to other schools especially suburban schools, they were not aware specifically of their school as a school ‘in need of improvement’ and even more importantly of their school not having made AYP for more than seven consecutive years.

Students were disappointed about their school’s status. They were concerned about how others or the public would perceive them and their school. They feared that if the school’s dismal academic performance continues, students at RHS might give up and fail to try harder. They feared that even teachers might find it pointless to hold students to high academic standards. This will make teaching and learning at RHS lacking of hope and optimism.

Since parental level of awareness of a school’s academic status directly influences parental involvement and participation—critical elements in the school improvement efforts—students’ perspectives were explored as a means to gauge parental level of awareness of RHS as a school “in need of improvement.” That their parents would be outraged and disappointed were the sentiments that students’ used to describe their parents reactions to knowledge of RHS current academic status. Students, however, spoke of three possible actions their parents would take if they were to know in detail of RHS current academic status; transfer their children out of the school system, work even more with school administrators and teachers to improve the school’s academic standing, or adopt a unilateral approach by working more intensely with their children to ensure that, in spite of the school’s poor academic situation, as individuals they can still be successful. The middle option, that their parents would be resilient by working even

harder with teachers and administration to improve the academic achievement of their children, was the one most frequently expressed by students.

Research Question 2: What are students' perspectives on teaching and learning in terms of NCLB assessments?

Research question 2 explores students' perspectives on teaching and learning at RHS in terms of NCLB assessments, particularly the HSPA. Nine questions explored students' perspectives on this issue (See Appendix E). Students' perspectives on the HSPA are important because HSPA scores in Language Arts Literacy and Math are used to determine a school's designation. Therefore, exploring students' perspectives in the areas of Language Arts Literacy and Math could shed light on the quality of teaching and learning at RHS. The findings, based on students' responses, have been categorized under six specific themes: (i) Description of Language Arts Literacy at RHS, (ii) Description of Mathematics at RHS, (iii) RHS preparation of students for the HSPA, (iv) Instructional practices that discourage students from learning, (v) Instructional practices that encourage students to learn and, (vi) The effect of discipline on teaching and learning at RHS.

Description of Language Arts Literacy at RHS

The responses of 11 of the 12 students about the quality of teaching and learning in the area of Language Arts Literacy at RHS were overwhelmingly positive. Their responses ranged from satisfactory to highly effective. The students assigned high ratings to Language Arts Literacy because of their teachers' efforts in preparing students to be successful on the HSPA. Students expressed with satisfaction the preparations provided by their teachers in getting them ready for the HSPA and how those preparations were

helpful because of the level of confidence they felt when they took the HSPA. In corroboration of students' responses, school data indicated that the percentage of students scoring proficient and above in Language Arts Literacy on the HSPA exceeded that of students' percentage in Math at RHS. For example, in 2010-2011 64% of the total student population at RHS passed the HSPA in Language Arts Literacy as opposed to only 28% of students who passed the test in Mathematics that same year. Most of the students showed appreciation for teachers who prepared them for the HSPA, the passing of which is a requirement for graduation in New Jersey

One of my teachers, she knew exactly everything that was supposed to be reviewed and done for the HSPA. So she basically gave us a whole lot of strategies. So I think the English department, well the Language Arts department is good here at RHS. (Chris)

Although students praised teachers' efforts in HSPA preparation of students in the area of Language Arts Literacy, some students pointed out two key limitations in the description of Language Arts Literacy at RHS. First, in terms of instruction, students expressed a lack of teacher-student interaction (Gransden & Clarke, 2001; Lee, 1999) and the lack of teacher availability to work with students individually (Wilson & Corbett, 2001). Low performing students, like Solomon, emphasized the need for instructional connectedness with teachers as well as the need for one-to-one instructional help. From these students' point of view teachers who continued to engage in the traditional approach of lecturing as the main pedagogical medium of instructional delivery in Language Arts Literacy at RHS were not making the instructional connection with

students for learning to be meaningful. Even when students were asked what instructional practices during Language Arts Literacy they find most exciting they mentioned movies: some of which were relevant, others overly repetitive. Some students even mentioned the assignment of projects in Language Arts Literacy as exciting and engaging, but the practice they said was few and far in between or sparsely implemented.

The second limitation, pointed out this time by a National Honors Society student and affirmed by most students, was the lack of balance in the selection of required literature materials in terms of author's ethnicity. Students were disappointed in the paucity of African-American authors that made up the required Literature at RHS. They were keen in acknowledging the impropriety of attending a school that was predominantly African-American yet required its students to study literature that was predominantly Anglo-Saxon.

The only thing I think needs to be fixed is the Literature, meaning what kind of books the students read. They need more variation, because this is a dominant, a community where African-Americans are dominant. I believe they need to read about more African-American authors rather than British authors (David).

Description of Mathematics at RHS

Unlike Language Arts Literacy, students described their Math teachers as not providing students with adequate preparation for the HSPA. In analyzing RHS 7-year trend data in Mathematics in 2010-2011 only about 28% of the entire student population passed the HSPA, the lowest in seven years. In fact, over the past seven years no more than 40% of the total student population passed the HSPA. With most students taking

standard classes in Math a significant majority of students interviewed described their Math classes as instructionally ineffective. The following reasons were given for such ineffectiveness: the fast and inflexible pacing of Math lessons, disruptive classrooms behaviors caused by students, and other negative pedagogical practices such as lecturing.

Low performing students complained of how teachers' prescriptive adherence to the district pacing guide in Math made it difficult for them to adequately understand a concept before a new one is introduced. They said some teachers believed by covering a lot of materials students would be exposed to more areas in Math and might perform better on the HSPA. Such practice that promote teachers' adherence to scripted lessons and mandated curriculum according to Crocco and Costigan (2007) stifles creativity. According to English (2010) such practices amount to teaching to the test. With no more than 40% of students scoring proficient and advanced proficient on the HSPA at RHS over the last seven years, the performance of students in Math had been poor.

Another common characteristic of most Math classrooms was the prevalence of disruptive behavior. Most Math classrooms were not conducive learning environments for the majority of students who came to class on time, who came prepared, and who sat in frustration for class to begin. These classrooms became havens for disruptive students who showed no interest in coming to class to learn. Solomon, a LP student described his classroom experience in the classroom:

And for my Math class, I have a lot of rowdy students in there, and it's hard for the teacher to teach because they're cursing, speaking loud, or playing music. So no one gets to learn. The teacher is trying to teach people, but the kids in the back of the room are

making noise, telling the teacher to shut up, curse at her. And no one is learning nothing 'cause she keeps kicking them out and yelling at them, or threatening them. So it's very hard for the teacher to teach them. (Solomon)

The third common characteristic that students used to describe their Math classrooms was that some teachers engaged in pedagogical practices that were, in their view, “unproductive.” For example, Solomon complained of teachers who consistently engaged in lecturing and those who engaged in off-topic discussions. Low performing students, more so than NHS students, complained of teachers whose only mode of instructional delivery was lecturing. It was clear that for them lecturing was boring. By lecturing students meant that math teachers spent so much time showing the work on the board and very little time giving students the opportunity to do the work or practice. In other words, they wanted something more interactive or hands-on. Some also mentioned how some teachers would initiate off-topic discussions or a monologue about their personal lives during class time knowing that a typical math class lasted only forty minutes.

While the aforementioned perspectives were the common characteristics in most Math classrooms at RHS, Gabriel and Peter, who had the same Math class, described their Math teacher as effective and their Math classroom as a positive learning environment. The students indicated that their teacher used manipulatives to model Mathematical concepts as well as an interactive style of teaching.

Preparation for the HSPA

Critical to students' success on the HSPA is the level of preparation students

received before taking the HSPA. Therefore, when asked to describe the quality and content of the preparatory practices at RHS that would enable them to be successful on the HSPA and thus meet the graduation requirements of the State, students' responses reflected their concerns over the nature of teacher and administrative focus and content-area preparations in Language Arts Literacy and Mathematics. Students expressed great concern over what they observed as the gross disparity in how the administration accentuated sports and athletics over academics. The culture of the school, its formal practices and rituals, celebrated the achievements of its athletes without assigning equal emphasis to the academic achievements of its academically gifted or those who demonstrate tremendous effort in their studies.

Both NHS and LP (Low Performing) students believed RHS did not emphasize academics enough to create a culture of learning that is productive and progressive. Therefore, although the school offers formal after-school tutoring in Language Arts Literacy, Math, and other subjects, these programs were either unknown to most students or poorly attended by students. During the time after school that I interviewed students for this study, my observations of these classrooms affirmed what students had said. It was interesting to see how students who poorly attended HSPA preparatory class,(in fact those who needed these classes) were the same students who were seen in classrooms a month or two before graduation attentively engaged in completing SRA requirements—a less rigorous alternative to graduation for students who did not pass the HSPA assessment.

Instructional Practices that Discourage Students from Learning

To probe deeper into students' perspectives of the quality of teaching and learning in terms of Math and Language Arts Literacy, I found it necessary to ask students whether there were any instructional practices within the classroom that discouraged them from learning. This question is particularly relevant because RHS is a school that has failed to meet the State's academic achievement benchmark for a long period of time. Very rarely, if any, do teachers or administrators inquire from students their perspectives of the effect of classroom instructional practices on student learning (Cook-Sather, 2002; Wilson & Corbett, 2001; Zion, 2009). Given this opportunity through these interviews students at RHS were unreserved in expressing their experiences of classroom practices that hindered their learning. Students identified three key areas of classroom instructional practices that hindered their learning, namely (i) the lack of effective discipline within the classroom, (ii) the inappropriate pacing of instruction, and (iii) the use of unqualified substitute teachers.

The lack of effective teacher discipline within the classroom during instructional time received the greatest level of emphasis from the students. Because students spoke so emphatically and so frequently about the lack of classroom discipline during instructional time this issue will receive separate treatment later in this study. For now, in this section of the study the issue of discipline will be treated only as a contributory factor to what discourages students from learning at RHS. According to all the students interviewed for this study the issue of discipline and its effect within the classroom environment was the most prominent factor influencing student learning and performance. Throughout the interviews students were very clear about how the lack of discipline or the lack of

effective classroom management hindered their learning. More specifically, students expressed with frustration how almost all their standard classes in particular were marked by loud and disruptive behavior. While studies by Gransden and Clarke (2001), and Wilson and Corbett (2001) corroborate disruptive behavior and teachers' lack of classroom management as hindering student learning, the views of the twelve students interviewed in this study on the singular emphasis on students' disruptive behavior and its effect on student learning at RHS was significant. NHS students taking standard classes and almost all LP students—those whose only classes are standard classes—complained of disruptive behavior as all too common in their standard classes. Although NHS students spoke more passionately and comparatively when describing the differences between their honors classes and their standard classes in terms of discipline and the classroom environment, for LP students trying to learn in disruptive classrooms was all they knew. For LP students it was as if such disruptive classrooms were the norm.

Based on the data gathered from students' interviews there were two reasons for students' disruptive behavior during standard classes. The first was the disruption that ensued from teachers' enforcement of the school's uniform policy and the second was the distractions within the classrooms from students uninterested in learning. In almost all their standard Math and Language Arts Literacy classes, the bulk of the disruption according to students occurred at the beginning of class when teachers attempted to enforce the school's uniform policy. School policy at RHS required that students without uniform not be permitted to class. Some students, most of whom were repeat violators, came to school everyday and attempted to enter class without school uniform. Because these students were defiant, the teachers spent significant amount of time arguing with

them when enforcing the school's uniform policy. According to Solomon on some occasions as much as 50% of instructional time was spent on discipline. But from the estimates given by most students, on average, about 38% of class time was spent at the beginning of class enforcing the uniform policy. At RHS the class time for Math and Language Arts Literacy for 11th and 12th graders is 40 minutes each.

I think when teachers spend a lot of time trying to get the students to settle down I think that really takes away from me learning. Like with the uniforms and stuff I understand that it's their job for us to send a student who's not wearing uniform down to get a pass and everything. But when you stand there and argue with the student for fifteen minutes worrying about whether or not he's going to get a pass, that's just ridiculous (Esther).

Another reason for classroom disruption was the level and frequency of classroom disruption from students who were uninterested in learning. Other than the time wasted at the beginning of class by teachers enforcing the school's uniform policy, there was the distraction within the classroom from a specific group of students who were not interested in learning. They described these students as those who sat in a certain section of the classroom, engaged in loud conversation among themselves with no regard of the teacher's presence and his desire to teach. These students came to class with I pods in their ears, with book bags that had no books, and of course with nothing to write with or write on. According to Stephen the primary intent of these consistently disruptive students was to socialize. School for them was seen only as a haven for socialization.

The second key factor that discourages students from learning was the inflexibility of teachers in the pacing of instruction. Students complained of how some teachers were teaching too fast and never allowing students the time to absorb the new knowledge before introducing another new idea. The complaint solely pertained to Mathematics and was not limited to any specific category of students since both NHS and LP students had the same concerns. Ann, a LP student, complained of how her teacher insisted that it was the curriculum that dictated the content and pace of her instruction. Sarah, a NHS student argued that when students complain of the fast pace of instruction it was because they did not understand the work. Therefore, continuing to teach at that pace only made learning more difficult for these students. This, she concluded, was the reason the students lost interest and become discouraged about learning.

Finally, the third factor that discouraged students from learning was the practice of placing in classrooms substitutes who had no content-area knowledge of Language Arts Literacy or Math—subjects tested on the HSPA. Five out of the six LP students spoke of incompetent substitutes at RHS as compared to NHS students. Ann, a LP student, gave an example of how her Math teacher was out on a medical leave for about two month beginning in February. The school, she said, had prior knowledge of her absence. The substitute provided had no content knowledge of Mathematics. After assigning the limited work left by her regular teacher there was nothing else to do for weeks. This is an indication that students do desire work that is challenging and teachers that can help them complete such work (Schmakel, 2008). With HSPA test due in March she and the rest of her classmates were ill-prepared for the math test on the HSPA. Still

angered by the experience she said going to class during those two months was a waste of time.

Instructional Practices that Encourage Students to Learn

Exploring students' perspectives about factors that discouraged students from learning is equally important as exploring factors or classroom instructional practices that encouraged students to learn. In the case of a school like RHS—a school in need of improvement—it was highly relevant to explore students' perspectives about what makes learning fun and exciting in order to improve student academic performance. Students identified basically three key factors or instructional practices that made learning fun, exciting and meaningful.

First, the use of technological resources as instructional aids made learning fun and meaningful. Esther and Solomon praised their Language Arts teacher who used videos and movies to keep students engaged during class. The teacher did this, on most occasions, by showing movies that were related to books just read by the class. Chris' interest in math had peaked because his Math teacher showed videos to support and reinforce new mathematical concepts

Let's say we were talking about parallel lines on a graph, she
would bring in videos about how you put parallel lines onto streets
and maps. (Chris)

Secondly, the students found learning exciting when the teacher uses manipulatives, games and projects as instructional resources to create real life situations or make learning fun. Veronica was still excited when she gave an example of how her teacher would let the class play a game of jeopardy built around the lesson. The teacher

would use the game as a review tool to give them an opportunity to reinforce what they learned. This was one of the ways he kept the whole class excited. For Ann, her math teacher would launch a new lesson with little games using Math manipulatives. Esther said she enjoyed group interactions with other students in completing projects. According to Gabriel, even something as simple as calling students to the board to solve problems and giving them an opportunity to explain their solutions to the class was more engaging than lecturing. Research shows that when classroom pedagogy is engaging and exciting for students, the quality of learning improves (Tolman, Ford, & Irby, 2003).

Thirdly, students said they appreciated teachers who took the time to explain difficult concepts in detail. Esther spoke with fondness of her freshman math teacher who was always willing to give, without ever getting angry, multiple and varied explanations to new mathematical concepts until every student in the class had a satisfactory understanding of the concept. For her, there has never been a teacher like him since then.

The Effect of discipline on Teaching and Learning at RHS

Based on the data from student perspectives the lack of effective classroom discipline was the most influential factor affecting student learning and teachers' ability to teach at RHS. The students complained frequently and unanimously about disruptive classroom behavior and the effect it has on their learning. Before describing the effect of discipline on teaching and learning I will begin with a description of the contextual environment where the lack of discipline at RHS occurs. According to the students all the discipline problems existed in the "standard" classes as opposed to honors classes. And since an overwhelming majority of students took standard classes it was the majority of students that were affected—thus the importance of the issue of discipline at RHS. For

the purpose of this study the focus here will be on Math and Language Arts Literacy classes—subjects tested on the HSPA. The students also complained that the lack of discipline was more prevalent in standard Math classes than standard Language Arts Literacy classes. They stated that it was because more attention was needed to understand the complexities of mathematical concepts than concepts taught in language Arts Literacy. Another key contextual characteristic pertaining of the issue of discipline was the time during the instructional period when the disruptive behaviors occurred. As mentioned previously in Research Question 2 of the Findings, a significant part of students' disruptive behaviors occurred at the beginning of class when teachers attempted to enforce the school's uniform policy. With an average of about 38% of classroom instructional time spent on enforcing the uniform policy, another 25% (and sometimes 30%) of classroom time was spent on controlling disruptive students who were uninterested in learning. This was how one NHS student described her standard math class:

I thought it was such a waste of a class for the simple fact that I couldn't learn because my teacher spent all the time trying to calm the class down. And when he finally did in fifteen minutes of class left that I did have to learn I didn't, I didn't understand because he didn't have time to really go step-by-step and help each individual person with the problem that they had because he just spent all of his time trying to calm down the class. (Esther)

The students were further probed to give specific examples of how the lack of discipline or students' disruptive behaviors affected teaching and learning at RHS.

According to students the disruptive behaviors of some students negatively affected the way their teachers taught and the way they learned as students at RHS. From David's point of view when students were disruptive within the classroom it affected the teachers' teaching because the teacher became stressed and when the teacher was stressed it affected everything the teacher did—the way he or she taught, responded to other students in the classroom, and the amount of content covered that period. David further gave an example of how the stress engendered by students' disruptive behaviors affected teachers:

I know a teacher that it takes such a personal toll on her. I've known this teacher since freshman year, she looked really nice, she still does now, and I think most of you know her—my Language Arts teacher. But I think because of the stress that the students have caused her she's probably aged five years more than she would have aged. And if you look at her now I feel really bad because she has a lot of stress. (David)

He concluded that when teachers were not stressed by students' disruptive behaviors, they did a lot more for students like one-to-one instruction, willingness to provide more detail explanations, or the giving of their time freely (without pay) during lunch and after-school to help students who needed help.

Whenever students were disruptive in the classroom not only did it affect teachers in the way they taught, it affected students as well in their ability to learn. For Esther, her math teacher was distracted so often that she could not hear him teach. Also she could never get him over to help her personally. As a result she performed poorly on her tests.

In Ann's case, the teacher insisted on homework being done, even though the teacher did not really cover the material in detail. Whenever she returns her homework the answers were usually wrong. Solomon, who is an LP student, dreaded going to his math class because the distractions were continuous—it occurred everyday. The situation was even more serious for Stephen who was waiting anxiously for the day when his request will be fulfilled: to be switched out of his Math class. According to Martha how were students expected to perform well on tests when the only reward good students received by going to class was to sit there, get bored, and learn nothing because the teacher spent so much time on discipline.

In the end when asked what single factor contributed most to the RHS poor academic standing, they unanimously agreed it was the frequent lack of discipline in the classrooms.

Summary of Research Question 2

The objective of research question 2 was to explore from students' perspectives the quality of teaching and learning at RHS since the effectiveness of instruction and student learning are factors that influence student academic performance. In terms of Language Arts Literacy at RHS for 11th and 12th graders students praised their teachers for the level of preparation they received for the HSPA. However, some students pointed out limitations to the program as being the need to include in the required Literature more African-American authors and the need to enrich instruction by infusing more teacher-student interactive instructional strategies. In Mathematics, most math teachers did not provide adequate preparation for the HSPA. In fact, the classroom environment in Math was frequently marked by students' disruptive behaviors both at the beginning of class

when the teachers attempted to enforce the school's uniform policy and during class time when the teachers were teaching. Most students had math as the first class in the morning.

Students were clear in identifying three factors, or instructional practices that negatively affected their learning and thus limited their academic performance as the lack of classroom discipline, inflexibility in the pacing of instruction and, the provision of unqualified substitutes with no content-area knowledge of Language Arts Literacy or Mathematics. Based on the data collected students were also clear in identifying instructional practices that created excitement, and encouraged learning as the use of technological resources as instructional aids, the use of manipulative and games especially during math to launch, explore, and reinforce a concept, as well as the willingness of teachers to be patient and provide detail and varied explanations to difficult concepts when students were struggling to learn.

In the end, in terms of teaching and learning and academic performance, the students unanimously identified the lack of classroom discipline as the factor that contributed most toward their poor academic performance. The lack of classroom discipline affected teachers' ability to teach effectively and students' ability to learn and be productive.

Research Question 3: What corrective practices can students offer to improve the academic performances of students at RHS on the HSPA?

In analyzing the data on students' responses to research question 3, three themes emerged, namely (i) students' perspectives on the role of teachers and administrators for school improvement, (ii) students' perspectives on the role of students toward their own

academic improvement and, (iii) students' perspectives on the ideal classroom—a learning environment that would optimize the academic achievement of every student at RHS.

The Role of Teachers and Administrators

Based on an understanding of their school as a failing school, their experiences of the school's culture, and an evaluation of the performances of their teachers and administrators, students made specific proposals as to what they believed needed to be done at RHS to improve the school's academic status in terms of NCLB. Their proposals in terms of what teachers and administrators must do to improve students' academic performance were focused on four key areas: discipline, preparation for the HSPA, a sense of caring about academics, and teacher availability.

Receiving the most emphasis was the lack of discipline. Almost all the students perceived the lack of discipline in standard classes as mainly a failure on the part of teachers and administrators at RHS. While they were aware that the disruptive behaviors were caused by some students, in their judgment it was the classroom teacher who ought to be assertive in creating a classroom environment for all students to learn. In the study by Wilson and Corbett's (2001) students interviewed also recognized that the responsibility for classroom discipline fell primarily on the teacher. They were focused not on the disruptive students, over whom they had no control, but on the many students, who came to class, sat quietly, and had to wait to learn. According to Solomon, something ought to be done to get the bad kids out of the classroom so that other kids could learn because in the end it made the teacher look bad. He expressed, without reservation, that students engaged in the practice of discussing among themselves in

which teacher's class they do learn and in whose class they learn nothing. For David, not only should disruptive students be kicked out of classrooms, they should be suspended every time they disrupt the class. Then when their parents begin to see multiple suspensions they would come in for a conference with the teachers and administrators and these students would begin to seriously reflect on their behaviors. But this ought to be a last resort after a necessary first step. According to David, a large part of discipline is built on the relationship between teachers and students. Therefore, teachers must find creative ways to bond with students in order to establish a relationship of trust. A good way for teachers to bond with students is to have something as simple as an egg race, a bike race, or even a basketball match. These activities will help ease tensions in the sometimes fiery relationships between teachers and disruptive students. Daniel, on the other hand, does not believe the vice-principals and the principal at RHS are fully aware of the magnitude of the situation because he can not remember seeing any administrator in his disruptive standard classrooms. For him, the vice-principals or the principal should visit classrooms more often because only when they see what was really going on would they be able to understand the urgency to fix the situation.

The second suggestion in terms of what teachers and administrators can do to improve students' academic performance on the HSPA was in the area of the preparation for the HSPA. The students were unanimous in suggesting that preparations for the HSPA should begin in September, at the beginning of the school year and not weeks or a month before the test. They emphasized that the practice of engaging students in a crash course for the HSPA just one or two months, or sometimes weeks before the test was definitely not effective. In addition, in terms of the content of the preparation the

emphasis should be more on Mathematics than Language Arts Literacy. They reasoned that because most of what appears on the HSPA in terms of Math are Algebra I and Geometry teachers should develop and concentrate on a rigorous review of Algebra I and Geometry beginning in September. Classes in Algebra II (the required content for the junior year) should either be postponed until after the HSPA in March, or taught minimally throughout the school years with teachers emphasizing more the key mathematical concepts in Algebra I and Geometry. Some students said this is necessary because by September they had forgotten during the summer what they learned in Algebra I and Geometry. For others they had still not mastered the key mathematical concepts in Algebra I and Geometry to be ready for Algebra II in their junior year making a focus on Algebra I and Geometry necessary. The act of soliciting students' participation in the selection, design, and implementation of the curriculum enhances students' academic performance (Kurth-Schai, 1988; Lee, 1999; Mitra, 2005; Rubin & Jones, 2007; Zion, 2009). Also students' desire to contribute is also an indication of the manifestation of the new role of students where students are perceived not as passive recipients of teaching, but as active contributors of school change (Cook-Sather, 2002).

The third proposal was focused on a sense of caring about academics. Students interviewed do not believe that the administrators and some teachers at RHS really care about students' academic success. They were all absolutely convinced that the school cared more about sports than academics.

Since they're so great and they love sports, they spend so much money on sports and bedazzling and amazing us with the spectacular events that they could hold for the athletes. But they forget about the Mathletes. They

forget about those kids who are great in Math and have a passion for

Math.....So if you don't recognize them they are going to feel worthless.

They're going to feel like 'Oh sport is the only thing that's good'. (David)

One way that the school could have shown that it cared about academics was to

advertise academic programs the same way it advertises sports activities at RHS.

The school has programs to help students succeed academically, more specifically

to succeed on the HSPA, but most students said that they do not know that such

programs existed. If standard classrooms were often disruptive then students did

not always hear announcement made about academic programs. According to

Esther and Martha the school ought to find more creative ways to emphasize

academics and direct students toward academics.

The fourth proposal was teacher availability. According to students only very few teachers, if any, were willing to sacrifice to make time for students after school. Every

student interviewed knew of friends or school mates who were struggling academically.

Sarah gave an example of how sometimes a student might be struggling and the teacher might not even know about it because the teacher was so preoccupied with other things.

She mentioned how a student in her Math class would come to class and always put her

head down. The teacher even tried to put her out of the classroom. One day Sarah asked

the girl if she needed help. After giving her help a couple of times the girl stopped putting

her head down in class and began doing well in the class. Had she not inquired and

helped this student she would have lost complete interest in the class and failed that class.

Even some NHS students who took standard Math classes said they needed help

themselves. Outside of the forty minutes of class time for Language Arts Literacy or

Math there was no one-to-one tutoring available (not group tutoring). Some LP students said that sometimes they needed one-to-one instruction during class time but the classroom environment did not make it possible. Sarah was convinced that it all started with the teacher. It is the teacher who ought to make students feel they can come to him or her for help. For Ann, maybe RHS should attempt adopting the college model where professors have office hours to see students individually for help when students were struggling academically. She pointed out that when teachers make themselves available they can help a lot of students who are struggling quietly.

The Role of Students

Any attempt to find a realistic and sustainable solution to RHS as a failing school must include not only the efforts of teachers and administrators, but students as well. Students were therefore asked to offer suggestions as to what students themselves could do at RHS to improve their academic achievement. The students knew, for example, that correcting the issue of discipline would require more than just asking teachers and administrators to fix the situation. It would require meaningful efforts from students as well.

In analyzing the data on what students can do to improve the school's level of academic achievement students proposed two major actions, namely (i) self-empowerment about success and, (ii) self-motivation to succeed. According to David, unless students at RHS began to believe in themselves and know that they can be successful academically, RHS would continue to be a failing school. Students needed to resist the perception that they can not succeed or that they can not be successful academically. He made the point that in a school where there were more pregnant

teenagers than security guards, while empowering students about being successful might seem insurmountable; students' academic success was still possible. There were many smart students at RHS who were academically successful. He shared with the group that students needed to empower themselves by dispelling the belief some students have that RHS was 'a prison'—a dead end, a trap to failure.

Another way students could empower themselves, according to Esther, was to become leaders not followers. Students at RHS needed to stop emulating kids who cut class, disrupt learning, and who act as class clowns. Students ought to stop seeing these behaviors as being 'cute' and 'cool'. There was a strong culture among students who thought it was cool to do the wrong things because they saw that it as the way to become popular.

The second step students must take to improve their academic achievements is to be self-motivated to succeed. Many students, in David's opinion, do not have the drive within them to excel. They seemed not to have any appreciation of the rewards of doing well in school. Such students did not assign personal value to listening to the teacher, taking tests seriously, as well as studying and grasping the materials being taught. For David in order for students at RHS to be successful they must be absolutely focused on school. He even suggested the need within the school to offer a course on 'How to Study' believing that one of the reasons students perform poorly on academic assessments was because they did not study and they did not study because they did not know how to study. Gabriel and Sarah shared the belief that students ought to be self-motivated by becoming academically focused and understanding that they must push themselves harder. This way they would surely succeed and will pass the HSPA. Students who were

unfocused needed to be told that whatever they do right now will definitely affect their future.

The Ideal Classroom

The final research question asked was about students' perspectives of what an ideal learning environment must be like in order for them to learn effectively and to succeed academically at RHS. Although the students proffered several perspectives, the analysis of the data yielded three main foci based on their experiences at RHS. First, students desired a learning environment unencumbered by distractions. Peter, Ann, Gabriel, and Esther emphasized their desire for classrooms where students were focused more on learning and teachers were readily available to offer more help to students. They also emphasized that in such a learning environment students would not have to wait to learn because of teachers enforcing policies that did not directly pertain to learning such as the school's uniform policy.

Secondly, students desired a learning environment that engages them in the learning process. In such a classroom, according to Sarah, teachers would design creative ways of engaging students in the learning process as opposed to teachers relying solely on lecturing. For Veronica, in such a classroom the teacher must adopt a cooperative learning design that encourages students to interact and learn from each other through group work and projects. Simply put, according to Esther, it must be a learning environment where learning would be fun and every student would be excited about learning.

Thirdly, students desired a classroom equipped with ample instructional resources to facilitate learning. Martha and Sarah emphasized the need for such a classroom to be a

print-rich learning environment. It must have a display of lots of high quality students' work. They believed such a display of high quality students' work would encourage other students to strive to perform at a high level.

Summary of Research Question 3

The focus of research question 3 was to provide students with an opportunity to offer recommendations for improving the academic culture at RHS. Students' recommendations for corrective actions were threefold: the role of teachers and administrators for school improvement, the role of students themselves toward their academic success, and students' conception of an ideal classroom at RHS that optimizes student learning.

The students held teachers and administrators generally responsible for the lack of discipline in most standard classrooms. While teachers must adopt strict measures to keep these classrooms free of disruptive behavior, at the beginning of the year teachers must bond with students and build a relationship of trust. Also more frequent visits by administrators to disruptive classrooms were highly recommended. The visits would make administrators to be more aware of what went on in these classrooms. In terms of the schedule and content of the preparation for the HSPA, teachers must begin such preparation as early as the beginning of the school year, in September. For such preparation students believed the emphasis should be more on Math than Language Arts and teachers needed to focus more on Algebra I and Geometry because, in their judgment, that was the bulk of what appeared on the HSPA. According to students in order for RHS to be academically successful school administrators must adopt a heightened sense of caring about academics more than sports. Currently, the reverse is

true. It was also important that teachers make themselves available to offer the individual help some students needed.

Based on students understanding that they too were an integral part of any school improvement efforts at RHS, students spoke with urgency of the need for them to be self-empowered—by dismissing any unbelief about their ability to succeed. They must also challenge themselves to be self-motivated—having that internal drive and determination to excel.

Finally, students were explicit in describing three main classroom conditions that would ideally enhance student learning. They wanted a classroom environment that would be free of distractions, that would engage students because teachers made learning exciting and fun and, that would contains on its walls a display of high quality students' work—work that represented excellence and challenged everyone to excel.

NHS Students vs. LP Students

Any similarities and differences observed between NHS students and LP students were limited by the lack of access to students' individual academic records and the lack of student contact time during school hours with the twelve participants of the study. School academic policy prohibited the release of students' individual assessment records, therefore this study can not make any statistical distinction between NHS students and LP students' academic performance at RHS, except to adhere to the lists given by the National Honors Society coordinator, the director of the program for disadvantaged students, and the guidance counselor of 11th and 12th graders. More distinctively, the mere affiliation of the six high achieving students to the National Honors Society (NHS) was a form of institutionalized cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Also, my knowledge of

the twelve NHS and LP students was primarily based on my interactions with students after school, more specifically during the interviews. Thus, in this study similarities and differences between NHS and LP students were based on my observation of students in terms of the manner of their responses, their attitudes toward school, and general behavioral characteristics during the interviews.

While both groups of students wanted to succeed, NHS students seemed more determined to succeed. They seemed to understand and possess the attitudinal disposition for success; such as effort, punctuality, and commitment. In effect, NHS students exhibited the cultural norms or habitus for schooling (such as hard work and commitment to academic excellence) that are institutionalized by schools (Bourdieu, 2003; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985, Lareau, 2003). The first distinction was that the responses of NHS students to the focus group and one-to-one interviews were generally longer than those of LP students. Even when probed for clarity NHS students responded with more detailed explanations. Except for Ann, the responses of all other LP students were short even when probed for details. Secondly, during the focus group interview with NHS students all six were on time and showed a keen interest to participate. In addition, during the one-to-one interview with NHS students, not only were they on time they were willing to stay even longer to complete the interviews when necessary. Thirdly, there was a subtle difference in the disposition of the two groups of students toward disruptive behavior during Math standard classes. Both NHS and LP students were dissatisfied with students' disruptive behavior within the classroom. However, NHS students seemed to understand more how such disruptive behavior could affect their grades. In their responses they were

concerned about their grades falling as a result of disruptive classroom behavior. They were more disappointed about teachers not being able to teach in these classes.

Summary of Findings

At RHS there was a lack of awareness among students that the school had not made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for seven consecutive years and was designated as “in need of improvement” under NCLB. As a result of the school’s status most of the students interviewed were concerned not only of the negative perceptions other may have about their school, but that some teachers and students may find it pointless to strive for academic excellence. In terms of teaching and learning although public high school students in New Jersey performed better in Language Arts Literacy than in Mathematics on state assessments (New Jersey School Report Card), students interviewed at RHS believed their Language Arts Literacy teachers prepared them better for the test than their Math teachers. The seven-year trend data (2002-2009) of students’ performance at RHS corroborated students’ performance on the state level. Students specifically identified disruptive classroom behavior as the factor that most significantly affected their learning, with “standard” Math classrooms being the venue of such disruptive behaviors. Instructional practices such as some teachers’ prescriptive compliance to inflexible pacing guides and the use of unqualified substitute teachers (especially in core content areas) were identified by students as practices that had negative impact on their learning. They emphasized the need for more student-friendly, interactive, and technology-rich instructional practices. In order to improve student academic performance and school organizational structure students strongly suggested that teachers and administrators (i) adopt strict measures in curbing disruptive classroom behaviors, (ii) redesign HSPA

preparatory classes to begin as early as September, and (iii) create classroom learning environments that are engaging by promoting interactive instructional strategies that address the needs of all learners. In terms of what students can do for themselves to improve their academic performance students suggested being self-empowered and self-motivated in their commitment to excel academically.

Post Script:

All six NHS students graduated from RHS and were accepted into the following universities and colleges: Rowan University, Florida Memorial University, Union County College, New England College, and Bloomfield College. All but one of the LP students graduated from RHS. One decided to work after high school, two went on to Montclair University and Johnson and Wales University, and the career paths of the remaining two were unidentified.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

RHS is an urban high school designated as a school 'in need of improvement' by NCLB standards. Although the school has implemented several district and state-mandated intervention strategies for school improvement, it has failed to make AYP for the past seven years. The students at RHS, however, have never been given the opportunity or the platform to voice their perspectives on issues that pertain to their school's performance on the HSPA. The findings of this study support the belief of previous research that students- those most affected in the educational process- are capable of offering significant insights to school reform if given the opportunity to express their perspectives (Mitra, 2008; Schmakel, 2008; Wilson & Corbett, 2001). More specifically, the findings suggest that students in an urban public high school designated as 'in need of improvement', such as RHS, do want to be fully aware of their school's academic status because they care about their school, their school's image, and about being successful. In this study students identified the lack of effective classroom discipline as the primary reason for the school's poor academic performance when given the opportunity to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning at RHS. In terms of suggestions for corrective practice the students recommended a paradigmatic shift from a school culture that promotes sports to one that emphasizes academics. Given the dynamics of the interviews conducted this means that students who attend failing urban school can be highly interested in making meaningful suggestions for improving students' academic achievement and their school status.

The format of the discussion section will be such that factors that influence students' academic performance on the HSPA the most will be treated first followed by factors considered as having a lesser import.

Ineffective Classroom Discipline

The students in this study at RHS unanimously and with an alarming frequency identified ineffective classroom discipline as the primary factor contributing to the school's poor academic performance. While other studies have also identified ineffective classroom discipline as a factor that impinges on student learning (Cushman, 2003; Schmakel, 2001; Wilson & Corbett, 2001) students in this study identified it as the major factor affecting their academic performance. School data indicates that the school's Math and Language Arts teachers are all highly qualified. The students even praised their teachers for demonstrating mastery of their content areas. Although most NHS students also praised their teachers for employing research-based pedagogical strategies that motivate them to learn, the majority of students (all LP students and some NHS students) who took standard classes complained of students' disruptive behaviors as a common and recurring phenomenon in their classrooms. According to students not only were disruptive behaviors frequent, they existed in multiple classrooms. When classroom discipline problems are chronic and severe then according to Granden and Clarke (2001) school discipline problems almost always exist. In the case of RHS, the effect of ineffective classroom discipline on student learning is highly significant as a schoolwide problem because of its prevalence.

The prevalence of disruptive behavior affects both students and teachers. For example at RHS it was frustrating for students to have to learn because the teacher spent

so much time trying to bring the class under control. The time taken away from student learning was ridiculously high—both with teachers enforcing the school’s uniform policy and students being disruptive within the classroom. How can a school, like RHS, be expected to be on the pathway to academic success when about 38% to 50% of the 40 minutes instructional period is spent on classroom behavior management? Not only did NHS students complain of not learning under such conditions, LP students complained of not learning at all. LP students were frustrated because for them the classroom was the one place they expected to learn. NHS students, on the other hand, were frustrated because being in such a classroom was a waste of their time because they could be learning somewhere else or something else. NHS students could easily avail themselves of other learning opportunities because they are highly motivated. The effect of disruptive classroom behavior on teachers’ ability to teach is also profound. According to the students account when students misbehave frequently teachers become stressed and frustrated. This is manifested in the way they teach, respond to students, and the amount of content covered. These effects on teachers are examples of negative instructional practices that limit student learning and student academic performance.

A key aspect of the negative effects of ineffective classroom discipline on student learning is the limited amount of individual help available to students from teachers. When a teacher is exasperated by classroom discipline problems he or she may not have the energy or desire to offer individual help to students either during school hours or after school. In particular, LP students at RHS complained of the lack of teacher availability to provide individual help when the classroom was disruptive. In the case of RHS given the little time that remained for uninterrupted instruction, the teacher simply did not have the

time to assist students individually with their learning. Students benefit when teachers provide individual help to clarify misconceptions and reinforce the proper understanding of difficult concepts. The literature on student voice abounds with research studies of student perspectives on student learning that is meaningful when students receive individual help from their teachers (Cushman, 2003; Schmakel, 2008; Wilson & Corbett, 2001). This study reinforces the importance of providing such individual help to students when they need it. Providing individual help to students enhances student learning and student academic performance. Therefore, teachers and school administrators must create classroom environments that are free of distractions so teachers have real opportunities to help students with quality individual help.

Ancillary Factors Affecting Student Learning

In addition to students identifying ineffective classroom discipline as the primary factor affecting student learning at RHS, the students identified other factors pertaining to teaching and learning that affected their learning in a negative way. Students identified teachers' inflexible pacing of instruction and the use of unqualified substitute teachers as factors that had negative effects on their learning.

When the students complained that some teachers exercised a prescriptive adherence to the curriculum in terms of content and pacing they were expressing what seems to be teachers' inflexibility to student learning. This is consistent with what English (2010) described as 'teaching to the test' in his observation and analysis of instructional practices of teachers as a result of the assessment accountability of NCLB. For Crocco and Costigan (2007) such prescriptive adherence to the curriculum stifles teachers' creativity and diminishes instructional efficacy. For example, most of the

complaints by the students at RHS about the inflexible pacing were in the area of Mathematics. As complex as mathematical concepts can be for most high school students, teaching at a hurried pace without regard to students' ability to comprehend and master one concept at a time is a Sisyphean waste of time. Mathematical concepts are cumulative; therefore, it is pointless to expect students to grasp and master a new and complicated concept when the prerequisite has not yet been mastered. In failing urban school, it is not surprising that teachers, under the pressure to demonstrate gains in students' academic achievements, pass down that pressure onto students perhaps with no harm intended. Pedagogically, those that should receive the greatest consideration are students in failing schools like RHS. This is because the planning and implementation of the curriculum in such schools need to be developmentally appropriate and tailored to students' needs. The students' view on pacing is a clear message to teachers and school administrators that the need to reflect critically on instructional practices should not be compromised under the urgency to increase student performance on state mandated tests.

While teachers' absenteeism cannot be completely eliminated in schools, in schools like RHS where teachers' enthusiasm for teaching may be dampened by the school's record of academic failure, teachers' absenteeism is frequent. Usually a lot is taken away from students' learning when a substitute fills in for a regular teacher, but when the substitute teacher has no content area expertise and the school is already a failing school the quality of student learning is seriously jeopardized. The students in the study gave account of the poor quality of instruction they received from substitute teachers who were not qualified in Language Arts Literacy or Math. Since Language Arts Literacy and Math are the two main subjects tested on the HSPA and RHS is a school

under pressure to show benchmark gains in student academic performance, then a school like RHS must include as its instructional priority the recruitment of a reserve of substitutes with expertise in Language Arts and Math. Not only can students at RHS not afford to have their learning interrupted by teachers' frequent absenteeism, they can not afford to have the quality of learning they receive compromised by substitute teachers' lack of content area expertise.

Development of Awareness

While creating and developing opportunities for students to participate meaningfully in their educational future can be a complex and daunting task (Beattie, 2012; Cook-Sather, 2002; Mitra, 2005; Rudduck, & Flutter, 2004), the importance of students' engagement and contributions to school reform cannot be overemphasized (Ericson & Ellett, 2002; Mitra, 2008; Oldfather, 1995). Based on this study in order to engage high school students about school reform it is important to develop among students sufficient awareness of the specific area(s) in need of school reform. All the students interviewed in this study were highly interested in passing the HSPA in order to graduate from high school. Each of them, the NHS students as well as the LP students, wanted to be successful on the HSPA. Yet the students did not know specifically the academic standing of the school they attended. Each student knew that individually they had to pass the HSPA to graduate, but they did not understand the significance of their collective performance on the school's academic status. For example, although most of the NHS students were confident that they would pass the HSPA they were not adequately informed that RHS academic status hinges on the performance of other students as well. In New Jersey on the HSPA nine subgroups of students must all meet

the performance benchmark in order for a school to make AYP—a factor used to determine a school's academic status. It was evident that the students lacked awareness of the significance of their collective performance. Thus in order to attain meaningful student involvement, especially on matters that affect students' academic future, school leaders must provide students with adequate information for students' comprehensive analyses and reflection. The findings of this study, therefore, with regard to students' lack of awareness of their school status juxtaposed with their desire to improve the image of their school only reinforces the significance of students being included as part of the solution to any meaningful school reform efforts.

Students' Resiliency

Embedded in students' responses was the element of resiliency evidenced in their desire to improve their school's image. Although the students expressed feelings of embarrassment and disappointment upon knowing their school's academic status, they were never discouraged about being more successful on the HSPA and improving their school's academic status. Both NHS and LP students were resilient despite the academic status of their school. More specifically, NHS students demonstrated a resiliency that was more individualistic as opposed to LP students who displayed collective resiliency. With confidence in their individual academic capabilities NHS students knew that despite the fact that they attended a failing school, as individuals they were confident of attaining success. For them even amidst the frequency of disruptive behaviors in standard classes they were confident of succeeding on the HSPA as individuals. LP students, on the other hand, saw themselves as a group deprived of what they needed to succeed. They did not see themselves as underachievers, but instead as students capable of succeeding

academically if only, for example, they had the help they needed and teachers and administrators who treated them better. It is an echo of similar sentiments of urban students in Lee's (1999) ethnographic study of 40 urban high schools with failing academic records. Despite the absence of these conditions LP students at RHS cared enough about their school and wanted to succeed. LP students desire for better understanding from and better treatment by their teachers and administrators are consistent with the findings in the study by Schmakel (2008) in which low performing students were distinguishable from the study's high achievers in that they expected their teachers to be empathic about their developmental needs. Also similar to the low achievers in her study, LP students in this study wanted to be challenged because they wanted to work harder and do better.

Contribution to Literature

The significance of this study lies in the insights it sheds into a specific area of school reform: the need to succeed on a NCLB state-mandated assessment (HSPA), especially when the assessment is a requirement for high school graduation as it is in the state of New Jersey. While the study is specific in its inquiry about the perspectives of students not being successful on state-mandated assessments, the insights offered by students may have implications on student learning in general. The participants of this study were students who attended an urban public high school that can be referred to as a failing school under NCLB and New Jersey state academic standards. The school's urbanicity and failing status are not unique as several researchers have written about these areas in the discourse on student voice (Cook-Sather, 2007; Mitra, 2007; Wilson & Corbett, 2001; Zion, 2009).

The students participating in this study expressed their appreciation for having the opportunity to share their perspectives on an area of school life that means a lot to them. In fact, such an opportunity had never been available to students at RHS. The students' interest and appreciation clearly indicate that urban students too do care about their school's image and about being successful, even if the school they attend is a failing school. Previous research by Wilson and Corbett (2001) of urban students in the Philadelphia school district underscored urban students' affinity to their school and their own desire to be successful.

The students' earnest desires to succeed underscore their resiliency to be successful in spite of the challenges they were experiencing at RHS. The element of resiliency in disadvantaged students is not uncommon in the literature on students voice (Schmakel, 2008; Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2002). While in light of the definition offered by Waxman et al., (2002), only NHS students at RHS would be considered as resilient, because individually they were successful in spite of their school's status, the LP students at RHS were also resilient. Their desire to succeed was as equally strong as their NHS counterparts. If the definition of resiliency is to be more about effort than about students' innate intellectual talents, then LP students at RHS were resilient. Reconceptualizing the definition of resiliency to include low performing students in failing urban schools who demonstrate a strong desire to succeed would give due acknowledgement to these students whose efforts go unnoticed. The school involved in this study does not have in place an organized forum for students' voice opportunities therefore, the effectiveness of students' perspectives on school reform can not be realistically ascertained. However, it is hoped that the poignancy and usefulness of the

findings will reinforce the need to create an organized forum for student voice and participation. It is by creating such student voice opportunities that students, in schools like RHS, will appropriately be recognized and hopefully appreciated as co-contributors and co-partners in school improvement efforts.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have several important implications for educational practice. First, there is the implication of students' perspectives on discipline. The students noted that ineffective classroom discipline had a negative effect on their learning. Furthermore, the students believed that teachers are the ones primarily responsible for classroom discipline. But students may not be aware of all the factors that affect classroom discipline. The findings on the effect of classroom discipline on student learning can serve as a starting point to begin serious discussion on how teachers and school administrators in urban high schools can navigate the issue of discipline in providing quality instruction to students. As in the case of RHS the enforcement of the school's uniform policy by teachers was the organizational factor that contributed to the ineffective classroom discipline, this study suggests further inquiry into the possibility of other organizational factors that can affect urban high school teachers' ability to teach their classes without unnecessary distractions.

Second, based on students' perspectives the study has implications on the quality of teaching and learning or instruction for failing urban high schools. According to students' perspectives, students learn best when instruction is interactive, student-centered, technology-rich, and project-based. But in practice how best students learn and their current learning environment are loosely coupled. Therefore, to what extent are

teachers and school administrators working to eliminate such disconnect? Not only must districts provide instructional resources that support the way students learn best, school administrators must ensure that these resources are actually being used, and used effectively, so as to achieve the desired effect.

Third, there are implications from students' perspectives on the promotion of a 'jock culture' at RHS. In a school environment such as RHS, where teachers may have low expectations of students' academic performance because of the school's history of systemic failure on the HSPA, there is a tendency to emphasize sports over academics. According to the students, RHS promotes a jock culture when it celebrates its athletes more than it does its academically gifted, and those who strive for academic success. This only serves to reinforce a deficit ideology about student academic potential. Thus, a paradigm shift is needed if RHS is to climb its way out of its current abysmal status. School leaders and teachers in schools similar to RHS must find creative and expressive ways of celebrating students' academic achievements and acknowledge those students with the recognition that will encourage others to strive for academic success. A simple honor roll program may not suffice. Promoting and celebrating academic success must be the highlight of the school's culture.

Limitations of Study

Although the purpose of this study's small sample size was to obtain an in-depth exploration into the perspectives of urban high school students about their school as a school in need of improvement, the findings cannot be generalized to a larger or broader population because of its sample size. This is a limitation that is characteristic of most qualitative research case studies. However, the findings of this case study are meant to be

transferred to only other similar settings. Also, this study is limited in that not all groups of students were represented in the sample. Even though the majority of students in the 11th and 12th grades at RHS were African-Americans, the sample group's one Hispanic student was statistically nonrepresentative of the proportion of Hispanics that were juniors and seniors at RHS. Being that participation was entirely voluntary, the researcher had no control over students' decision to participate. In this study the researcher's role as an observer participant was primary focused on making students aware that they would be interviewed in order to collect data about their perspectives on their school's status as a school in need of improvement. As an observer participant the researcher had better access to data on students and the school as well as the opportunity to develop the level of trust with students that enabled them to participate and to speak openly. The limitations of such a role are the possibility of observer bias and the lack of objectivity which could influence the validity of the results of the study. The researcher's elicitation of students' feedback after the completion of the findings to ensure the study's accurate reflection of students' perspectives was one strategy used to minimize the influence of observer bias and enhance the study's objectivity. Finally, the study is limited in that it is based on the perspectives of students without any expert consultations from teachers and school administrators. While students may not have expert knowledge of all the factors that affect student learning and school academic performance, students are those who learn and those required to perform on standardized assessments. Their views, therefore, on the learning environment and what affects their learning are uniquely relevant.

Questions for Future Research

The findings from this study will serve as the starting point for several recommendations for future research. Recommendations for future research are presented in two general categories: recommendations based on the level of students' awareness of their school's academic status, and recommendations based on teaching and learning in urban high schools such as RHS.

From the findings of this study the students had very limited awareness of their school's status as a failing school. Furthermore, they had no knowledge that their school had failed to make AYP for seven consecutive years. How widespread is students' level of awareness of their school's status in terms of the entire student population? This is important because students had emphasized during the interviews that they would have performed better if they had knowledge of their school's academic status. But in what ways do students' level of awareness affect their academic performance? Also research of a qualitative nature is needed to probe into why teachers and especially school leaders in a failing urban high school may fail to promote a high level of awareness among students and parents of the school's academic status given the urgency to succeed.

Secondly, in terms of teaching and learning the students indicated that there is a need to modify the Math curriculum in its content and pacing in order to improve their performance. If students are to participate in designing the curriculum, then what should the extent of their participation be? How would their participation in designing the curriculum directly affect their performance on state assessments? In reference to teachers, what level of preparation do urban teachers receive in terms of controlling their classrooms? Also, what do teachers in failing urban high schools have to say about

teaching and student learning as they strive to meet NCLB academic performance standards?

CONCLUSION

Although urban schools by their urbanicity are influenced by external socioeconomic realities as well as the influences of cultural and social capital associated with poor student academic performance, urban schools like RHS do possess the school organizational resources to make meaningful change in the lives of their students. This can be done when urban high schools provide and sustain student voice opportunities that empower students to be active partners in the school reform process. This study affirms that students—those most affected by their schools' academic performance— must be heard and encouraged to participate actively in any effort to attain meaningful solutions to the poor academic performance of most urban public high schools. This study seeks to inform school administrators and policy makers on the important role students can play in improving the persistently low academic performance of most urban high school students. The finding from students' perspectives that ineffective classroom discipline is the primary factor affecting students' poor academic performance should spur serious discussion among teachers, and school administrator about effective ways of creating better classrooms for urban high school students. School organizational policies and classroom pedagogical practices must be strategically synchronized to provide the learning environment that students need to succeed.

References

- Anderson, L. & Olsen, B. (2006). Investigating early career urban teachers' perspectives on their experiences in professional development. *Journal of Teacher Education* 57(4) 359-377.
- Anyon, J. (1995). Race, social class, and educational reform in an inner city school. *Teachers college Record*, 97(1), 69-94.
- Armstrong, D. G. (1989). *Developing and documenting the curriculum*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Auerbach, S. (2007). From moral supporters to struggling advocates: Reconceptualizing parent roles in education through the experience of working-class families of color. *Urban Education*, 42(3), 250-283.
- Balfanz, R., Legters, N., West, T. C., & Weber, L. M. (2007). Are NCLB's measures, incentives, and improvement strategies the right ones for the nations low-performing high schools? *American Educational Research Journal* 44(3), 559-593.
- Beattie, H. (2012). Amplifying student voice: The missing link in school transformation. *Management in Education* 26(3), 158-160
- Bolman, L. and Deal, T. (1997) *Reframing Organisations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. (1979). *The inheritors: French students and their relations to culture*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Bragg, S. (2007). "It's not about systems, it's about relationships": Building a listening culture in a primary school. In D. Thiessen and A. Cook-Sather (eds.), *International handbook of student experience in elementary and secondary school* (pp. 659-680). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.
- Bunker, B. B., & Alban, B. T. (Eds.). (2006). *The handbook of large group methods: Creating systemic change in organizations and communities*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Chatterji, M. (2006). Reading achievement gaps, correlates, and moderators of early reading achievement: Evidence from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS) kindergarten to first grade sample. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 98(3), 489-507.
- Christie, D., & Viner, R. (2005). Adolescent development. *British Medical Journal*, 330(7486): 301-304.
- Clark, R. M. (1983). *Family life and school achievement: Why poor black children succeed or fail*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Coleman, J. S. (1968). The concept of equality of educational opportunity. *Harvard Educational Review*, 38(Winter), 7-22
- Coleman, J. S. (1987). Families and schools. *Educational Researcher*, 17, 32-38.
- Cook-Sather, A., & Schultz, J. (2001). Negotiating worlds and words: Writing about student experiences of schools. In J. Schultz & A. Cook-Sather (Eds.), *In our own words: Students' perspectives on school* (pp. 165–178). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Cook-Sather, A. (2002). Authorizing students' perspectives: Toward trust, dialogue, and change in education. *Educational Researcher*, 31(4), 3-14.
- Copland, M. A. (2003). Leadership of inquiry: Building and sustaining capacity for school improvement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 25 (4), 375-395.
- Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research (3rd ed.)*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Crocco, M. S., & Costigan, A. T. (2007). The narrowing of curriculum and pedagogy in the age of accountability urban educators speak out. *Urban Education*, 42(6), 512-535.
- Cushman, K. (2003). *Fires in the bathroom: Advice for teachers from high school students*. New York: The New Press.
- Dearing, E., Kreider, H., Simkins, S., & Weiss, H. B. (2006). Family involvement in school and low-income children's literacy: Longitudinal associations between and within families. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 98(4), 653-664.
- De Graf, P. M. (1986). The impact of financial and cultural resources on educational attainment in the Netherlands. *Sociology of Education* 59, 237-246.

- De Graf, N. D., De Graf, P. M., & Kraaykamp, G. (2000). Parental cultural capital and educational attainment in the Netherlands: A refinement of the cultural capital perspectives. *Sociology of Education*, 73, 92-111.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2005). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Desimone, L. (2009). Improving impact studies of teachers' professional development: Toward better conceptualization and measures. *Educational Researcher*, 38(3) 181-199.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Collier Books.
- DiMaggio, P., & Mohr, J. (1985). Cultural capital, educational attainment, and marital selection. *American Journal of Sociology*, 90, 1231-1261.
- Dornbusch, S. M., & Glasgow, K. L. (1996). The structural context of family-school relations. In A. Booth and J. F. Dunn (eds.), *Family-school links: How do they affect educational outcomes?* (pp. 35-44), Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Doyle, M. C., & Feldman, J. (2006). Student voice and student choice in Boston pilot high schools. *Educational Policy*, 20(2), 367-398.
- Elmore, R. F., and Associates (Eds.). (1990). *Restructuring schools: The next generation of educational reform*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- English, F.W. (2010). *Deciding what to teach & test: Developing, aligning, and learning the curriculum* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.
- Epstein, J.L. (2001). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Fielding, M. (2001). Students as radical agents of change. *Journal of Educational Change*, 2(3) 123-141.
- Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban high school*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Fletcher, A. (2005). *Meaningful student involvement: Students as partners in school change*. Olympia, WA: HumanLinks Foundation.
- Franklin, W. (2000). Student at promise and resilient: A historical look at risk. In M. G. Sanders (ed.), *Schooling students placed at risk*. (pp. 3-16), Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(1), 59-109.
- Garet, M. S.; Porter, A. C.; Desimone, L.; Birman, B. F & Yoon, K. S. (2001). What makes professional development effective? Results from a national sample of teachers. *American Research Journal* 38(4) 915-945.
- Gransden, B., & Clarke, P. (2001). Student perceptions of factors impacting on their learning. *Improving Schools*, 4(1), 34-41.
- Hatchman, J., & Rolland, C. (2001). *Students' voices about schooling: What works for them—Its implications to school reform*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA.
- Helgesen, S. (1999). *The female advantage: Women's ways of leadership*. New York: Doubleday.
- Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., & Sandler, H. M. (1997). Why do parents become involved in their children's education? *Review of Educational Research*, 67(1) 3-42.
- Hudson-Ross, S., Cleary, L., & Casey, M. (1993). *Children's voices: Children talk about literacy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heineman.
- Jacobs, H. H. (1989). *Interdisciplinary curriculum: Design and implementation*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Joselowsky, Francine. (2007). Youth engagement, high school reform, and improved learning outcomes: Building systemic approaches for youth engagement. *NASSP Bulletin*, 91(3), 257-276.
- Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools*. New York: Harper Perennial
- Kurth-Schai, R. (1988). The roles of youth in society: A reconceptualization. *Educational Forum*. 52(2) 113-132.
- Kushman, J., & Shanessey, J. (1997). *Look who's talking now: Student views of restructuring schools*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Education.
- Kreuger, R. A. (1988). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. London: Sage.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal childhood: Class, race, and family life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Lee, P. W. (1999). In their own voices: An ethnographic study of low-achieving students within the context of school reform. *Urban education*, 34(2), 214-244.
- Legters, N. E., Balfanz, R. W., Jordan, W. J., & McPartland, J. M. (2002). *Comprehensive reform for urban high schools: A talent development approach*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Levin, B. (2000). Putting students at the centre in education reform. *International Journal of Educational Change*, 1(2), 155-172.
- Mangin, M. M. (2007). Facilitating elementary principals' support for instructional teacher leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43(3), 319-357.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach (2nd ed)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Marks, H. M. & Printy, S. M. (2003). Principal leadership and school performance: An integration of transformational and instructional leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 39(3) 370-397.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2006). *Designing qualitative research (4th ed)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McLaughlin, M. W., & Talbert, J. E. (1993). *Contexts that matter for teaching and learning: Strategic opportunities for meeting the nation's education goals*. Stanford University: Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching.
- Merton, R. K.; Fiske, M., & Kendall, P. L. (1990). *The focused interview: a manual of problems and procedures (2nd ed)*. London. Collier MacMillan.
- Meyer, J., & Rowan, B. (1978). The structure of educational organizations. In M. Meyer & Associates (Eds.), *Environments and Organizations* (pp. 78-109). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mickelson, R. A. (1990). The attitude-achievement paradox among Black adolescents. *Sociology of Education*, 63, 44-61.
- Miles M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook (2nd ed)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mitra, D. (2001). Opening the floodgates: Giving students a voice in school reform. *Forum*, 43(2), 91-94.

- Mitra, D. L. (2003). Student voice in school reform: Reframing student-teacher relationships. *McGill Journal of Education*, 38(2), 289-304.
- Mitra, D. L. (2005). Adults advising youth: Leading while getting out of the way. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 41(3), 520-553.
- Mitra, D. L. (2008). *Student voice in school reform: Building youth-adult partnerships that strengthen schools and empower youth*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Mitra, D., & Gross, J. (2009). Increasing student voice in high school reform: Building partnerships, improving outcomes. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 37(4), 522-543.
- Monkman, K., Ronald, M., & Theramene, F. D. (2005). Social and cultural capital in an urban Latino school community. *Urban Education*, 40(1), 4-33.
- Morgan, C., & Morris, G. (1999). *Good teaching and learning: Pupils and teachers speak*. Buckingham; Open Books.
- National Center for Education Statistics, *America's High School Graduates: Results from the 2005 NAEP High School Transcript Study*, U. S. Department of Education, February 2007
- National Honor Society, www.nhs.us retrieved 10/5/10
- National Center for Education Statistics, *Urban schools: The challenge of location and poverty* (NCES #96184) August 1996
- Newmann, B. S.; Allensworth, E.; Bryk, A. (2001). Instructional program coherence: What it is and why it should guide school improvement policy. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 23 (4) 297-321.
- New Jersey Department of Education: www.state.nj.us/education/finance/sf/dfgesc.shtml retrieved 5/31/2010
- Oldfather, P. (1995). Learning from student voices. *Theory into Practice*. 34(2).
- Orr, M. T.; Berg, B.; Shore, R.; & Meier, (2008). Putting the pieces together: Leadership for change in low-performing urban schools. *Education and Urban Society* 40 (6) 670-693.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Reitzug, U. C.; West, D. L.; & Angel, R. (2008). Conceptualizing instructional leadership: The voices of principals. *Education and Urban Society*, 40(6) 694-714.
- Rogers, A. L. (2005). *Student voice: Bridges to learning*. Seattle: University of Washington. Online. Retrieved 10/08/2010.
- Rossmann, G. B., & Wilson, B. L. (1994). Numbers and words revisited: Being shamelessly eclectic. *Quality and Quantity*, 28, 315-327.
- Rubin, B. C., & Jones, M. (2007). Student action research: Reaping the benefits for students and school leaders. *NASSP Bulletin*, 91(4), 363-378.
- Rubin, B. and Silva, E., eds. (2003) *Critical Voices in School Reform: Students Living through Change*. London: RoutledgeFarmer.
- Rudduck, J. (2007). Student voice, student engagement, and school reform. In D. Thiessen and A. Cook-Sather (eds.), *International handbook of student experience in elementary and secondary school* (pp. 635-658). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.
- Rudduck, J., & Demetriou, H. (2003). Student perspectives and teacher practices: The transformative potential. *McGill Journal of Education*, 38(2), 274-288.
- Rudduck, J., & Flutter, J. (2003). *How to improve your school: Giving pupils a voice*. London: Continuum Press.
- Sanders, M. G. (2000). *Schooling students placed at risk: Research, policy, and practice in the education of poor and minority adolescents*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Sanders, M. G. (2002). Community involvement in school improvement: The little extra that makes a big difference. In J. Epstein, M. Sanders, B. Simon, K. Salinas, N. Jansorn, Van Voorhis in *School, Family and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action* (2 ed.). Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press (p. 30-39).
- Scherger, S., & Savage, M. (2010). Cultural transmission, educational attainment, and social mobility. *The Sociological Review*, 58(3), 406-428.
- Schmakel, P. O. (2008). Early adolescents' perspectives on motivation and achievement in academics. *Urban Education*, 43(6), 723-749.
- Schubert, W. H. (1986). *Curriculum: Perspective, paradigm, and possibility*. New York: Macmillan

- Scribner, J. P. (1999). Professional development: untangling the influence of work context on teacher learning. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 35(2) 328-366.
- Shutes, R., & Petersen, S. (1994). Seven reasons why textbooks cannot make a curriculum. *NASSP*. 78: 11-22
- Short, E. C. (1991). Curriculum design: A wider perspective for today and tomorrow. *NASSP* 75, 27-37.
- Silva, E. (2003) 'Struggling for Inclusion: A Case Study of Students as Reform Partners', in B. Rubin and E. Silva (eds.) *Critical Voices in School Reform: Students Living through Change*. London: RoutledgeFarmer.
- Stringfield, S. & Land, D. (2002). *Educating at-risk students: One hundred first yearbook of the national society for the study of education*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Strauss, A. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Swartz, D. (1997). *Culture and power: The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tanner, D. & Tanner, L. (2007). *Curriculum development: Theory into practice (4th ed)*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Tolman, J., Ford, P., Irby, M. (2003). *What works in education reform: Putting young people at the center*. Baltimore: International Youth Foundation.
- Wahlstrom, K. L. & Louis, K. S. (2008). How teachers experience principal leadership: The roles of professional community, trust, efficacy, and shared responsibility. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 44(4) 458-495.
- Wehlage, G., Rutter, R., Smith, G., Lesko, N., & Fernandez, R. (1989). *Reducing the risk: Schools as communities of support*. Philadelphia: Falmer Press.
- Weis, L. & Fine, M. (eds.) (1993). *Beyond silenced voices: Class, race, and gender in the Unites States Schools*.
- Wiggan, G. (2007). Race, school achievement, and educational inequality: Toward a student-based inquiry perspective. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(3), 310-333.
- Wilkins, J. L. M. (2000). Preparing for the 21st century: The status of quantitative literacy in the United States. *School Science and Mathematics*, 100, 405-418.

- Wilson, B. L. & Corbett, H. D. (2001). *Listening to urban kids: School reform and the teachers they want*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Von Glasersfeld, E. (1989). *Facts and the self from a constructivist point of view*. *Poetics*, 28(4-5), 435-448.
- Von Glasersfeld, E. (1995). *Radical constructivism: A way of knowing and learning*. London: Falmer Press
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society* (M. Cole, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Zion, S. D. (2009). Systems, stakeholders, and students: Including students in school reform. *Improving Schools*. 12(2), 131-143.

Appendix A

Parental Consent Form

Non-clinical, Minimum Risk Study

A Case Study of Urban Students' Perspectives on NCLB state-mandated Assessments
and Students' Academic Achievement

Dear Parent/Guardian:

My name is Mr. Patrick P. Giple. I have been a teacher here in the xxxxxxxx School District for about 10 years. I currently teach Math at xxxxxxxxxx. I am also completing a doctoral dissertation at Rutgers University in New Brunswick in the field of Educational Administration and Supervision.

During the 2010-2011 school year I will be conducting a research study as part of my dissertation requirement. The purpose of this research study is to explore urban high school students' perspectives on NCLB state-mandated assessments (such as HSPA) and their academic achievement. There is burgeoning research indicating that the perspectives of students on teaching and learning, academic achievement, as well as school climate are critical to school improvement efforts.

Your child _____ has been selected to participate in this research study. It is a non-clinical study minimum risk study. That is, no experiment will be performed on your child and your child will not be exposed to any physical, emotional, or psychological danger. Your child will simply be asked to answer questions pertaining to the above topic along with other students in a small group setting. Let me also assure you that your child's name will never be made known in the report I will write. Instead, another name will be used to refer to your child throughout the report so as to keep your child's name secret or confidential. Also during the interview your child may choose not to answer any questions he or she is uncomfortable answering.

Your child will be asked to participate in three focus-group interviews to be conducted at the xxxxxxxxxx High School for a duration of one hour each from 3:15-4:15 P.M. The exact dates of the interviews are not fixed at this time. Therefore, should you give your consent for your child's participation; I ask that you provide me with your

home and/or cell phone numbers so that I can inform you two days before the exact dates of each interview. This is to keep you informed of the actual date and time that your child will be with me. Your child's whereabouts and safety is very important to me as well.

Please feel free to ask any questions about the procedures of this study. I can be reached at 609-238-9920 (cell)/609-871-3008 (home).

Sincerely yours,

Patrick P. Giple

I agree to allow my child to participate in the interviews of this case study research.

Name (Print): _____

Signature: _____

Telephone (cell): _____

Telephone (Home): _____

Appendix B
STUDENT ASSENT FORM
ASSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Investigator: Mr. Patrick P. Giple

Rutgers University

Study Title: A Case Study of Urban Public High School Students' Perspectives of
 Their School as 'In Need of Improvement' Under NCLB

This assent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask the researcher or your parent or teacher to explain any words or information that you do not clearly understand before signing this document.

1. Mr. Patrick P. Giple is inviting you to take part in his research study. Why is this study being done?

We want to find out from students at an urban public high school about their thoughts and experiences of their school so that we can find ways to make students do better on state tests and improve their schools.

2. What will happen:

First, you will take part in a focus-group discussion with five other students in your group to inform Mr. Giple about your school as a school that needs improvement, about what you are learning in the classroom and about ways to help your school help you to do better on state tests. This will last for about 45 to 60 minutes. Secondly, Mr. Giple will have a one-to-one interview with you to hear from you personally, without other students present, about what you think about the same questions in the focus-group interview. This also will last for about 45 to 60 minutes. Finally, at the end of the study I will meet with all the students who took part in the study and present a report of the findings and ask you for any corrections you may have. This also will take another 45 to 60 minutes. You may skip any question that you do not want to answer and you may take a break if you need one. With your permission indicated below, I will make only an audiotape recording of these sessions.

What does it cost and how much does it pay?

You don't pay to take part in this study and you will not be paid to take part in this study.

3. There are very few risks in taking part in this research, but the following things could happen:

Your answers could be seen by somebody not involved in this study. We will do our absolute best to keep all your answers private. Your teachers, principal, or school district personnel will not know your particular response. *Teachers may learn about things said*

about them generally, but this risk is no greater than what students may already be talking about teachers on blogs, texting, emails chatrooms, and other social networks.

Your answers will be kept locked up. Your name will not appear beside your response; we will use a code number instead. The people who work for us are very well trained and understand the importance of confidentiality. But, if the researchers learn that you or someone else are in serious danger they would have to tell an appropriate family member, such as your mother, father, or caretaker or the appropriate officials to protect you and other people. Also, if at any time during this study you wish to drop out or withdraw you are absolutely free to do so without any penalty. Moreover, whatever is discovered during this study will only be used after the study is finished and defended successfully.

4. **Are there any benefits that you or others will get out of being in this study?**

All research must have some potential benefit either directly to those that take part in it or potentially to others through the knowledge gained. The knowledge gained through this study may allow us to develop more effective programs to assist students just like you do better on state tests and improve their schools.

It's completely up to you! Both you and your parents have to agree to allow you to take part in this study. If you choose to not take part in this study, we will honor that choice. No one will get angry or upset with you if you don't want to do this. If you agree to take part in it and then you change your mind later, that's OK too. It's always your choice!

5. **CONFIDENTIALITY: We will do everything we can to protect the confidentiality of your records.** If we write professional articles about this research, they will never say your name or anything that could give away who you are. We will do a good job at keeping all our records secret by following the rules made for researchers.

6. **Do you have any questions?** If you have any questions or worries regarding this study, or if any problems come up, you may call the principal investigator Mr. Patrick P. Giple at:

XXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
E-mail address: pgiplesr@msn.com

7. You may also ask questions or talk about any worries to the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews research studies in order to protect those who participate). Please contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:
Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey
Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
3 Rutgers Plaza
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559

Tel: 732-932-0150 ext. 2104
 Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

Your parent or guardian will also be asked if they wish for you to participate in this study. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Please sign below if you assent (that means you agree) to participate in this study.

Signature

Date

Name (Please print): _____

Investigator's Signature: _____ Date: _____

AUDIO/VIDEOTAPE ADDENDUM TO CONSENT FORM

You have already agreed to participate in a research study entitled: **A case study of urban public high school students' perspectives of their school as 'in need of improvement' under NCLB** conducted by **Mr. Patrick P. Giple**. We are asking for your permission to allow us to only **audiotape (sound)** you as part of this research study. You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of the study.

The recording(s) will be used for **educational purposes. No money will be given to you for taking part in this study.**

The recording(s) will include **your voice, but not your name because a six-digit code will be used to identify you during the recordings. By using this code not even your teachers, principal, or school district officials would know what your exact response was.**

The recording(s) will be stored **in a locked file cabinet with no link to your identity; your identity and the number code that identifies you will be stored in a locked file cabinet in a separate location. Electronic copies that are kept of your responses will be password protected by me to prevent others from gaining such knowledge. Also, upon completion of the study procedures data pertaining to your responses will be permanently destroyed by shredding after three years.**

By participating in this study/these procedures, you agree to be a study subject and you grant the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that stated in the consent form without your written permission.

Signature

Date

Name (Please print): _____

Investigator's Signature: _____ Date: _____

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
ASB III, 3 Rutgers Plaza, Cook Campus
New Brunswick, NJ 08901

February 9, 2011

P.I. Name: Giple
Protocol #: 11-320M

Patrick Pepan Giple
 18 Parish Ln
 Willingboro NJ 08046

Dear Patrick Giple:

✓
 (Initial / Amendment / Continuation / Continuation w/ Amendment)

Protocol Title: "A Case Study of Urban Public School Students' Perspectives of Their School as in Need of Improvement Under NCLB"

This is to advise you that the above-referenced study has been presented to the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, and the following action was taken subject to the conditions and explanations provided below:

Approval Date:	1/5/2011	Expiration Date:	1/4/2012
Expedited Category(s):	6,7	Approved # of Subject(s):	12

This approval is based on the assumption that the materials you submitted to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs (ORSP) contain a complete and accurate description of the ways in which human subjects are involved in your research. The following conditions apply:

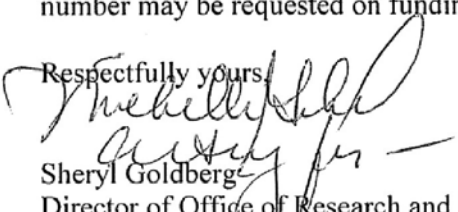
- **This Approval**-The research will be conducted according to the most recent version of the protocol that was submitted. **This approval is valid ONLY for the dates listed above;**
- **Reporting**-ORSP must be immediately informed of any injuries to subjects that occur and/or problems that arise, in the course of your research;
- **Modifications**-Any proposed changes **MUST** be submitted to the IRB as an amendment for review and approval prior to implementation;
- **Consent Form(s)**-Each person who signs a consent document will be given a copy of that document, if you are using such documents in your research. The Principal Investigator must retain all signed documents for at least three years after the conclusion of the research;
- **Continuing Review**-You should receive a courtesy e-mail renewal notice for a Request for Continuing Review before the expiration of this project's approval. However, it is your responsibility to ensure that an application for continuing review has been submitted to the IRB for review and approval prior to the expiration date to extend the approval period;

Additional Notes: **Expedited Approval per 45 CFR 46.110**

Failure to comply with these conditions will result in withdrawal of this approval.

Please note that the IRB has the authority to observe, or have a third party observe, the consent process or the research itself. The Federal-wide Assurance (FWA) number for the Rutgers University IRB is FWA00003913; this number may be requested on funding applications or by collaborators.

Respectfully yours,


 Sheryl Goldberg
 Director of Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
 gibel@grants.rutgers.edu

cc: Catherine A. Lugg

PARENTAL INFORMED CONSENT

Title of study: A Case Study of Urban Public High School
Students' Perspectives of Their School as
'In Need of Improvement' Under NCLB.

Your child is invited to participate in a research study that is being conducted by me, Patrick P. Giple. I am a graduate student at Rutgers University Graduate School of Education. The purpose of this research is to determine the perspectives of students within an urban public high school of their school's performance on the HSPA and what suggestions they may have to improve academic performance.

Approximately 12 children between the ages of 16 and 18 years old will participate in the study, and each child's participation will last approximately three hours in total.

The study procedures include two focus-group interviews made up of only six students each, and twelve one-to-one personal interview of each student. In other words, first your child will be interviewed in a group together with five other students. This will last for only one hour. Later your child will sit with me in the classroom for a one-to-one interview. This one-to-one interview is important because it will provide your child with an opportunity to share his thoughts, without listening to what others have to say, about the HSPA and what can be done to help students improve their score on the test. This one-to-one interview will last for only one hour. Finally, your child and all the other students who took part in this study will meet with me to review the findings of this study.

This research is confidential. The research records will include some information about your child and this information will be stored in such a manner that some linkage between your child's

EXPIRES

APPROVED

Date: 1/5/11

JAN 04 2011

Approved by the
Rutgers IRB

identity and the response in the research exists. For example, to protect your child's identity a six-digit number code will be assigned to your child and will be used to identify your child's responses. This information will be kept in a locked filed cabinet. Some of the information collected about your child includes your child's HSPA score, grade level, sex, and ethnicity. Please note that we will keep this information confidential by limiting individual's access to the research data and keeping it in a secure location. For example, data about your child's responses to the questions of the interviews that are kept on the computer will be password protected to protect your child's privacy.

The research team and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews research studies in order to protect research participants) at Rutgers University are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. If a report of this study is published, or the results are presented at a professional conference, only group results will be stated. *All study data will be kept for at least three years before they are destroyed by shredding. All electronic data will be permanently deleted from the computer and all backup disks destroyed after three years.*

While there are no major foreseeable risks to students, one foreseeable area of discomfort is your child's responses to questions pertaining to teaching and learning within the classroom as it affects their performance on the HSPA. *Also teachers could learn about things said about them generally, but this risk is no greater than what students may already be talking about teachers on blogs, texting, emails chatrooms, and other social networks.* Please note that your child at any time during the study reserves the right not to answer any questions that will make him/her uncomfortable. At any time during the interviews your child can choose not to answer any question without penalty. In fact, your

EXPIRES

APPROVED

Date: 1/5/11

JAN 04 2012

Approved by the
Rutgers IRB

child can even choose to drop out or withdraw completely from this study with any penalty.

You/your child have been told that the benefits of taking part in this study will be to inform teachers and school leaders of students' suggestions of how to help them improve their performance on state-mandated assessments such as the HSPA. However, you may receive no direct benefit from taking part in this study. You/your child will receive no money for completing the entire study.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose for your child not to participate, and you may withdraw your child from participating at any time during the study activities without any penalty to your child. In addition, your child may choose not to answer any questions with which your child is not comfortable.

If you/your child have any questions about the study or study procedures, you/your child may contact me at:

18 Parish Lane
Willingboro, NJ 08046
Telephone #: (609) 238-9920
E-mail address: pgiplesr@msn.com

If you/your child have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews research studies in order to protect those who participate). Please contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:

Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey
Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
3 Rutgers Plaza

EXPIRES

APPROVED
Date: 1/5/11

JAN 04 2011

Approved by
Rutgers IRB

New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559
 Tel: 732-932-0150 ext. 2104
 Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

Your child will also be asked if they wish to participate in this study. You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

Sign below if you agree to allow your child to participate in this research study:

Name _____ of _____ Child _____ (Print)

Name _____ of _____ Parent/Legal _____ Guardian _____ (Print)

Parent/Legal Guardian's Signature _____ Date _____

Principal Investigator Signature _____ Date _____

AUDIOTAPE AND/OR VIDEOTAPE / PHOTOGRAPHY ADDENDUM TO CONSENT FORM

You have already agreed to allow your child to participate in a research study entitled: **A case study of urban public high school students' perspectives of their school as 'in need of improvement' under NCLB** conducted by **Patrick P. Giple**. We are asking for your permission to allow us to only **audiotape (sound)** your child as part of this research study. You do not have to agree to allow your child to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of the study.

EXPIRES

JAN 04 2012

APPROVED

Date: 1/5/11

Approved by the
 Rutgers IRB

The recording(s) will be used for ***educational purposes. No money will be given to your child for taking part in this study.***

The recording(s) will include ***your child's voice, but not his/her name because a six-digit code will be used to identify your child during the recordings. With this code not even your child's teachers, principal, or school district officials will know your child's exact response.***

The recording(s) will be stored ***in a locked file cabinet with no link to your child's identity; your child's identity and the number code that identifies your child will be stored in a locked file cabinet in a separate location. Electronic copies that are kept of your child's responses will be password protected by me to prevent others from gaining such knowledge. Also, upon completion of the study electronic data pertaining to your child's responses will be permanently deleted and all non-electronic data will be destroyed by shredding after three years.***

Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record your child as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that stated in the consent form without your written permission.

Name _____ of _____ Child _____ (Print)

Name _____ of _____ Parent/Legal Guardian _____ (Print)

EXPIRES

APPROVED
Date: 1/5/11

JAN 04 2012

Approved by the
Rutgers IRB

Parent/Legal Guardian's Signature _____
Date _____

Principal Investigator Signature _____ Date _____

APPROVED

Date: 1/5/11

EXPIRES

JAN 04 2012

Approved by the
Rutgers IRB

ASSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Investigator: Mr. Patrick P. Giple

Rutgers University

Study Title: A Case Study of Urban Public High School Students' Perspectives of
Their School as 'In Need of Improvement' Under NCLB

This assent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask the researcher or your parent or teacher to explain any words or information that you do not clearly understand before signing this document.

1. Mr. Patrick P. Giple is inviting you to take part in his research study. Why is this study being done?

We want to find out from students at an urban public high school about their thoughts and experiences of their school so that we can find ways to make students do better on state tests and improve their schools.

2. What will happen:

First, you will take part in a focus-group discussion with five other students in your group to inform Mr. Giple about your school as a school that needs improvement, about what you are learning in the classroom and about ways to help your school help you to do better on state tests. This will last for about 45 to 60 minutes. Secondly, Mr. Giple will have a one-to-one interview with you to hear from you personally, without other students present, about what you think about the same questions in the focus-group interview. This also will last for about 45 to 60 minutes. Finally, at the end of the study I will meet with all the students who took part in the study and present a report of the findings and ask you for any corrections you may have. This also will take another 45 to 60 minutes. You may skip any question that you do not want to answer and you may take a break if you need one. With your permission indicated below, I will make only an audiotape recording of these sessions.

What does it cost and how much does it pay?

You don't pay to take part in this study and you will not be paid to take part in this study.

3. There are very few risks in taking part in this research, but the following things could happen:

Your answers could be seen by somebody not involved in this study. We will do our absolute best to keep all your answers private. Your teachers, principal, or school district personnel will not know your particular response. *Teachers may learn about things said about them generally, but this risk is no greater than what students may already be talking about teachers on blogs, texting, emails chatrooms, and other social networks.*

APPROVED
Date: 1/5/11

EXPIRES

JAN 04 2012

Approved by the
Rutgers IRB

Your answers will be kept locked up. Your name will not appear beside your response; we will use a code number instead. The people who work for us are very well trained and understand the importance of confidentiality. But, if the researchers learn that you or someone else are in serious danger they would have to tell an appropriate family member, such as your mother, father, or caretaker or the appropriate officials to protect you and other people. Also, if at any time during this study you wish to drop out or withdraw you are absolutely free to do so without any penalty. Moreover, whatever is discovered during this study will only be used after the study is finished and defended successfully.

4. **Are there any benefits that you or others will get out of being in this study?**

All research must have some potential benefit either directly to those that take part in it or potentially to others through the knowledge gained. The knowledge gained through this study may allow us to develop more effective programs to assist students just like you do better on state tests and improve their schools.

It's completely up to you! Both you and your parents have to agree to allow you to take part in this study. If you choose to not take part in this study, we will honor that choice. No one will get angry or upset with you if you don't want to do this. If you agree to take part in it and then you change your mind later, that's OK too. It's always your choice!

5. **CONFIDENTIALITY: We will do everything we can to protect the confidentiality of your records.** If we write professional articles about this research, they will never say your name or anything that could give away who you are. We will do a good job at keeping all our records secret by following the rules made for researchers.

6. **Do you have any questions?** If you have any questions or worries regarding this study, or if any problems come up, you may call the principal investigator Mr. Patrick P. Giple at:

18 Parish Lane
Willingboro, NJ 08046
Telephone #: (609) 238-9920
E-mail address: pgiplesr@msn.com

7. You may also ask questions or talk about any worries to the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews research studies in order to protect those who participate). Please contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:
Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey
Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
3 Rutgers Plaza
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559
Tel: 732-932-0150 ext. 2104
Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

EXPIRES

JAN 04 2012

Approved by the
Rutgers IRB

APPROVED

Date: 1/9/11

ATTACHMENT # 7

Protocol for Focus-Group Interview (Part 1)

First session: National Honors Society students

Second session: Low-achieving students

Focus: *Student perspectives of their school as 'in need of improvement'*

Good Afternoon,

My name is Patrick P. Giple. I currently teach at Clinton K-8 Center in Plainfield. I will like to begin by thanking each of you for agreeing to participate in this case study research and for taking the time to meet with me during after-school hours.

Your school, Roosevelt High School, is a school 'in need of improvement' because it has failed to meet the state standards of proficiency for more than two consecutive years. The purpose of the focus-group interviews of this case study is twofold: (1) to find out your perspectives of your school as 'in need of improvement', and (2) to hear your suggestions as students about classroom practices that you believe can improve the academic performance of students at your school. To answer these questions I have arranged for two focus-group interviews each with six students.

Today is Part 1 of our focus-group interview and we will focus on your perspectives of your school as 'in need of improvement'. During the interview please be assured that your names and the names your teachers, principal and school will be kept completely confidential. One way I am going to do this is to use numerical codes in place of your names and all other parties to protect the identity of all those involved. *It is important to keep in mind that whatever is discussed at these interviews must remain confidential. This means you must not disclose or discuss what is said here to anyone outside of this study. Everyone needs to feel safe and protected to say what they really want to say.* Also, while I would very much like for you to answer all the questions in each interview, you are absolutely free not to answer any question you may feel uncomfortable answering. All I ask is that you relax and answer as truthfully as possible the questions I will ask. If at any time during the interview a question is asked that you do

EXPIRES

APPROVED
Date: 11/5/11

JAN 06 2012

Approved by the
Rutgers IRB

not fully understand please ask me to explain or elaborate clearly and I will be pleased to do so. This is important because in order to answer the questions correctly and completely you need to understand the questions clearly.

Before we begin let us introduce ourselves.

Questions

1. Your school (CHS) has been categorized as a school 'in need of improvement'. That is, it has failed to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) for two or more consecutive years. In fact, it has failed to make AYP for seven years. Are you aware of this classification and what does it mean to you?
2. Do you think it makes a difference whether you are aware of your school's status as 'in need of improvement' or not? Explain.
3. The federal government through its NCLB legislation requires all schools in the United States to reach 100% proficiency by 2014. The reason why New Jersey reports the status of each school is to inform you of where your school stands in reference to meeting this goal. Do you know where your school stands and how is this information important to you as students?
4. How does being aware of your school's status have any negative implications?
5. Do you think that your parents should be fully aware of your school's status? Why or why not?

APPROVED
Date: 1/5/11

EXPIRES

JAN 04 2012

Approved by the
Rutgers IRB

ATTACHMENT # 7 (contd.)**Protocol for One-to-One Interview**

Focus: *Student experiences of teaching and learning at RHS and how do these experiences relate to the goal of succeeding on the HSPA.*

Good Afternoon,

Today I will be conducting a one-to-one interview. Again I would like to thank you for coming. The focus of our interview today is to hear from you, an individual, about your experiences and perspectives about the quality of teaching and learning here at RHS and how you relate these experiences to the goal of succeeding n the HSPA.

So relax and remember that the code of confidentiality applies to all interviews.

Questions

1. Describe for me the quality of teaching here at RHS in the areas of Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science.
2. How does the classroom environment affect how your teachers teach in the classroom?

EXPIRES

JAN 04 2012

APPROVED
Date: 1/5/11Approved by the
Putgers IPR

3. Is there anything that teachers here at RHS do in terms of what takes place within the classroom that discourages you from learning and being serious about your studies? Explain.
4. Is there anything that teachers in your school do that really excites you to learn and be serious about your studies? Explain.
5. What can you say about how teaching at RHS prepares you for passing the HSPA?
6. How does what you learn in the classroom help you when you take the HSPA?
7. In what ways do you think what you are learning is not helping you to succeed on the HSPA?
8. Do you think there is a relationship between discipline and how teachers teach and what students learn in the classroom? If so, describe the classroom situation here at RHS and how discipline affects how teachers teach and what students learn in the classroom?
9. How does the classroom environment affect how you learn in the classroom as students?

EXPIRES

JAN 04 2012

Approved by the
Rutgers IRB**APPROVED**
Date: 1/5/11

ATTACHMENT # 7 (contd.)**Protocol for Focus-Group Interview (Part 2)**

Focus: *What corrective practices can students offer to improve the academic performances of students at RHS on the HSPA?*

First session: Low-achieving students

Second session: National Honors Society students

Questions

1. Is there anything teachers can do to improve the way they teach in order for you to be successful on the HSPA? Explain.
 - i. In Language Arts
 - ii. In Mathematics
 - iii. In Science
2. Is there anything students can do for themselves to help improve their own learning in order to be successful on the HSPA? Explain.
3. Is there anything that students and teachers at RHS can do together outside of school hours to help students succeed on the HSPA? Explain.
4. Are there any resources that would be most helpful to you as students in helping you to succeed on the HSPA? Explain.

APPROVED
Date: 1/5/11

EXPIRES

JAN 06 2011

Approved by the
Rutgers IRB

This marks the end of our focus-group and one-to-one interviews. Thank you very much for participation. You did a fantastic job. Again, let me assure you that only pseudonyms will be used in place of your names throughout the report of this study to ensure confidentiality. Moreover, at the end of the initial draft of this study, and before the final draft is written, I will arrange to sit with you as a group to review every part of these interviews. This is important because I want whatever I have written in the final report to accurately reflect your views and experiences, not mine.

Thank you and have a nice day!

EXPIRES

JAN 04 2012

Approved by the
Rutgers IRB

APPROVED
Date: 1/5/11