

WHAT MATTERS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF HOW PARENTS IN  
LOW-PERFORMING, LOW-INCOME SCHOOLS DEFINE SCHOOL  
QUALITY RELATIVE TO SCHOOL PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORKS

by

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Abstract

Contemporary American school reform efforts require increased levels of accountability, with a focus placed on student performance on high-stakes accountability measures (HSAM). The data from these measures are reported in school performance frameworks (SPF) in the United States, in which one function is to allow parents to choose schools for their children. The body of research has shown that most parents do not exercise their option to choose new schools based on the information provided in SPF. In California, the SPF proposed for some districts includes the significant use of other data sources to describe both the academic domain and social-emotional domain of a school's overall performance. A review of the literature includes a focus on the practical impact of neoliberal educational reform policies and the pragmatics of school choice opportunities, as well as the practical and theoretical analysis of HSAM through the lenses of critical race theory, social reproduction theory, and theories of pedagogic control. This research study presents the practical and theoretical implications of the information contained in SPF and the ways that parents at low-income schools use this information. Using critical ethnography to conduct a single-instrumental case study, this study aims to answer the question of how parents of students enrolled in low-performing and low-income schools perceive and define the quality of their children's schools based on the information sources that are available to them. Additionally, this study addresses the following research sub-questions:

- Which factors contained in the SPF, relative to each other, are of greater importance to these parents?
- What factors that are of relevance to these parents are missing from the California Office for the Reform of Education (CORE) SPF?
- What factors influence these parents' perceptions of their ability to choose schools for their children based on information presented in SPF?

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

As long as free public education has been a part of American life, educational reform has been a reiterative driving force in defining the purposes of public education (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Tyack, 1974, 1995). In the last 30 years, reform efforts have been focused on using schools as a means to ensure the nation's economy remains globally competitive by viewing students as a form of human capital to serve the needs of national industry (Apple, 2000, 2006; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). These campaigns to change the face of American public education have been sustained by federally initiated reform programs such as *A Nation at Risk* (Gardner, 1983), *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB; Bush, 2001), and *Race to the Top* (Obama, 2009), all of which have mandated the use of high-stakes accountability measures (HSAM).<sup>1</sup> HSAM, as required by NCLB, are standardized assessments of English language arts, mathematics, and, in some cases, history and science in all grades from third through eighth, as well as at least once between 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades . These assessments are administered across large student populations to measure both student learning outcomes and the effectiveness of teachers and administrators, and they have been the sole basis for most state-level reporting on school performance frameworks (SPF; Polikoff, McEachin, Wrabel, & Duque, 2014; U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the term “high-stakes accountability measures” is inspired by Merchant’s (2004) working definition of the term “high-stakes assessments,” which includes an understanding that a student’s or a class’ performance on the assessments can have profound impacts on decisions related to student promotion or retention, as well as teacher and administrator hiring, rewards, or retention. HSAM are standardized assessments administered across large student populations to measure both student learning outcomes and the effectiveness of teachers and administrators.

Department of Education, 2012). Polikoff et al. (2014) and Fullan (2011) describe how both NCLB and Race to the Top reform mandates require the use of SPF by states and districts to maintain a level of accountability to the goal of raising students' academic performance levels. However, this set of data has traditionally included only that of students' performance on HSAM (Bush, 2001).

## **Background**

Neoliberalism, school choice, and HSAM as information sources for traditional SPF. A part of the incentives and disincentives NCLB has constructed to support high levels of student performance on HSAM has included a provision that allows parents of students attending a low-performing school to select a higher-performing school (Bush, 2001; Dyrness, 2011; Hastings, Van Weelden, & Weinstein, 2007; Labaree, 2010; Pattillo, 2015). The idea, firmly rooted in neoliberal theory (Abendroth & Porfilio, 2015; Enright, 2003; George, 1999; Harvey, 2005) is that when the structures of a free market, such as consumers/parents voting for quality through their choice of products/schools, are applied to domains such as public education, the producers/educators will be obliged to improve the quality of their work in order to meet these newly emphasized demands and desires. As Pattillo (2015) and others (Enright, 2003; Hastings et al., 2007; Glass, 2015; Whitty, 1997) report, the ideal of a choice-driven educational marketplace is rarely realized for the parents seemingly most in need of higher quality schools, such as those living in economically distraught urban centers. Due to bureaucratic restrictions, general lotteries with low-odds of being selected, poorly advertised enrollment windows, lack of funding for transportation, racist "red-lining" policies, and a lack of support for parents stressed by economic and housing uncertainties, many parents do not participate in school-choice opportunities. As Pattillo (2015) points out, many parents are resigned to accept the

school they know from prior experiences, even if those experiences were not positive, rather than take a risk with putting a lot of effort into an uncertain process that has the potential of creating a worse situation for their children.

Despite the existence of these provisions, the body of research indicates that the vast majority of parents at low-performing schools do not exercise this option, and it is not clear how these parents use data from SPF and, by extension, HSAM to understand differences between schools available to them. Given that most SPF available to parents to inform their option of choosing high-quality schools have historically contained only data from students' performance on HSAM (Enright, 2003; Hastings et al., 2007; Polikoff et al., 2014; Whitty, 1997), it is necessary to explore both the conceptual frameworks and the practical implications of HSAM as they fit into the larger school reform efforts. On the surface, HSAM appear to be nothing more than quantitative assessment tools developed to measure the effectiveness of teaching and learning practices in schools; however, further investigation reveals that HSAM have a darker history and application in former and current reform efforts (Apple, 2006).

HSAM find their origins in the racist social-Darwinism and eugenic movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which attempted to use scientific and pseudo-scientific methods to justify the practices of racial segregation and inequitable resource allocation in American education (Au, 2008b; Darwin, 1969; Halliday, 1971). In the American educational reform efforts of the last 30 years, HSAM have been among the favored tools used to shape public education to meet the visions of two key social and political movements: neoconservatives and neoliberals (Apple, 2000, 2006). United States President Ronald Reagan and his administration rallied the troops with the publication of "A Nation at Risk", grounding the proposed reforms in an urgent statement of the country's economic decline: ,

Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility. We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments. (Gardner, 1983, p. 9)

Emboldened by these calls of alarm describing the international and domestic economic and political challenges faced by American society in the late twentieth century, the neoconservative movement turns to the past to look for educational models for the current era. Neoconservatives believe that a strong state driven by clear moral and religious structures should also reward its citizens according to their skills and talents (Apple, 2000, 2006).

This, in turn, leads to the neoconservative support for highly regulated curricula and assessments in the nation's schools. The neoliberal movement, on the other hand, responds to the same national challenges as the neoconservatives, but instead advocates for less state control of schools, looking to the forces of the free market to shape schooling based on the needs of families and communities, situated here as choice-driven consumers (Enright, 2003; George, 1999). The policies of neoconservatism and neoliberalism converge in their faith in the concept of meritocracy, where individuals earn access to resources and financial security based on their talents and accomplishments, as

measured in most educational reform efforts by HSAM (Apple, 2006; Popham, 1987). The naïve, populist draw of meritocracy as a potential foundation for Americans' success is not without its detractors (Alvarado, 2015; Kumashiro, 2006; Lorsch & Lucey, 2015; Nielsen, 2015), who view this conceit as little more than a mythology most often used by successful White capitalists to legitimize their own histories while purposefully denying the impacts of racism, classism, sexism, and heteronormative biases on a more diverse and less financially privileged population.

Both neoconservatives and neoliberals use the results of HSAM to support their ongoing calls for further educational reforms, manifesting their belief that these types of educational assessments are both valid and reliable measures of the impact of American schooling (Apple, 2000). However, the results of most contemporary HSAM, which traditionally skew in favor of White middle-class and upper-class students (Ladson-Billings, 2006), also manifest vast inequities in the ways that teaching and learning occur and are measured in our nation's schools. The over reliance on HSAM in contemporary American education has resulted in test-driven curricula that avoids opportunities for critical thinking (Au, 2013), and it has shaped the way that teachers are prepared and supported, as Costigan (2013) found in his research of preservice teachers who were asked to reflect on the degree to which testing pressures and the language of free-market capitalism relative to public schooling were used in their credentialing program. Most importantly, however, HSAM have not been used to radically address the increasing segregation of White students from non-White students nor provide meaningful changes in the way that resources are equitably allocated (Amrein & Berliner, 2002a; Dumas, 2007; Losen, 2013).

**The use of SPF by parents in low-performing and low-income schools.** The SPF used by most school districts and states reflect just one group of data: student performance on HSAM. Schools receiving federal funding are responsible for making

adequate yearly progress (AYP) in terms of increasing the percentage of students scoring at proficiency levels on HSAM, as well as reducing the percentage of students performing at the lowest skill levels. Both of these areas of measurement are reported for the population of students tested, both as a whole group and as disaggregated groups, with focus given to groups based on race, family income, language fluency, and participation in specific educational programs. In addition, these data are used to drive state and federal systems of incentive, including awards and recognition for high-performing schools and punishment for schools, including programmatic supports and threats of closure for underperforming schools (Bauer, 2015; Polikoff et al., 2014; Ravitch, 2009). SPF have the potential to provide parents with important information to shape their perceptions of the quality of their children's schools; however, as discussed above, low-income parents rarely apply this information to motivate a selection of a new school for their children. This fact questions what other sources of data, not provided in most SPF, that parents at low-performing, low-income schools would use to shape their decisions about school quality and whether to seek out a new school.

There is a significant body of research on the efficacy of SPF and related accountability tools in terms of whether they actually impact school performance or lead to differentiated patterns of support, reward, or punishment for schools (Burgess, Wilson, & Worth, 2013; Jacobsen, Saultz, & Snyder, 2013; Polikoff et al., 2014; Sims, 2013), but there is a need for more specific research on how low-income families are able to use the information contained in SPF and the related school accountability tools as a part of their engagement with their local school system in order to act as agents of change for their own children's education.

Most of the existing research on how information included on SPF are used by low-income parents to make data-driven decisions focuses on data related to students' performance on HSAM. Bauer (2015) found that most parents considered quantitative



SPF data related to student performance on HSAM, but they did not believe it was the most important set of data in influencing their choices. Instead, parents were more concerned with qualitative data related to issues of school and neighborhood safety, the prospects of their children being happy at a school, the quality of specific academic or support services in a school, and the proximity of the school to parents' homes or workplaces.

Rogers (2006) profiled a group of parents in California who held similar concerns about school quality as the parents Bauer (2015) studied; however, Rogers found that when parents banded together to form their own community-based organizations, they were better able to gain access to the kind of data about schools that was important to them, in addition to being able to advocate more effectively for change in their current schools. The power wielded by a group of low-income parents to demand information they deemed valuable about their schools is exactly the type of power that Apple (2006) and Whitty (1997) describe as being intentionally restricted by the neoliberal approach to school reform.

Reformers who are bent on making schools a marketplace where schools compete for resources cannot afford the open flow of information about the quality of schools as safe, supportive, and nurturing environments for the most at-risk students, as the success of students in these areas is not their main intent. Most SPF are focused only on a single set of data gathered from students' performance on HSAM, even though these data are not the sole concern of parents (Bauer, 2015; Rogers, 2006). HSAM can be seen from a conceptual level in a neoliberal reform of schools as tools of social reproduction rather than opportunities for students to perform to the best of their abilities. By keeping most SPF structures focused solely on HSAM scores, the market's criteria for school quality remains skewed away from other criteria valued by parents in low-performing and low-income schools. The extant literature shows that parents in low-income schools do not

often exercise their right to select alternative schools in part because of the uncertainty that such change presents (Altonji, Huang, & Taber, 2010; Billings, Brunner, & Ross, 2014; Enright, 2003; Hastings et al., 2007; Pattillo, 2015; Whitty, 1997). Hastings et al. (2007) found that when low-income parents were presented with the actual odds of their selected choice of schools being granted to them by a district-wide school assignment lottery, as is common in many urban areas, they were less likely to make any selection for a school other than their current school than if they were provided with just information on a school's performance on HSAM.

Bauer (2015) studied parents in a California school district where much of the qualitative data they valued was not readily available in the existing SPF materials; instead, these parents had to rely on the Academic Performance Index (API) measure generated by the California Department of Education (Kim & Sunderman, 2005) and the federal measure of AYP (Lee, 2004). Both of these measures are determined by taking HSAM scores and using them to compare schools with similar student demographics or by holding a school's performance on HSAM against a predetermined set of achievement goals. As NCLB has matured and the practical implications of these measures have become better understood at both the state and local levels, the need for new ways to measure student performance and school effectiveness has become more intense. In 2011, United States President Barack Obama called for states to be granted greater flexibility in the ways that they met the demands of the NCLB law (Carney, Barnes, & Duncan, 2011), which has led to more than 43 states submitting applications for waivers from different aspects of the regulation (Polikoff et al., 2014). Most of these waivers continue to use HSAM as the main measure on proposed SPF, though a few states have proposed introducing other school quality data to be considered along with standardized test scores.

**The use of SPF in the California CORE Waiver.** California submitted a request for a waiver as a state and was quickly rejected because of the waiver's failure to

implement a new teacher-evaluation system using student performance data as a factor in determining teacher retention or promotion (Fensterwald, 2012; Polikoff et al., 2014). In turn, a group of the 10 largest school districts in California, self-organized as the California Office for the Reform of Education (CORE), applied for a waiver from NCLB, which was granted in 2011 (California Office to Reform Education, 2013). Covering more than 1,000,000 students, including students in the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), the CORE Waiver proposes, among other things, a revised SPF where the scores on HSAM account for—at maximum—60% of the overall ranking of a school, with the remaining 40% of the ranking determined by measurements of school safety, climate, and student preparation for high school or college. The complete list of the proposed components of the CORE SPF with their percentages of significance for the overall measure is presented in Table 1 (Montes de la Oca, 2015).

<b>Academic Domain</b>	<b>Percentage of Overall Significance = 60%</b>	<b>Social-Emotional and Culture-Climate Domain</b>	<b>Percentage of Overall Significance = 40%</b>
<u>Elementary Schools</u>		<u>Elementary Schools</u>	
SBAC Performance	30%	EL Reclassification	8%
SBAC Growth	30%	Parent, Staff, & Student Surveys	8%
		Student SEL Survey	8%
		Suspension/Expulsion Rates	8%
		Chronic Absenteeism	8%
<u>Middle Schools</u>		<u>Middle Schools</u>	
SBAC Performance	20%	EL Reclassification	8%
SBAC Growth	20%	Parent, Staff, & Student Surveys	8%
High School Readiness	20%	Student SEL Survey	8%
		Suspension/Expulsion Rates	8%
		Chronic Absenteeism	8%

<b>Academic Domain</b>	<b>Percentage of Overall Significance = 60%</b>	<b>Social-Emotional and Culture-Climate Domain</b>	<b>Percentage of Overall Significance = 40%</b>
<i>High Schools</i>		<i>High Schools</i>	
SBAC Performance	10%	EL Reclassification	8%
SBAC Growth	10%	Parent, Staff, & Student Surveys	8%
A-G Completion	10%	Student SEL Survey	8%
Pathway Participation	10%	Suspension/ Expulsion Rates	8%
4-year Cohort Graduation Rate	20%	Chronic Absenteeism	8%
<i>Note.</i> SBAC = Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium: the HSAM used in California as of 2014. (Montes de la Oca, 2015)			

*Table 1: CORE Waiver SPF Data Weighting by Percentage of Overall Significance*

The CORE Waiver SPF is broken into two domains: the Academic, which is weighted at 60% of the total SPF score, and the Social-Emotional and Culture-Climate, which is weighted at 40% of the total SPF score. The weight given to the HSAM in the CORE SPF, with high-school scores accounting for just 20% of the overall rating, is far less than the minimum level of 70% recorded by Polikoff et al. (2014) in their study of more than 40 state NCLB waiver requests and their proposed SPF.

Within the Academic domain of the CORE SPF, different grade spans contain different elements. At the elementary level, the only measure is students' performance on the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) in Grades 3–5. The level of proficiency each year is weighted the same as the growth demonstrated by cohorts of students based on race, language, socioeconomic status, and educational program across two years. At the middle school level, the students' performance on the SBAC in Grades 6–8 is also balanced with the level of high-school readiness demonstrated by the students in Grade 8. High-school readiness is defined as the number of students in Grade

8 who meet all of the following conditions during the school year: an overall GPA of 2.5 or above; no out-of-school suspensions; an attendance rate of 96% or better; and no grades below C- in language arts or math. At the high school level, the Academic domain balances the students' SBAC performance in Grade 11 with the following data: the number of students completing A–G requirements by Grade 12; the number of students participating in defined career-pathway programs; and, given the greatest weighting, the school's 4-year cohort graduation rate (Montes de la Oca, 2015).

For the Social-Emotional and Culture-Climate domain of the CORE SPF, all schools are measured using the same criteria. These include the following: the percentage of English learners reclassified as fluent in English each year; the results of surveys completed by parents, students, and staff about the emotional and physical safety of the campus; the results of a student-completed survey on their use of social and emotional coping strategies; the percentage of students suspended and expelled each year; and the rate of chronic absenteeism in the school, defined as students missing school more than 10% of the school year (Montes de la Oca, 2015).

The new allotment of values outlined in the CORE SPF largely coincides with the goals described by Fullan (2011) in his call for a shift in the culture of both adults and students, where all aspects of their work are used to describe the quality of the overall educational experience. The CORE SPF, with its diversity of indicators, gets very close to measuring much of the day-to-day, lived experience of a school and its staff, students, and parents. The commitment by OUSD—a financially struggling urban school district serving mostly minority and low-income families—to using the CORE SPF as an accountability tool creates an opportunity for low-income parents to easily access a larger set of data to make decisions about school quality. It remains to be seen whether or how parents at low-performing, low-income schools will use the information contained in the CORE SPF to make decisions about school quality and whether these decisions are

used by these parents to choose schools that could potentially provide a more supportive environment for their children.

In a city like Oakland, where the 4-year cohort graduation rate in 2013 was only 62.8%, with African American students graduating at a rate of 56.9% while White students graduated at a rate of 76.9%, the necessity for schools that are responsive to the needs of all students is sorely felt as an issue of equity and social justice (Ed-Data, 2014). As far as OUSD is concerned, a focus on the elements of school performance outlined in the CORE SPF offers a more complete portrayal of a school's academic and social-emotional/culture-climate issues and develops from the district's earlier commitments to developing high-quality community schools across the city. The goal of the district in implementing the CORE SPF is to create a new definition of accountability for its schools and its community, and it is hoped that these measures will better capture the areas of quality shared by both educators and community members alike (Oakland Unified School District, n.d.).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research study was to understand how OUSD parents in low-performing and low-income schools respond to the diverse data presented in the CORE SPF. This research has practical and theoretical implications for the work of school districts and for key stakeholder groups in the United States, in that an accountability measure using a diverse set of data was investigated in terms of the relevancy it accrues as a decision-making tool to determine overall school quality.

Oakland has a long history of providing opportunities for parents to organize in ways that benefit their children's education, such as the small autonomous school movement of the last decade (Dyrness, 2011; Vasudeva, Darling-Hammond, Newton, &

Montgomery, 2009). The CORE SPF has the potential to serve as an important means by which parents will be able to more easily engage in an inquiry process over not only the academic but also the social-emotional and culture-climate aspects of the city's schools. Even as Whitty (1997) provides cautions that school choice and the tools used in the choice process are often no more than window dressing on neoliberal, free-market driven reform efforts disguised as opportunities for parental engagement, the CORE SPF may hold the potential to provide a unique opportunity for real, meaningful engagement with parents on the topics that interest them most about schools: emotional and physical safety, quality teaching and learning, and an institution's embrace of the larger community (Bauer, 2015).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Parents in low-performing, low-income schools have the right to select better performing schools, mostly as defined by results of HSAM, for their children, but the research has shown that the vast majority of them do not exercise this right. The data on school quality available to most parents only reflect students' performance on HSAM, as presented in SPF. Research indicates that parents in low-performing, low-income schools care about other areas of school performance not typically contained in most SPF when deciding if a school is of a high quality. The CORE SPF planned for use in the OUSD will present a wider array of data, including students' performance on HSAM, their readiness for high school and college, and results of measures focused on the social-emotional and culture-climate aspects of each school. A complete study is necessary in order to fully understand how parents at low-performing and low-income schools would use this new set of data to inform their decisions about school quality and their selection of schools. While this research focuses on the bounded system of OUSD public and

charter schools, it is recognized that some parents may not find any schools within this system that would meet their definition of a high-quality school. Given the current and historical predominance of neoliberal quality-control tools, such as HSAM, over other measures of school quality, it is of interest to discover the degree to which parents have internalized the principles of neoliberal competition and selection into their own lives as consumers and wage-earners and parents of future citizens of our capitalist society (Apple, 2000; Roberts, 2009; Torres, 2008).

### **Research Questions**

The central research question that this study aims to answer is the following: How do parents of students enrolled in low-performing and low-income schools perceive and define the quality of their children's schools based on the information sources that are available to them? Additionally, this study also addresses the following research sub-questions:

- Which factors contained in the SPF, relative to each other, are of greater importance to these parents?
- What factors that are of relevance to these parents are missing from the CORE SPF?
- What factors influence these parents' perceptions of their ability to choose schools for their children based on information presented in SPF?



## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This review of literature focuses primarily on HSAM, as these have traditionally been used as the sole measures included on most SPF across the United States in the last three decades (Polikoff et al., 2014). Given the power afforded to HSAM, it is necessary to understand the practical and theoretical implications of HSAM use in contemporary education. Following a review of literature related to parent-choice options, an extended discussion of practical analyses of the impact of HSAM on teaching and learning is provided, as well as theoretical analyses of HSAM through the lenses of critical race theory (CRT), social reproduction theory, and theories of pedagogic control. The review then focuses on neoliberalism as the theoretical basis for most HSAM and SPF.

#### **The Pragmatics of Parental School-Choice Options**

Apple (2006) and Whitty (1997) maintain that the power of making parental choice an option exercised by low-income families on an individual basis rather than as a collective actually decreases the significance of the parent choice as a form of incentive or disincentive for schools to improve student academic performance. By making choice an individual process, Apple and Whitty claim, the power of a unified movement of parents choosing to leave a failing school is diminished. This movement of decision-making about school quality from the public sphere to the private sphere is also an example of how local governments and school districts have abdicated their duty

to enforce the expectation that all schools deliver a high quality of education to their students (Dyrness, 2011; Jennings, Noblit, Brayboy, & Cozart, 2007; Lipman, 2013; Pattillo, 2015; Pedroni, 2007). This abdication of responsibility (Labaree, 1997) is a function of the faulty assumption that the free-market principle of consumer-choice will motivate change in a winner-takes-all competitive marketplace. Whitty (1997) maintains that this assumption is flawed as there is little power exercised through such a choice when decision-making moves from the public to the private sphere, since the organization of parents in a low-performing school as a single movement demanding change is unlikely.

Even when parents in a community are organized as collaborators designing new school communities, as documented by Dyrness (2011), they often experience significant political and organizational roadblocks in being able to make choices for their students' schooling. As Kumashiro (2006) observes, true engagement in meaningful choice processes is often negated by the differences in perceived power between parents and educators, creating feelings of intimidation, self-doubt, and even fatalism among parents who do not feel prepared to demand what they need from an historically unresponsive administration. Pattillo (2015) documents the suspicion that many parents hold around school-choice lottery programs and the repeated frustrations they've experienced when they have tried to serve as agents of change for their children only to find that their actions had no impact on their admission to a desired school.

### **Practical Analyses of the Impact of HSAM on Teaching and Learning**

Before engaging in a theoretical and critical analysis of HSAM as instruments of perpetuating educational inequity and pedagogic control, it is important to briefly review some of the impacts that HSAM have had on the practices of teaching and

learning. Amrein and Berliner (2002b) contrast students' performances on state-mandated high school HSAM with their performances on wider-scaled, nationally administered HSAM, such as the American College Test (ACT), the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) produced by Educational Testing Service (ETS), the Advanced Placement tests (AP), and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests. Amrein and Berliner tracked the growth in the use of HSAM as part of high school graduation requirements, showing that only one state required such HSAM in 1979, while 27 states required them in 2008. Despite the significant growth in the use of HSAM, Amrein and Berliner found that the use of these state-developed assessments do not correspond to improved performances on nationally administered assessments. In Amrein and Berliner's (2002b) study, 67% of the 18 states showed a decrease on ACT Scores, while 56% showed a decrease on SAT scores. NAEP and AP examination scores, when controlled for cohort participation rates, showed a lack of consistently corresponding performance, with 62% of states losing ground on the NAEP Math, while AP scores were hard to correlate, because so many students from the states under investigation were excluded from participating in the national exams. Only the NAEP Language Arts assessment showed signs of improvement, with 69% of states showing gains. However, the significance of this gain is to be questioned, according to Amrein and Berliner, because of low-matched cohort participation rates between NAEP participation and high-school exit examination participation (2002b, p. 57).

Ultimately, Amrein and Berliner's (2002b) critique of HSAM is somewhat unclear. While they state that "high-stakes tests being used today do not, as a general rule, appear valid as indicators of genuine learning" (p. 58), Amrein and Berliner's research, and the conclusions they draw about the reliability of state-mandated HSAM, are limited because of their use of solely quantitative methods to collect and analyze their

data on students' HSAM performance and their assumptions that nationally administered standardized assessments are appropriate and valid measures of real student learning.

Medina and Neill (1988, 1989) address questions of HSAM validity and reliability in their survey of test design methods used by HSAM developers, such as NAEP and ETS. Test validity is the degree to which an assessment measures what it claims to measure, as well as the degree of objectivity of the conclusions that can be drawn from assessment results. Test reliability is often measured as the statistical rate at which a student would achieve similar results if she or he were to be administered the same testing instrument twice. In terms of ensuring test validity, Medina and Neill (1988, p. 11) report that three key criteria must be maintained during test creation and analysis:

- Do test results accurately measure the skills and knowledge actually taught to the students?
- Do test results accurately correlate with future performance in the subject being measured?
- Do test results accurately correlate with the underlying trait or characteristic being measured?

Medina and Neill (1988) maintain that most HSAM development is focused solely on satisfying the first criterion of content validity and replaces the completion of the second and third criteria with advice provided by content experts from state boards of education and university faculty. This failure to fully validate HSAM items leads to assessment outcomes that are not significantly different from subjective teacher grading or independently created tests. In terms of test reliability, Medina and Neill report that few HSAM achieve a reliability coefficient above 0.8, which indicates that up to 20% of students would achieve a significantly different set of results if they were to take the same HSAM twice. In terms of practical implications, HSAM misrepresent the actual performance of one out of every five students assessed (Medina & Neill, 1988, p. 12).

Hilliard (2000) continues Medina and Neill's (1988, 1989) criticism of HSAM development practices with his own analysis of how the domination of HSAM in public schools betrays the authentic need for families and educators to have access to meaningful and reliable measures of academic progress. Hilliard (2000, p. 295) documents how criticism of HSAM is often misrepresented as a criticism of high standards of performance and learning and that non-White families and communities, as well as educators and policy-makers driven by principles of social justice,<sup>2</sup> have been reluctant to speak out against HSAM because of this confusion. In turn, these same communities striving for excellence limit their criticism of the ways that school districts have narrowed the curriculum and pedagogy offered to their students. Instead of offering a rich education based in critical analyses of how information and history have intersected with students' lives and communities, most schools work to close the incomplete validity-criteria loop identified by Medina and Neill (1988), whereby HSAM creators strive to match the content of the assessments to the content of most schools' curricula, while schools have narrowed their curricula and pedagogical methods to match the anticipated content of HSAM.

Townsend (2002) continues Hilliard's criticism of the cyclical relationship of HSAM and curricula development, pointing out that the White middle-class bias of most HSAM and related curricula, as documented by Medina and Neill (1988), has an impact on how students come to regard their own abilities as learners. Townsend provides a summary of research from the last 50 years on how standardized testing, and the curricular and pedagogic reforms associated with it, have negatively influenced how African American students shape their own understanding of themselves as capable students. Townsend documents how the cycle of HSAM analysis and the curricular-

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<sup>2</sup> For a working definition of social justice, readers should refer to a collaboratively created definition presented in Appendix A.

focusing of current educational reform efforts, such as NCLB, have resulted in public identification of schools serving mostly poor, non-White students as under-performing. Instead of providing students with a richer, more empowering curriculum, these schools are required to limit their curriculum even more severely so that remediation and constant repetition of skills to ensure success on HSAM become the key foci of instruction.

Townsend (2002), in her analysis of research on teacher attitudes in these schools (Cross, 1997), points out that African American students who attend these schools, mostly centered in urban centers across the nation and in poor rural areas in the South, internalize the messages of low self-worth and low intelligence conveyed by the cycles of poor performance on HSAM and the subsequent narrowing of learning opportunities. Cross' (1997) qualitative, interview-based research of 68 teachers in a large Midwestern school district looks at how teacher attitudes towards poor, non-White students are shaped, in part, by these students' academic performance. Cross reports that the vast majority of the teachers she interviewed felt that academic success and the development of critical thinking skills supported by instruction focused on the needs of each individual student were vital elements in helping poor non-White students in urban settings to have a stronger sense of self-esteem. This proposal and its presumed outcomes are similar to the claims that Hilliard (2000) makes for a standards-based, student-focused curriculum that he proposes for African American students. Townsend (2002) presents the potential held by these curricula not driven by HSAM (Cross, 1997; Hilliard, 2000) to the narrowed remedial curriculum imposed by HSAM-focused reform efforts. In a sweeping criticism of NCLB reforms driven by HSAM, Townsend (2002) maintains:

With high-stakes testing as their accountability cornerstones, NCLB and RTTP [Race to the Top] guarantee that the very child who gets left behind is African American. In addition to being left behind academically, African American

children's racial identities, self-concepts, and achievement orientations will be sacrificed in the process. (p. 224)

As a means of addressing these negative impacts of HSAM on student learning and identity-development, Townsend calls for a "strength-based model of assessment" (p. 228) to augment HSAM with portfolio and curriculum-based assessments. While such an assessment system would have the potential to more fully portray the actual learning and skills of each student, Townsend's recommendation does not explicitly call for a more personally focused and empowering curriculum not driven by HSAM results, indicating an assumption that the ways that the curricula and pedagogy of most schools have been impacted and limited by modern reform efforts and HSAM are inevitable. Can educators really portray the full potential of students as learners trained as self-empowered critical thinkers when they've never been allowed the opportunity to develop those students' full potential?

Solórzano (2008) calls for a more complete review of how the HSAM are developed and implemented in order to assess the academic progress of students learning English (EL), another population with historically low performance on HSAM. In his analysis of 46 studies on EL performance on HSAM, covering a total sample of more than 1,000,000 students, Solórzano outlines the ethical, theoretical, and practical considerations that should be taken when developing HSAM for EL students. Mirroring many of the issues outlined by Medina and Neill (1988), Solórzano (2008) investigates the degree to which HSAM validity and reliability is impacted by EL student participation, the level of relevancy that EL student performance on HSAM can have for instructional decisions, and whether current HSAM demonstrate unacceptable levels of bias and unfairness when administered to EL students (p. 263). Based on the results of his

review of the research studies, Solórzano calls for several key changes to the ways that HSAM are developed and implemented:

- Develop an Opportunity to Learn (OTL) Index to address and adjust the interpretation of EL students' scores on HSAM. The OTL Index would consider, among several factors, the quality and experience of a student's teachers, as well as the quality of the instruction and resources available to the student;
- Provide an increased level of accommodations for EL students taking HSAM, including the availability of dual-language dictionaries, simplified instructions, and increased time to complete the assessments;
- Require a specific threshold of English proficiency, rather than simply using length of student enrollment in American schooling, before administering HSAM;
- Develop new HSAM specifically to assess EL students with increased levels of validity and reliability;
- Eliminate curricular reforms based on EL student performance on HSAM until the modifications described above can be fully implemented. (Solórzano, 2008, p. 316)

Solórzano's (2008) recommendations for adapting the development and application of HSAM for EL students allows for significant changes, but they never venture into the range of questioning the basic premise of HSAM. He summarizes the logic of using HSAM to measure EL students' learning, stating, "[I]t is understandable that, as a result of [...] consistently poor academic showing, states, school districts, schools, teachers, and parents ultimately need to be held accountable for this student population's progress" (p. 262). Similar to Amrein and Berliner (2002b) and Townsend (2002), Solórzano (2008) does not really question the inevitability of HSAM as ways



to measure student learning. Hilliard (2000) and Medina and Neill (1988, 1989), on the other hand, keep separate the need for high standards for teaching and learning from the ways that HSAM are used to monitor and reshape these processes.

Understanding the ways that HSAM negatively impact teaching, learning, and non-White student self-identity, as already discussed, could be sufficient reason for educators and communities driven by principles of social justice to take note. Even more disturbing are the ways that the reforms tied to HSAM results have inspired some schools and districts to completely remove evidence of non-White and non-fluent English speaking students' participation in schooling in order to falsely bolster the institutions' academic records in the name of preserving teachers' and administrators' employment. In their review of the history of American HSAM being solely used to measure school and district effectiveness, King, Houston, and Middleton (2001, p. 438) note that nearly every American state engages in the practice, reinforcing an agenda of marginalizing districts and schools with high populations of non-White and non-fluent English speaking students. The real stories, needs, and experiences of these students are negated, and the only academic narrative they are allowed is one of continued failure within the environment where White, fluent English-speaking, middle-class student experiences are the norm (King et al., 2001, p. 430).

This urge to recontextualize the very existence of non-White and non-fluent English-speaking students is documented by Vasquez Heilig and Darling-Hammond (2008). They engaged in a multiyear, mixed-methods research study in a large Texas school district, with the research sample consisting of more than 270,000 students over seven years. Among the district's students, 31% were African American, while 56% of the students were Latino, and 28% were English learners. Vasquez Heilig and Darling-Hammond report a remarkably consistent practice of removing African Americans, Latinos, and EL students from their testing ranks before HSAM were administered each

year. Using a complex gaming-system of retentions, dismissals, and failures to properly code student transitions in and out of the district, as well as hastily completed referrals of students to special education, the officials of this school district bolstered their district's HSAM records by preventing lower performing students' records from being counted. The researchers found that 12% of African American students' scores were excluded, more than double the rate of exclusion for White students, and all students who took the assessment in Spanish, accounting for more than 10% of all tests taken in the district, were also excluded. A review of the excluded students' assessments found that their scores were significantly lower than the scores of the students included in the district's HSAM records.

Vasquez Heilig and Darling-Hammond (2008) conclude, based on interviews with district officials and teachers, that the state policies surrounding HSAM reporting created an atmosphere where their district employees felt that their continuation in their careers depended on reporting continual HSAM gains each year, even if it meant denying the very existence of a significant number of lower-performing non-White and non-fluent English-speaking students. The district used an aggressive "employment at-will" policy that "punished" non-conforming and non-performing administrators (p. 97). Due to these attempts to prevent non-White and non-fluent English-speaking students from being fully counted, it is estimated that over 30% of ninth grade students were retained for one or more years during the period of the research so that the district could avoid having them participate in the required HSAM in tenth grade. Many of these retained students, often held in that grade for two or three years, either dropped out completely or were later promoted to eleventh grade on credits alone, again skipping the HSAM in tenth grade (p. 106).

In their analysis of student-exclusion policies tied to the implementation of HSAM, Vasquez Heilig and Darling-Hammond (2008) do not provide many potential

alternatives to replace the role of HSAM in these situations. However, in an earlier work, Darling-Hammond (2004) profiles three educational agencies that have made remarkable structural and financial changes in response to mandated school reforms driven by HSAM. Rather than resorting to the exclusion of students or the narrowing of curricula and pedagogy, the main goals of the three educational agencies were focused on the development of students as critical-thinkers, as well as the need for teachers to grow in their ability to teach complex information and ideas. Darling-Hammond (2004) describes the work being done by the State of Connecticut that emphasizes the analysis of student performance data as a commentary on the professional development needs and goals of the teachers and administrators, rather than simply serving as diagnostics of student and educator failure. Additionally, Darling-Hammond (2004) documents the state's systems designed to support, develop, and retain excellent teachers in all of their schools based on needs demonstrated on HSAM, not solely in the schools with property tax revenues sufficient to pay for the best teachers. Over the last 30 years, Connecticut has doubled teachers' salaries while requiring a strengthening of the requirements for both initial credentialing of teachers and the renewal of credential. These efforts have resulted in a significant improvement in student performance on HSAM over a five-year period, with some urban districts showing an increase of nearly 14 percentage points in the number of students reading at or above grade level (Darling-Hammond, 2004, p. 17). Darling-Hammond also profiles similar efforts in New Haven Unified in California and District #2 in New York City. In all cases, the focus is on developing the skills and knowledge, the initiative to collaborate, and the professionalism of teachers and administrators in all schools, even those where students perform poorly on HSAM, rather than modifying the curriculum to meet the low critical-thinking demands of most HSAM. These professional development and incentive efforts are coupled with close partnerships with the states'

teacher preparation programs to improve the recruitment and development of the state's highest-performing college graduates.

Darling-Hammond (2004) summarizes the efforts made by Connecticut, New Haven Unified in California, and District #2 in New York City as a means of addressing the authentic learning needs of students rather than the testing performance of the students on HSAM. These efforts include:

- Enhancing teacher professional development to focus on serving the needs of diverse learners in order to improve their critical thinking skills;
- Increasing the amount of learning time for students while decreasing the number of students each teacher must serve;
- Using a system of district-level formative assessments throughout the year to help teachers make more informed instructional decisions; and
- Making targeted support services available for all students needing these resources (Darling-Hammond, 2004, p. 14).

Darling-Hammond (2004) points out the benefit of making education a true profession, where teachers are developed and supported, and HSAM performance is used as data to inform areas for professional growth. Contrasted with systems that solely use HSAM performance as data to regulate and punish students, teachers, and schools, Darling-Hammond highlights better ways to attract and retain a higher caliber of educators who want to grow in their ability to promote the critical thinking skills of all students.

### **Theoretical Analyses of HSAM**

As the key point of data included in most SPF, HSAM warrant a significant analysis (Polikoff et al., 2014) in order to understand the ways that the design and

implementation of HSAM in the United States exemplify bodies of critical thought and analysis. Without trying to understand the grounds from which HSAM have grown, it is unlikely that an educator driven by the principles of social justice can build a solid argument against the wide-scale use of the assessment tools and their inequitable but significant outcomes. What follows are three sets of analysis and critique of the use of HSAM from the perspective of theories of educational inequality and control: critical race theory (CRT), social reproduction theory, and Bernstein's theory of pedagogic control.

**Critical race theory and HSAM.** Critical race theory (CRT) found its initial articulation in 1989 through a series of meetings of legal theorists and scholars (Brown & Jackson, 2013). Critical analyses of the multitude of legal cases in the mid-twentieth century in the United States surrounding the abandonment by the federal and many state governments of "separate but equal" policies in education led to a deeper analysis of the legal and educational reasoning motivating these shifts. Derrick Bell (1979, p. 14) proposes the concept of interest convergence, which claims that African Americans' efforts to fight racism are only effective to the degree to which their interests match the interests of the White elitist class, who control the majority of our society's institutions. Bell's analytic stance has been used by scholars of CRT to analyze policies and reform efforts in the fields of both law and education, including such HSAM-related policies as NCLB and Race to the Top.

**Buras (2013) calls for the creation of** a paradigm of "racial realism" that is based on the belief that "racism is endemic and infects all aspects of social life" (p. 217). Buras goes on to criticize the presumptions that drive many public and charter school reform efforts from two positions: First, the belief that "scientifically based . . . school policy and practice" (p. 219) can drive reform efforts, and, second, the idea that the results of HSAM can be used to validly compare the performance of White and non-White students. Buras claims that attempts to cloak reform efforts and decision-making based on the outcomes

of HSAM in the disinterested and historically detached language of science and purely quantitative methodologies erases the opportunities for the public to consider both reforms and HSAM from the perspectives of the lived-experiences, personal narratives, and real-life accounts of how policies and law have been subverted by a White elite when their interests do not converge with anti-racist ideals.

Ladson-Billings (1998) builds on Bell's (1979) and Buras' (2013) concepts of interest convergence in her description of how Whites have benefitted to a greater degree than African Americans by affirmative action programs in education (p. 12). Her critique of HSAM situates the roots of the accountability practices in the racist movements around intelligence testing and eugenics in the early twentieth century (p. 19). She maintains that one continuing role non-White students serve when HSAM performance is discussed is to serve as a "symbolic index" for non-elite Whites, whereby the latter group can be placated by their relatively superior performance; in turn, it allows for the continued economic and educational exploitation of both African American and non-elite Whites by the ruling White elites. Ladson-Billings (1998) connects the way that HSAM culminate and give clear expression to a "dysfunctional curriculum coupled with a lack of instructional innovation (or persistence)" (p. 20), and she voices opposition to the ways that HSAM are sometimes used to perpetuate stereotypes of intellectual and moral inferiorities of non-White students.

Ladson-Billings (2006) later focuses her critique on HSAM and the ways they are analyzed to justify the perpetuation of economic and social control in her essay challenging the use of the term "achievement gap" to describe **the difference in performance** on HSAM among White and Black and Latino students. Ladson-Billings (2006, p. 4) documents this difference in performance by contrasting the scores of White and Black and Latino students on the 2005 administration of the NAEP. In fourth-grade reading, Black and Latino students scored, on average, 26 scaled-score points lower than

White students, and they scored 20 scaled-score points lower in math. The same pattern held in the eighth-grade, where Black and Latino students scored 23 scaled-score points lower than White students and 26 scaled-score points lower in math.

Though the term “achievement gap” has become a common term used to emotionally charge the work of educators and policymakers of all political stripes, Ladson-Billings (2006) maintains that it fails to capture the prolonged history of educational neglect and inequity faced by non-White communities. In addition to creating **the false presumption that White and non-White students in the United States** live and learn in equally resourced communities and attend schools that are equally caring and responsive to their needs, the use of “achievement gap” to describe HSAM outcomes places the onus for the gap solidly on the individual student’s own history of academic achievement, inferring that she has primary agency in whether the gap is to be widened or closed.

From the perspective of CRT, Ladson-Billings (2006) maintains that the deficit-driven language of the “achievement gap” needs to be reframed instead as the “educational debt” in order to accurately describe the potential solutions society owes to non-White students in partial compensation for generations of neglect and oppression. This subtle shift in language creates a new paradigm in which it is more difficult for educational systems and policy-makers to reproduce a set of expected outcomes for non-White students and to avoid their responsibilities from a social justice perspective. Ladson-Billings details the levels of debt owed to non-White students from historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral perspectives. The historical construction of the educational debt looks to the centuries-long prohibition and repression of equitable access to learning opportunities for non-White students in this country. The economic element of the educational debt can be found in the widely disparate levels of educational funding between different American communities; Ladson-Billings documents a difference of

nearly \$10,000 per student less spent in the largely non-White New York City Public Schools than in nearby suburban districts that serve mostly White students. Ladson-Billings views the sociopolitical aspect of the educational debt as a continued demand by non-White communities for high-quality educational opportunities, which found its clearest expression in the civil rights movements throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Finally, the moral component of the educational debt is evident, according to Ladson-Billings, in the difference between “what we know is right and what we do” (p. 8). America’s history of racial oppression is tightly bound to its history of economic and political success, with African American slavery and servitude as a source of American economic growth across several centuries and African Americans’ crucial participation on the Union’s behalf during the Civil War serving as just two examples of how America owes its historical and current prominence to the actions it has demanded from its oppressed people. Ladson-Billings (2006) expresses her agreement with the concept that there remains a significant imbalance between what this nation has demanded and what it has repaid.

As a set of tools primarily used to document the scope of the educational debt, HSAM need to be understood from a CRT perspective not only as one of the instruments by which wide-scale oppression is measured and maintained in American society, but also for their potential to highlight the specific inequities and social injustices perpetuated in education. To view HSAM outside of such a critical perspective is equivalent to willfully denying the impact of centuries of insidious and omnipresent racial oppression and neglect.

Despite the looming presence of the educational debt proposed by Ladson-Billings (2006), it is important to recognize the tactics that many disenfranchised parents use to gain greater control over their children’s education. A related variable in the issue of the ways that parents use data from HSAM, as well as how parents in low-performing



and low-income schools form a sense of identity as empowered participants in managing the selection and quality of their children's schools, warrants further investigation. Pedroni (2007) used the theoretical work of de Certeau (1984) on how disenfranchised groups form a sense of identity in response to hegemonic power structures to develop his case-study analyses of the ways that African American families in Milwaukee used a school-choice voucher system to develop their power as agents capable of changing the educational prospects for their children. Essentially, less powerful groups, or what Pedroni terms "subaltern" groups, gain power by finding specific elements of a more powerful group's hegemonic control to which they can attach themselves (Pedroni, 2007, pp. 34–38). This tactical identification of limited points of alignment between groups of different power helps to inform a new sense of agency among members of a lower-powered group and is often misinterpreted by members of the more powerful group as implicit support for their larger agenda. The neoconservative and neoliberal organizers of Milwaukee's school voucher system claimed that the engagement of previously marginalized populations, such as African American parents, proved that their strategy of undermining the structures of the Milwaukee Public School was widely accepted across the community (Pedroni, 2007). However, Pedroni found that these parents were simply using these new tools as a way to access education options that had historically been denied to them. Rather than agreeing with the larger agendas of neoconservative and neoliberal groups to privatize public social services and to carry out specific reactionary cultural agendas, the families studied by Pedroni were exercising a form of agency inadvertently provided to them by the passage of the school-choice voucher laws, making conditional and temporary alliances with power structures that normally worked to repress their ability to be engaged in the larger civil discourse on education.

The current study of parents in low-income schools in OUSD has inquired as to the degree to which they, like the parents studied by Pedroni (2007), distill power for

themselves by selectively aligning with political initiatives tied to school quality that may not serve their interests in other aspects of their lives. To what degree do low-income families in settings where school vouchers are not available see themselves as aligned or unaligned with the goals of larger political, social, and economic movements and how does the nature of these relationships affect the ways that these parent make decisions?

**Social reproduction theory and HSAM.** Elements of the theory of social reproduction have been a part of nearly every educational reform effort in America's history (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Tyack, 1974, 1995), but it is in Bowles and Gintis' (1976) classic Marxist analysis of how capitalism and market forces drive the organization of American education that the expression of a clear theory of social reproduction finds its widest audience. Though this seminal work has been criticized as being overly reductionist and deterministic in terms of the lines it draws between capitalism and educational structures (Au, 2008a; Swartz, 2003), it serves, for a developing researcher, as an important point of entry into the ideas of social reproduction. Bowles and Gintis (1976) clearly express their perspective on social and economic reproduction by stating:

Repression, individual powerlessness, inequality of incomes, and inequality of opportunity did not originate historically in the educational system, nor do they derive from unequal and repressive schools today. The roots of repression and inequality lie in the structure and functioning of the capitalist economy. (p. 49)

For Bowles and Gintis, the educational system is not the engine generating the source of economic and social repression. Instead, they see it as a sustaining system developed as a result of the larger society's need to maintain its own economic and class structures.

Bowles and Gintis (1976) help to clarify how the history of HSAM and their implementation have been closely linked to movements to perpetuate the economic and class structures of the United States. They provide a succinct overview of how HSAM developed in the intelligence quotient (IQ) testing movement, which found its own roots both in the eugenics movement and the social efficiency movements (p. 196). Uncovering the façade of meritocracy, a self-fulfilling myth in which each individual may achieve a level of economic and social success relative to her or his technical and cognitive skills, Bowles and Gintis demonstrate how the impact of capitalism on schooling has resulted in the conversion of this fantasy to an economic reality through the use of selective instruments like HSAM (p. 103).

The process by which meritocracy is legitimated through the implementation of HSAM follows a fairly straightforward path, according to Bowles and Gintis (1976). First, students and families have near-daily contact with schools that communicate the idea that competition and technical skill development are the sole ways to achieve economic and social success. Success on HSAM is presented as evidence of this skill development, as well as proof of strengthened personal motivation, increased perseverance, and an individual's willingness to make personal sacrifices in order to achieve academic success. Students and families come to believe that HSAM effectively assess these personal attributes as a part of the invisible pedagogy of the middle-class proposed by Bernstein (2003), as outlined in the following section. Finally, Bowles and Gintis (1976) propose that the ideals of meritocracy, as expressed by HSAM, are further strengthened by the assured repetition of failure experienced by specific groups of students, especially students of color who live in poverty. Rather than instilling the optimism that many players of a lottery game, for example, might feel despite their own small failures, this system of social reproduction requires that the same groups of students

receive repeated failures on HSAM so that all students and families become reconciled to their essentially predetermined social positions.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, p. 45) reinforce this concept of the struggle between the expectations of a dominant class, which outlines the habits and cognitive strategies it chooses to express through its “pedagogic work” for its own class, and the ways in which non-dominant classes negotiate these expectations. The “mode of inculcation” of the non-dominant classes depends not on the needs of these classes but on the interests of the dominant class (p. 45). HSAM, arising from a history of their use in classifying people in terms of their ability to serve the economic needs of the dominant class (Au, 2008b), have not strayed far from their original intent, ensuring that the “right” people make it through the gate, while also ensuring that, through repeated and prolonged failure, the “wrong” people will cease their attempts to cross from one social class to another.

Apple (2006) documents this phenomenon of the HSAM being used as a tool of social reproduction in his description of “newly professional and managerial middle class” in the United States (Apple, 2006, p. 48). Apple claims that a common belief held by this group that HSAM represent nothing more than “neutral instrumentalities” cloaks their racist and classist origins and subsequently leads to their overuse as a part of a burgeoning social-efficiency system focused on distinguishing whether individuals are worthy of being allowed access to the resources self-allocated to that same managerial middle class (Apple, 2006). If one is left to wonder whether the practices of the large Texan district that excluded students who were anticipated to perform poorly on HSAM, as documented by Vasquez Heilig and Darling-Hammond (2008), are uncommon or whether other districts engage in similar practices, Apple (2006) theorizes that these types

of exclusions to game the system are relatively commonplace and are a direct result of a level of social reproduction found in state offices of education, districts, and schools.<sup>3</sup>

Bowles and Gintis (1976) provide a commentary on this element of social reproduction through HSAM in their description of the antagonistic relationship between small, decentralized schools and the larger structures of corporate capitalism. HSAM serve as a tool of unification and standardization in service of forcing communities to become fully reliant on the values and products of free-market capitalism. If success on HSAM is the only route to success because all other routes have been destroyed, then communities have little choice but to step into line; failure to do so ensures that a community and its students will be made politically and economically invisible, as is seen in the research of Vasquez Heilig and Darling-Hammond (2008) and Apple (2006), and they will have little access to the resources already garnered by the dominant groups. There is certainly a clear pattern of governmental and non-governmental agencies promoting the necessity of ensuring that all students are “college and career ready” so that they can participate in the ongoing meritocratic selection of individuals for success in our market economies (Camara, 2013; Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, & Pittenger, 2014; The College Board, 2013), despite the looming odds of most children of color raised in poverty not escaping the economic hardships faced by their parents (Alexander, 2012). The degree to which parents in low-income OUSD schools believe that the education their children receive will afford their children colleges and careers will remain to be seen.

**Pedagogic control and HSAM.** Wayne Au (2008a) stands out for his conceptualization of the ways that HSAM are used as regulating, norming, and

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<sup>3</sup> Similar practices have allegedly occurred in a school district in Southern California, where district officials removed students of color and students learning English from their official rosters after brief absences so that these students would not be included in the schools’ HSAM end-of-year statistics (Plough, 2014).

conservative tools to reproduce the current social order. He builds on the application of the concept of the “pedagogic device” developed by sociologist Basil Bernstein (2000). Au (2008a) described that we make a mistake in believing that the act of testing students is in itself the tool by which hegemonic structures control the flow of resources and thereby reproduce the status quo. HSAM are but one element of a much larger pedagogic system that exerts control over many elements of thought and instruction. Understanding the simplicity of the pedagogic control proposed by Bernstein (2000) helps provide both a lens through which to view the multiple impacts of HSAM and a context within which each element and action related to HSAM can be seen as being driven by hegemonic forces.

Before venturing into a discussion of Bernstein’s theory of pedagogic devices, it is worthwhile to present Bernstein’s (2003) view on “invisible” pedagogies and relate them to the impact of HSAM. As used by Bernstein, a pedagogy is a system for organizing the transmission and distribution of knowledge that a society deems worth learning. A visible pedagogy is seen in the explicitly organization of a content or skill being taught, for example, the history of the building of the Egyptian pyramids or the process by which a student can multiply numbers. There is little student input, and the methods and contents of the transmission of information are largely controlled by the teacher. An invisible pedagogy is largely implicit, and the student is responsible for managing the organization of the information and content. The teacher acts more as a facilitator as the student assembles her or his own knowledge about hierarchies, order, and relationships.

For an invisible pedagogy like HSAM to be successful, four key presuppositions must be met. First, an invisible pedagogy presumes that all students and communities operate on and accept the same sense of educational time and space shared by many middle-class families, wherein the school is seen as the sole source of information, and time spent in school is not used to express oneself as much as it is used to learn and

apply the epistemological constructs of the ruling class. Second, an invisible pedagogy, such as HSAM, demands an elaborated code of communication. Knowledge, and the way it is transmitted by an invisible pedagogy, requires a specific control of symbols and discourse, and it does not allow any other expression of knowledge using alternative symbols and discourse. Students must learn to think and communicate like the test-makers, even if they have very limited exposure or connection to the test-makers' symbols or discourse. Third, invisible pedagogies, such as HSAM, rest on the expectation that there is an adult in each home who will reinforce the pedagogical work as an agent of social reproduction. If there is a strong match between the specific knowledge, skills, and languages valued at both home and school, then the success of the invisible pedagogy is more greatly ensured. The fourth, and final, presupposition of an invisible pedagogy is that students will be organized in small class groups to ensure efficient transmission of the controlling knowledge. While this last point may seem somewhat insignificant, it is worth recalling that in an invisible pedagogy, the teacher is meant to act as a facilitator of students' self-guided learning; class size is a common feature distinguishing middle-class, suburban schools from lower class, urban schools (Apple, 2006).

It is clear that the application of HSAM in most urban public schools does not find the satisfaction of all four of Bernstein's (2003) presuppositions, but that does not mean that HSAM's power as a form of invisible pedagogy is diminished. It is exactly through this mismatch between the presuppositions of HSAM and the reality of contemporary education that HSAM serve as structures designed to reproduce social inequities. Bernstein (2003), writing from his analysis of British education in the middle of the twentieth century, tersely expressed this reality, stating that "unreflecting institutionalization of [an invisible] pedagogy will not be to the advantage of the working class" (p. 39).

HSAM not only fulfill Bernstein's concept of an invisible pedagogy but also serve as a manifest for his concept of a pedagogic device. For Bernstein, a pedagogic device is a set of rules organized at three hierarchical levels (Au, 2008a; Bernstein, 2000). At the highest level of the hierarchy are the distributive rules determined by institutions of higher education and private foundations, which determine what can be considered appropriate sets of knowledge within a society. Given the elite nature of the contexts within which the distributive rules are enacted, the knowledge deemed appropriate for the society is often highly decontextualized from the experiences and lives of many communities where students live. This decontextualization of knowledge leads to its fragmentation from its original epistemological roots, and the format in which the knowledge is conveyed leads to pedagogic choices in schools that favor teaching methods designed for conveyance of facts (e.g., lectures, direct instruction) in lieu of teaching methods that support critical thinking, exploration, or discovery.

At the next hierarchical level are the recontextualizing rules, which control the way that the knowledge is transformed through the work of curriculum leaders in districts, administrators, and teachers (Au, 2008a; Bernstein, 2000). It is at this level that the decontextualized body of facts constituting the knowledge transmitted from the level of redistribution is organized for instruction in schools and classes. In a society driven by neoconservative and neoliberal school reform efforts and HSAM, the recontextualization of knowledge adheres to the demands of these powerful drivers. Content is further reduced to what will ensure certain students success on HSAM (e.g., learning historical facts instead of developing students as historical thinkers), pedagogy is narrowed even further, and even the selection and retention of teachers and administrators is linked to their potential ability to improve student scores on HSAM.

Finally, the evaluative rules determine what knowledge is testable, what experiences are worth measuring, and, thereby, which people contain valuable knowledge



in the form predetermined by the pedagogic device (Au, 2008a; Bernstein, 2000). While some may deem Au's application of Bernstein's pedagogic device to be an esoteric exercise, the usefulness of the structure brings clarity to understanding how HSAM can impact education at all levels, especially for minority students. Au (2008a) also positions HSAM as a manifestation of Bernstein's pedagogic structures as a "potential site of challenge and opposition" (p. 649) and as a non-deterministic expression of the relationship between capitalistic reform efforts and the perpetuation of racial-based and class-based inequalities, contrasting this more nuanced expression with Bowles and Gintis' (1976) reduction of capitalism as the driving force behind American education.

### **A Review of Neoliberalism as a Theoretical Framework of HSAM and SPF**

There are several conceptual frameworks that need to be discussed in an analysis of SPF, HSAM, and the contemporary school reform efforts in the United States. Included in the list of conceptual frameworks are neoconservatism (Apple, 2006; Au, 2008b; Pedroni, 2007), authoritarian populism (Apple, 2006; Au, 2008b), managerialism (Apple, 2006), and identity formation (de Certeau, 1984; Pedroni, 2007). The key conceptual framework that drives the current investigation, however, is neoliberalism. This analysis of neoliberalism as a conceptual framework within which SPF are situated includes other aspects of contemporary educational reform efforts presented by three researchers, including: Pedroni's investigation of school-choice vouchers as a means of creating a market environment, in which public schools are forced to compete for funding (Apple, 2006; Au, 2008b); Au's work exposing the ways that HSAM are engineered to control teaching and learning in support of specific political and social ideals (2007, 2008a, 2008b); and Apple's analysis of the driving forces behind specific policy and social movements that have shaped American education reform as a whole (Apple, 2000, 2006).

**The historical roots of neoliberalism.** Neoliberalism as a political and economic movement found its genesis immediately before and after the conclusion of the Second World War in Europe and the United States (George, 1999; Harvey, 2005; Thorsen & Lie, 2006) in response to the growing development of the welfare state and state-controlled public services in many developed nations, as well as the New Deal in the United States (George, 1999). Harvey (2005) proposes a definition of neoliberalism as a political and economic theory that grounds human advancement in a vigorously capitalistic free market—free from most elements of government control, which should exist only to the degree that they support and do not impinge upon the entrepreneurial liberties and ambitions of individuals. Governments should serve only the purpose of creating a state based upon the sanctity and protection of individual private property rights, and the extension and mirroring of market forces and individual entrepreneurship and profit should be evident in all elements of a society, including education.

Citing the work of Polyani (1944), who asserts that market forces should never be allowed to serve as the key driver of society, George (1999) points out that neoliberalism, despite its nearly global predominance in developed societies today, is not an intuitive development, and, if this control were allowed, then the results for human society would be disastrous. George provides examples of how the British government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s dismantled most aspects of that nation's government-led social health and welfare system, plunging significant portions of the population into poverty while creating opportunities for wealth creation for an elite class of corporate barons. In the United States, President Ronald Reagan followed many of the same cues as Thatcher, which resulted in very similar outcomes. It was the Reagan administration's call in 1983 for a wide-scale reform of education, "A Nation at Risk" (Gardner, 1983), that explicitly proposed that education and schooling must become competitive and better prepare students for participation in the free capitalist markets

that were blossoming worldwide. While not the first, or last, educational reform effort using the economic model of free markets to analyze the process and product of public education in America, the theories behind “A Nation at Risk” were widely consumed and accepted as the natural forces that should drive public reforms in school organization, staffing, curriculum, and assessment practices.

Demarrais (2006) provides a detailed narrative of the money-fueled trail of American neoliberal leaders as they formed powerful and richly funded think-tanks, controlled the academic departments at many universities, and gathered their corporate-sponsored wealth to spawn a breed of political lobbyists in order to influence and control nearly all government decision-making, including public education reform. Demarrais chronicles the history of multiple non-profit foundations formed by American billionaire families such as Bill and Melinda Gates and Charles and Helen Schwab and the way they collaborate through organizations like the Philanthropy Roundtable and the New School Venture Fund to combine their wealth and charitable power to have a greater impact on education-related projects, such as increasing access to computers in schools, the creation of new charter schools, and the adoption of HSAM-driven curricula and standards.

**Neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and educational policy.** Apple (2006) uses the conceptual structures of neoliberalism to highlight the change in roles the framework creates in educational environments. When teachers and administrators are viewed as producers, and students and families are viewed as consumers who may select the school (read: enterprise) that best fits their perceived needs, discussions of educational policy and learning theories, for example, are no longer possible. Apple points out that while neoliberal concepts create the most immediate fissuring of educators from their traditional realm of work, these neoliberal labels do little to help explain all of the other drivers in contemporary education reform. Like Pedroni (2007), Apple (2000, 2006) also uses the framework of religious neoconservatism to further explore the dimensions of how

the reimagined roles of policy-makers, educators, students, and families are manifested in a marketplace school. Apple maintains that one needs to understand how religious and mercantile systems have been intertwined across Western history, and especially how they have been expressed in the relatively brief narrative of American political and social development. The United States may have founding documents that declare a separation of church and state, but, according to Apple, a closer view of how this nation's institutions were developed shows a very different truth. Neoliberalism is merely an expression of how many religious conservatives believe divine order should be realized in the nation.

Apple (2006) provides a clear assessment of how neoliberal theory and practices have elevated the theory of marketplace competition as an educational model for how students, classes, schools, districts, and states should be in relationship with each other. The de facto presence of winners and losers on SPF and HSAM in a market-based relationship is seen as value-neutral from the perspective of neoliberalism and a condition that should be allowed to continue. Looking at HSAM as a product of public education reform, Au (2008b) credits the competitive motives at the heart of neoliberalism for creating an educational testing environment with threats to remove government resources to schools and districts that fail to make progress on norm-referenced HSAM, which some researchers argue are designed to inevitably produce failures for a specific percentage of users (Hilliard, 2000). In addition, Au (2008b) also highlights how the HSAM are themselves products of a free-market industry, one in which test-makers compete for lucrative government contracts in a multi-billion dollar industry. Neoliberalism as a conceptual structure supports most of the key elements of contemporary education reform, replacing education's drive to create diverse critical thinkers who can move between disciplines as they build their own futures with, instead, a focus on creating producers and consumers for a market-driven economy, where one

of the only expressions of self that is valued is the competitive urge to fulfill one's own needs and desires (Harvey, 2005).

Au (2008b) uses the conceptual framework of neoliberalism to focus on how HSAM as tools used to measure the efficacy of education reforms have created a culture of marketplace competition between and within school systems, while simultaneously creating a newly expanded economic marketplace for testing materials and services. Au uses President George W. Bush's manifesto from 1999 that "[f]ederal funds will no longer flow to failure. Schools that do not teach and will not change must have some final point of accountability" (2008b, p. 62) as evidence that the neoliberal model was squarely at the base of the President's NCLB reform policies. The practice of allowing Adam Smith's<sup>4</sup> invisible hand of capitalism (Sacks, 2000) to maintain the appropriate balance of effective educational producers driving ineffective producers out of the marketplace describes, for Au (2008b), more than just the culture or climate of educational reform driven by neoliberal ideals; it also describes the actual policies linking schools' performance on NCLB to their key funding sources and their very existence. In addition, Au (2008b) examines the fiscal marketplace created by neoliberal education reform efforts like NCLB and the associated HSAM. By 2006, the testing industry grossed more than 2.3 billion dollars, with 90% of the revenue going to just five American companies. Neoliberal education reform may make claims that individual students and families will profit from their improved access to quality educational products, but it simultaneously assures that specific capitalist elites will financially profit from the newly liberated marketplace of schools.

Pedroni (2007) uses neoliberalism as a conceptual framework to explore how individual families used their ability to select schools through a market-driven voucher

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<sup>4</sup> Scottish eighteenth-century moral philosopher and political economist who described how competition and self-interest support economic stability in a market (Ross, 2010)

program. Historically, conservative and neoliberal policy-makers have promoted the school voucher movement as an essential element of allowing the forces of the free market to control education reforms and practices. Pedroni's research focuses on the motivations that drove African American families in Milwaukee to use vouchers to help control the quality of their children's education. Pedroni inquires whether these motivations differed from those of the neoliberal supporters of school vouchers. Pedroni (2007) argues that this use of vouchers by African American families is best viewed within the context of the larger historical struggles of African Americans to secure equitable and high-quality educational opportunities for their children and should be seen neither as a sign of support for neoliberal policies nor as a rejection of broader educational reforms grounded in the ideals of social justice. Pedroni situates his research in the theoretical concept of neoliberal identity formation, claiming that African American families' use of vouchers helped form their larger political identity as advocates for their children attempting to "game" a system of education with a proven history of discrimination, segregation, and gross inequities. Though the neoliberal policy-makers behind school vouchers may have claimed that the use of vouchers by these African American families proved that these families were embracing the totality of the free-market theories behind vouchers, Pedroni's research indicates that this was not the case.

Apple (2006) focuses his use of the neoliberal conceptual framework on the ways that its economic qualities supersede all of its other qualities. Apple identifies the power of neoliberalism to transform concepts of democracy, especially when applied to public institutions such as schools designed to promote the public, into concepts mostly based on an economic model. Citizens become consumers, an identity that feigns to obscure other identities such as workers, owners, or capitalists. Apple's recognition that neoliberalism, as applied to contemporary educational reforms, encourages a sharp

narrowing of an individual's needs to focus just on their need to consume products is also supported by Harvey's (2005) claim that the socially just needs of the individual, such as the reduction of income disparities and a decoupling of economic class from race and ethnicity, cannot be served in a neoliberal environment, where individual freedom is only seen as the freedom to choose which product to consume. Apple (2006) joins Au (2008b) in referring to John Adams as one of the key engineers of free-market economic theory, but Apple reminds us that Adams asked that the invisible hand of the market be ruled by government regulations and safeguards in favor of the working class but never in favor of the masters of the market. Apple recognizes that the economic needs of the masters has come to overrule the needs of the workers when it comes to neoliberal education reform, leaving nothing more than an illusory environment of competition and choice while not equitably infusing additional resources to create high-quality options for all students/consumers.

Neoliberalism and scientific management. It should be noted that Au (2008b), Pedroni (2007), and Apple (2006) did not select neoliberalism as their sole conceptual framework around which to organize their research. Each researcher integrated neoliberalism into the layering of other conceptual frameworks to drive their specific work. Au (2008b) describes the rapid growth of HSAM as determiners of educational efficacy by combining theories of social reproduction, scientific management, and social meritocracy to align with a framework of neoliberalism, which he uses specifically to expose the ways that HSAM have created a commodified environment with schools. This neoliberal commodification is seen in the ways that educational process and outcomes have been transformed into consumable products, as well as in the ways that HSAM have created a burgeoning new marketplace where fiscal profits are reaped every day.

Pedroni (2007) builds on Au's (2008b) ideas of scientific management as an expression of neoliberalism, proposing that a managerial state has come to replace the

traditional social democratic welfare state. Pedroni's position also aligns with Apple's (2006) observations that the mercantilism of neoliberalism has come to replace many of the functions previously held by the state. Pedroni (2007) goes even further, exposing how neoliberal principles and practices coordinate with conservative and religious Right beliefs that a free market driven by competition creates a context where the success or failure of individuals is not just a demonstration of their luck or skill but is also a manifestation of their virtue and character.

**Subaltern identity development as a response to neoliberal hegemony.** The concept of the subaltern is derived from the writings of the Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1996), when he published his "Letters from Prison" in 1947. Gramsci discusses how ruling forces in a society create a cultural hegemony in which the identity and voices of minority and oppressed people are suppressed, denied, and ignored. Apple and Buras (2006) explore Spivak's (1988) influential question of "Can the subaltern speak?" by extending this notion to include the ways that different forms of knowledge are strengthened or diminished in school communities, writing, "Whether in boardrooms or classrooms, home schools or school communities, universities or foundations, each arena is characterized by the dynamics of differential power and the complexities and contradictions of identity and agency" (Apple & Buras, 2006, p. 6). The commodified marketplace of public education produced through an interplay of neoliberal, neoconservative, and scientific managerial policies has replicated a traditional capitalist market, with clear winners, losers, controllers, and controlled (Labaree, 2010; Pedroni, 2007). Kumashiro (2006) explores how these dominating forces strive to control the quality and quantity of how a subaltern identity is formed or expressed in a school community, limiting critical inquiries into how curricular or pedagogical choices came to be made or sustained and limiting the expression of identity to those expressions most palatable to the status quo.



Kumashiro (2006) provides as an example the way that community discussion of the fact that students from different ethnic and economic classes have vastly different performances on HSAM<sup>5</sup> is limited just to that topic; it is rarely sustained as a community discussion of whether the knowledge measured by HSAM is important and valuable to the community. He points out how subaltern groups themselves are prevented from assuming a truly critical focus, writing:

The focus remains on how to get all students to learn what white American students are learning, and to perform as they perform. The fear that they will be seen as dismissing the educational inequities experienced by certain racial groups helps to explain why many are willing to respond to the disadvantaging of students of color, but not the privileging of whiteness that engenders these gaps. (Kumashiro, 2006, p. 170)

Pedroni (2007) uses the framework of neoliberalism in his larger effort to explain the concept of subaltern identity formation as parents make choices for their children's schools. He introduces the ideas of subaltern agency and hegemonic alliances as ways to understand African American families' development of their own justifications for utilizing school vouchers. In creating this theoretical construction, Pedroni provides extensive definitions and contexts for the political identities of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and authoritarian populism. He discusses the idea of conservative modernization, in which neoliberals and conservatives explicitly appeal to populations not traditionally supporting the larger political visions of the movements, creating a hegemonic alliance and a level of subaltern agency in which the newly aligned communities are used to bolster the larger agendas of the neoliberal and conservative

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<sup>5</sup> See Ladson-Billings' (2006) work on the educational debt as an attempt to reframe the notorious "achievement gap."

movements. Pedroni demonstrates that the African American voucher-using community in Milwaukee was strategically using the resources and opportunities provided by their alliance with neoliberal and neoconservative forces; however, he also demonstrates that there was little evidence of the local community's being manipulated or influenced by these politically driven groups' larger political goals.

This research study's analysis of Oakland families' definition of school quality similarly looks at the degree to which individuals access, understand, and accept the predefined features of school quality proposed by SPF, created as a part of contemporary school reform efforts in Oakland. Even though local, state, and national governments, as well as private foundations (Enright, 2003; Shiller, 2011), have invested substantial financial and administrative resources to the process of creating and enforcing educational reforms to sustain a marketplace of competition and quality among schools, there is little, if any, empirical research available on whether and how the individual consumer-parent aligns her or his perception of school quality with these efforts.

If one of the goals of neoliberal and neoconservative reform efforts is to improve school quality by creating a competitive marketplace where consumers are informed and empowered to make choices, and schools are obliged to meet the demands of these consumers, then this dynamic inherently creates opportunities for parents to establish their agency as decision-makers and to take some level of control in guiding their children's education. Granting this sort of agency and control in real terms, in contrast to merely spinning populist propaganda, would seem to be very much counter to the structures and outcomes historically achieved by the neoliberal economic and educational agendas experienced to date in the United States (Harvey, 2005; Leyva, 2009; Tienken, 2013); therefore, it is of significant interest to examine how families in Oakland establish their own subaltern identities as educational decision-makers.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

Parents in low-performing, low-income schools have the right, as outlined in NCLB, to select better performing schools for their children, but the research has shown that the vast majority of them do not or cannot exercise this right. The data on school quality available to most parents only reflect students' performance on high-stakes accountability measures (HSAM), as presented in school performance frameworks (SPF). Research indicates that parents whose children are in low-performing, low-income schools may care about other areas of school performance not typically contained in most traditional SPF when deciding if a school is of a high quality. The CORE Waiver SPF planned for use in the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) will present a wider array of data, including students' performance on HSAM, their readiness for high school and college, and results of measures focused on the social-emotional and culture-climate aspects of each school. A complete study is necessary in order to fully understand how these parents' definition of school quality corresponds with this new set of data.

This study's central research question focuses on how parents of students enrolled in low-performing and low-income schools perceive and define the quality of their children's schools based on the information sources that are available to them. Additionally, this study addresses the following research sub-questions:

- Which factors contained in the SPF, relative to each other, are of greater importance to these parents?

- What factors that are of relevance to these parents are missing from the CORE SPF?
- What factors influence these parents' perceptions of their ability to choose schools for their children based on information presented in SPF?

### **Research Design**

This study employs critical ethnography conducted through a single-instrumental case study as a qualitative research design (Creswell, 2012; Denscombe, 2014; Madison, 2011). Described by Creswell (2012, p. 464) as a study of “a marginalized group with the aim of advocacy about issues of power and authority,” critical ethnography requires that the researcher refuses the position of neutral observer in order to serve as an advocate to challenge situations that perpetuate the inequities experienced by oppressed and marginalized people. A single-participant case study, rather than multiple case studies, was selected due to time limitations and researcher convenience (Denscombe, 2014). The challenges of using a single case study to make generalizations about the shared experiences and opinions of members of the group is recognized, though the understanding gained by considering an individual case in great detail can justify the selection of this approach (Stake, 1995). Denscombe (2014) outlines the advantages of using an individual case study as providing the researcher a more holistic view of how the data collected fit into the larger experience of the subject, while also encouraging the researcher to use multiple methods for the collection and analysis of data collected in a natural setting that requires little or no manipulation. On the other hand, Denscombe also describes the disadvantages of an individual case study, including limitations to the degree to which the findings can be generalized, boundaries placed on the scale of the data collected, and logistical issues that can arise if access to the subject is withdrawn.

Taking all of these issues into account, it is essential to build a close relationship with the participant so that the research is conducted with him or her as the key constructor of meaning, in which she or he participates in the process of defining and articulating their understanding of school quality in ways that may not have occurred before this research (Akom, 2009; Dyrness, 2008). Using a descriptive approach to presenting the themes underlying the data collected with the involvement of the participant, this study portrays the ways that a parent in a low-performing and low-income school in OUSD makes decisions about the quality of his or her children's schools and how this parent might use the information contained in the CORE SPF to inform these decisions.

### **Rationale**

In my work for OUSD as a deputy network superintendent, I provide representation of the district cabinet on the team engaged in planning the implementation of the CORE SPF in Oakland. We are still in the early stages of learning how to adequately describe the innovations provided by this set of tools, and we have yet to really work on how to engage parents. My research on this project includes documentation as well as provides engagement with the community in a participatory research structure (Dyrness, 2009). The potential that the CORE SPF holds for making data about all aspects of schools available for all stakeholders is immense. Very few, if any, other SPF currently in use in the United States place HSAM in a more balanced relationship to other sources of social-emotional and culture-climate data (Polikoff et al., 2014). Several questions guided this work:

- How can this opportunity to engage a parent in a dialogue about what he or she wants to see in his or her community school (Smoothe, n.d.) be leveraged to help drive lasting and effective reform at both the school and district levels?

- How can this reform be about building the capacities of teachers and schools to respond to the real needs of the real children in their classrooms?
- How can equity and social justice be served through a system that chooses to break with practices that have ignored vital data about the real, lived experiences in most urban public schools?

Given that the goal of the research was to gain a clear picture of the lived experiences of both students and families participating in the CORE SPF environment, conducting a single-instrumental case study as a methodology provided the ability to collect data over a relatively sustained period of time, which was necessary in order to gather a clear picture of the thoughts and reasoning of the subject in this research study (Creswell, 2012; Madison, 2011). While conducting an instrumental case study presents unique challenges in separating the information coming from specific sources (e.g., interviews with the parent) from the larger focus of the analysis (e.g., the bureaucratic limitations on parents' ability to select their children's schools), this confusion must always be cleared by triangulating information gathered through interviews with data gained from an analysis of official documents and artifacts (Yin, 2003). Another challenge posed by engaging in an instrumental case study as a methodology is deciding how to relate the grounded theories that come out of the case study analysis to a critical presentation of the relevant literature (Creswell, 2014). While this challenge is not insurmountable, it was addressed during the drafting of this study's research findings.

### **Target Participant**

The target participant for this research was identified by his or her relationship to a specific school in OUSD. First, using data collected both by the school district and the state (District Summary, 2015), schools were identified using two criteria: first, the

school must have more than 80% of its students receiving free or reduced-priced meals, a common indicator of the income level of its community; second, the performance of the students at the school demonstrates a proficiency level in both language arts and mathematics below a level of 30%, using the most recent set of standardized assessments. The goal was to identify an elementary school serving Kindergarten through Grade 5, or a middle school serving Grade 6 through Grade 8. These two types of schools were selected because parents at both types of schools must make a decision about where their children will go to school after they complete the last grade at the school.

### **Selection Criteria for Participant**

Once the school sites were identified, the parents of at least two students at each school were selected for consideration. At an elementary school, the participant was to be selected from families enrolled in Grade 4 or Grade 5, while, at a middle school, the participant was to be selected from families enrolled in Grade 7 or Grade 8. This limit on the selection of participants was important, since these parents had to make a selection of their child's school within the next two years and were most likely to be already engaged in the process of considering the attributes of different schools. Finally, the selection of the participant was based on feedback from the school administrators about parents who had been involved with the school as volunteers, as well as based on those parents who had otherwise self-identified as having expressed interest or concern in the day-to-day life of the school. This method of identifying a specific case study follows Denscombe's proposal that the degree of how intrinsically interesting a participant may be can be used as a supplementary justification for the selection. Parents who have engaged with school officials about instructional or programmatic quality have indicated their interest in

specific issues, and, by virtue of this fact, they have qualified themselves as intrinsically interesting subjects.

### **Setting of the Study**

This study was set in a public school operated by OUSD in the City of Oakland, California (District Summary, 2015). In 2013–2014, OUSD provided schooling for nearly 48,000 students, with more than 75% of students qualifying for free or reduced-priced meals due to their families' income levels. Nearly 31% of students were classified as English learners, and the average daily attendance (ADA) rate was just over 80%. Of the 122 district-operated educational programs and schools, many schools in East and West Oakland serve communities where more than 90% of the students qualify for free and reduced-price meals. While the state-mandated HSAM have not been administered since the spring of 2013 as the state transitions to the new SBAC, OUSD student performance on the Language Arts and Mathematics sections of the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) trended 20 percentage points or more below the statewide average proficiency rate of 84%. The 4-year cohort graduation rate in OUSD was 62.8% in 2013–2014, nearly 20 points below the statewide average rate.

### **Measures/Instruments**

Creswell (2012) classifies the data collected during ethnographic fieldwork into three categories: emic data, etic data, and negotiation data. Emic data is related to first-order concepts, such as the specific language and phrases used by participants that can be analyzed for the ways the participants construct their perspectives. Etic data is related to second-order concepts, including the language of analysis used by the researcher to



categorize information into different thematic groups. Finally, negotiation data is related to information that both the researcher and the participant agree to use in the study, such as descriptions of the advocacy initiatives created as a result of the relationship between the researcher and the participants. Conducting a critical ethnography using a single-instrumental case study approach requires careful consideration of instruments as the nature of the research demands that the participant is engaged in selecting the emic, etic, and negotiated data to be analyzed, as well as the frames for analysis.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

In general, this research study relied on semi-structured interviews and field observations. Madison (2011) outlines the difficulty of entering into a critical ethnographic investigation with a fully scripted set of interview questions, but at the same time she provides reference to reasonable frameworks within which questions can be grouped. Among these, Madison encourages the use of a framework proposed by Patton (1990):

- Behavior or experience questions that describe a person's actions;
- Opinion or value questions that describe a person's beliefs or perspectives;
- Feeling questions that get at a person's sentiments or emotions;
- Knowledge questions that ask about the information held or believed by a person;
- Sensory questions that get at the physical sensations experienced by a person in a situation;
- Background questions that describe the familial and community experiences and history of a person. (Patton, 1990)

These interviews and observations were focused on the participant's life history as related to his or her experiences with education systems throughout life, as well as more focused on interview events in which participants were asked to review SPF in different formats, in order for the researcher to understand how the participants would use the information to make decisions about school quality.

### **Methods of Analysis**

Engaging in critical discourse analysis as a qualitative research methodology provides important data for understanding the reasoning and the connections between the ideas and experiences of parents whose children are in low-performing and low-income schools that are engaged in the use of SPF as they make decisions about their children's education. The main area of description is how these same families respond to the diverse data presented in the new CORE SPF, as well as how these families previously used traditional SPF that were solely focused on HSAM data. As methods of collecting data, interviews and observations were conducted. Interviews provided access to data from sources that lack other forms of documented evidence (e.g., parents' perceptions of how HSAM impact their academic choices); however, the fact that interviews are not sufficient to gain data about a parent's sense of self-efficacy in making decisions about her or his child's academic progress was taken into account (Seidman, 2013).

Observation provided that other source of data, capturing a subject's words, actions, and relationships that are not available through interviews. Observation and analysis of the social networks of the subjects enabled the researcher to understand how SPF are viewed, sustained, or challenged in the different contexts of family-to-school relationships (Wasserman & Faust, 1994).

Critical discourse analysis based on theories of interactional sociolinguistics provided the theoretical tools necessary to uncover the deeper meaning, biases, and belief systems of my subjects (Gee, 2004; Henze & Arriaza, 2006; Schiffrin, 1994). This approach takes many of its cues from anthropology and the theory that all experiences and languages are assimilated by individuals through the filters of their own cultural belief systems and the shared experiences of their social networks (Gumperz, 1982). Interactional sociolinguistics as a form of discourse analysis grounds individual characteristics of speech, such as making inferences or drawing conclusions, in a socially constructed view of self (Schiffrin, 1994). From this perspective, discourse analysis does not stand in contrast to case studies as a separate methodology, though they each demand different components of rigor. The researcher needs to understand the cultures and belief systems of all of his or her research participants. Case studies and discourse analysis are the best qualitative methodologies for approaching this area of study, and interviews combined with observations are the appropriate methods for collecting the required data.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

One of the greatest potential limitations on my research is also potentially one of my greatest assets. My role as a deputy network superintendent gives me unparalleled access to the planning process for communicating the CORE SPF to the broader community in general and to parents specifically. How would I know when to abandon my role as leader and participant in this issue, and how would I be allowed to become a researcher? As mentioned earlier, the theories of participatory research (Dyrness, 2009) helped me to understand the cognitive and behavioral shifts that I needed for engaging in this transition. Additionally, the focus subject of this study, low-income parents, may have been harder to identify in a manner supported by my research methodology. However,

I already possess a certain level of familiarity and trust among a large community of parents from my role as an educator for their children over the last 20 years.

At the beginning of this research study, questions I considered included: How do I begin to pry into the basic demographic information about these parents that would make them potential participants in my study? Namely, how do I learn more about their income status and their sense of enfranchisement as a stakeholder in a school community? I knew that I had a great deal of study and practice ahead of me as I generated the sets of questions and engagement protocols that would allow me to understand these families' full lives without assuming the role of external inquisitor.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS/OUTCOMES

#### **Introduction**

Before beginning a discussion of the findings from the participant interviews, it is important to review the main research question, along with the related sub-questions. The main purpose of this study was to determine how parents of students enrolled in low-performing and low-income elementary and middle public schools in urban centers perceive and define the quality of their children's schools based on the information sources, such as SPF, that are available to them. The study was organized as a single, qualitative case study of a family with a student enrolled in a middle school in the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). The related sub-questions are the following:

- Which factors contained in the SPF, relative to each other, are of greater importance to these parents?
- What factors that are of relevance to these parents are missing from the CORE SPF?
- What factors influence these parents' perceptions of their ability to choose schools for their children based on information presented in SPF?

#### **Background Information on Participants**

Miguel Rodríguez, Sr. (MS), his wife, Lupe Rodríguez (LR), and their son, Miguel Rodríguez, Jr. (MJ) live together in a small apartment in the town of East Bay, a

community adjacent to Oakland, California. MJ is 13 years old and is currently enrolled as a seventh grade student at OUSD Middle School; before that, he was enrolled at OUSD Elementary School for kindergarten through fifth grade.<sup>6</sup> I first met the Rodríguez family in the fall of 2008 when they registered MJ for kindergarten at OUSD Elementary School, where I worked as the Principal. MS has frequently served as a voting parent-member of the school's School Site Council (SSC) and English Language Advisory Committee (ELAC). MS demonstrated a strong interest in understanding how the school was financed and how resources were used to fund specific programs, and he participated as a vocal member at many of the SSC and ELAC meetings. LR sometimes accompanied her husband to the meetings, but she rarely participated or asked questions. She also attended the daily English as a Second Language classes provided each morning for parents and frequently volunteered in MJ's classroom and in the cafeteria.

MS was born in 1975 in Municipio Pequeño, a small city with a population of approximately 40,000 inhabitants, located in the southwest district of Honduras. MS was part of a large family of 11 people—his parents, five brothers, three sisters, and himself. MS reported that his family had a small business selling clothing from stalls and from the home; as the children in the family matured, they were enlisted to help with the work. He reported that he attended two schools as he grew up in Municipio Pequeño, the local public primary and secondary schools, to which he walked each day. Most of MS's siblings attended university and received professional degrees in fields including engineering, chemistry, and biology. MS began university in Honduras to study architecture, but he had to withdraw because of financial difficulties. He and his family decided that MS would emigrate to the United States in order to earn money so he could return and finish his university education; however, after he moved to California in his

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<sup>6</sup> To protect the participants' anonymity, participant names, towns of origin, current residence, and school names have been changed.

mid-20s, he decided to stay in the United States because of the amount of money he was able to earn.<sup>7</sup> He worked on building construction crews, adding,

It was hard, really hard. I came from a family that we didn't work hard there. We had work like an easy work like business, store. Now, when I make it here, I see my hands . . . Blistering, because I use pick and shovel a lot. It was a big change in my life. At the same way, I was making good money. I say. Wow. The money's there.

He learned a variety of skills doing this work, including building and painting techniques, as well as conversational English. In fact, MS was so confident in the English skills he was learning on the job that he decided to stop attending the English classes he was taking through an adult education program. Ultimately, MS opened a contracting business, specializing in painting residential and commercial buildings. None of his siblings or extended family members live in the United States.

LR was born in Ciudad Grande in the early 1970's, in the northwest district of Honduras, a city with a population of approximately 430,000. She, too, attended public elementary and secondary schools, institutions that she recalls were "horrid," where students received corporal punishments for both poor academic performance and misbehavior. LR's family had 12 members—her parents, three sisters, six brothers, and herself. She did not attend university; instead, she came to the United States at the age of 15 in 1999, when she was sponsored for a visa by her older sister, who was a resident and business owner in Northern California. In addition to this sister, LR also has two sisters and a brother and several nieces and nephews living in Florida. LR reports that

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<sup>7</sup> From 1994 to 1997, the period of time during which MS emigrated to the United States, the average net income per capita, expressed in current U.S. dollars, ranged from \$23,214 to \$26,907. During the same time period in Honduras, the average net income per capita ranged from \$541 to \$688 (World Bank Group, 2016).

after graduating from the University of California, Berkeley, her older sister opened and operated a private preschool, a business she operated for nearly 25 years with her husband, who was from Pakistan. LR started working in her sister's school as a teacher's assistant, helping to care for the youngest students, some of whom were toddlers. After her sister and her brother-in-law sold the school, LR was hired in the same role by the new owners, and she reports that she's happy to be able to do the same work for 17 years. LR has very basic conversational skills in English, often needing translation to fully communicate her ideas. During the interview sessions, LR participated mostly in English, with her husband and son providing occasional translations.

MJ is 13 years old and in the seventh grade. He was born in Oakland and is the only child of MS and LR. Before attending OUSD schools, he was enrolled in the preschool where his mother is employed. When he entered kindergarten, he participated in the English Learner's program at OUSD Elementary School, and he received all instruction in English in the Structured English Immersion Program. By December of fourth grade, MJ was redesignated as fluent in English by the school district.<sup>8</sup>

Despite his strong academic ability, MJ's behavior in school has been less than sterling, often resulting in calls home because of disrespect or disruption in class. In sixth grade, MJ was actually suspended from school for disruption and defiance, and he has received more than 15 referrals to the office since entering middle school, mostly for cutting class, being disrespectful to adults, or disrupting instruction; 13 of those referrals occurred during the year in which this study was conducted. During this time, he attended school only 89% of the time, though in previous years he had a higher attendance rate. During the last three semesters of MJ's middle school career, he received the following

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<sup>8</sup> This redesignation was based on MJ's performance as "advanced" on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) and his scoring as "advanced" on both the English Language Arts and Mathematics sections of the California Standards Test (CST) in third grade; it was also based on his teachers' recommendations.



grades: A = 1; B = 2; C = 3; D = 6; and F = 10. During the final marking period, however, MJ earned the following: A = 1; B = 3; C = 1; and D = 2.

As an interesting side note, MJ had broken one of his arms or legs no less than five times in the previous eight years, mostly as a result of rough play or inattentiveness on his part. These injuries impacted his school attendance over the years, as well as created emotional and financial strain for his parents. Both of the OUSD schools that MJ attended qualify as low-income and low-performing. OUSD Elementary School and OUSD Middle School were founded in 2006, as a part of OUSD’s Small Autonomous Schools project. The elementary school serves as a feeder school to the middle school, and the two sites are approximately four blocks apart in East Oakland. See Table 2 for the school’s family income levels and the academic performance of the students.

<b>2012–2013 Academic Year</b>	<b>OUSD Elementary School</b>	<b>OUSD Middle School</b>
Percentage of students qualifying for free/ reduced-priced meals	73%	75%
Percentage of students scoring as “proficient” on the English Language Arts section of the California Standards Test (CST)	36%	19%
Percentage of students scoring as “proficient” on the Mathematics section of the California Standards Test (CST)	48%	12%
(Ed-Data, 2014)		

*Table 2:* Family Income Levels and Student Academic Performance for OUSD Elementary School and OUSD Middle School

### **Format of the Interviews**

Originally, the design of this research included interviewing a single participant—a parent of a student in a low-performing, low-income elementary or

middle school in OUSD. Using a format of oral interviews described by Seidman (2013), I planned for three 90-minute interviews with MS. However, given the location and timing of the interviews (in MS's home in the late afternoons or early evenings after he had finished work for the day), MS's wife, LR, and son, MJ, were both present for all interview sessions. Also, in an attempt to lessen the burden that the interviews would have on the family schedule, I proposed that I would bring food for dinner for each session. Given this environment of sharing meals together with the family, it was inevitable that LR and MJ began to participate in the interviews, which they seemed to perceive more as open discussions.

Rather than trying to doggedly stick to the specific questions I had selected before the interviews, I quickly adapted the process previously planned for data collection and soon found that all three family members were fully engaged in the conversations, with both parents speaking the most. MJ was quietly playing videogames during the beginning of the first interview, but within 10 minutes he stopped playing and joined the group, listening to and watching his parents intently. During the roughly five hours of interviews that occurred over three sessions, there were 1,898 unique turns, defined as when a new speaker begins and ends a statement, exclamation, response, or question. Of these turns, I initiated 755 unique turns, or 40%; MS initiated 578 unique turns, or 30%; LR initiated 363 unique turns, or 19%; and MJ initiated 202 unique turns, or 11%.

The first meal that I provided included salad greens, cold cuts, and vegetables, because MS had told me that they were trying to maintain a healthy diet and this was their preferred food. MS ate heartily during this meal, but I noticed that LR and MJ did not eat much. At the end of this first session, MS asked if we could get pupusas, curtido, and chicharrónes from their favorite restaurant that served food from Honduras. I readily agreed to the idea but rejected MS's offer to pay for the future meals. We ate our meals and engaged in conversation in the small living room of the family's apartment, sitting

on the sofa in front of a small folding table, which serves as the family's dining table, as well as the place where MJ completes his homework and MS manages the details of his business. Due to the nature of this environment of sharing meals and engaging in conversation, I found the semi-structured interview process I had selected as mostly appropriate (Madison, 2011; Patton, 1990), though I found myself relying less and less on a specific order of questions as I followed the conversation and pushed to inquire ever more deeply into the ideas being presented by the family.

All of these details are provided to help portray the inclusive and comfortable environment that was established during the interviews—traits that are essential for effective interviewing and engaging participants in the process of co-discovery of new ideas and positions (Madison, 2011; Seidman, 2013). As described more fully in Chapter 5, this process of engagement began to develop into a relationship of co-participation and co-construction of meaning, and, by the final set of interviews, MJ, in particular, seemed to have changed the way that he positioned himself as an agent driving his own behavior and effort in school (Akom, 2009; Dyrness, 2008; Madison, 2011; Smith, 2012).

Following the tiered, three-session interview structure proposed by Seidman (2013), each session was designed to cover a specific set of topics. The first interview focused on the educational experiences of both parents of the family, with the goal of understanding the context from which current decisions and opinions about school quality and school choice are made. The second interview focused on the experiences of the family in selecting schools for their child in their current community, and it strived to focus on giving the participants an opportunity to define for themselves and articulate their reasoning in judging a school's quality and choosing it. The third and final interview focused on many of the ideas about school quality expressed in the first two interviews, along with additional areas of school quality outlined in the OUSD SPF for middle schools, as summarized in Table 3.

<b>Academic Domain</b>	<b>Percentage of Overall Significance = 60%</b>	<b>Social-Emotional and Culture-Climate Domain</b>	<b>Percentage of Overall Significance = 40%</b>
<i>Middle Schools</i>		<i>Middle Schools</i>	
SBAC Performance	15%	EL Reclassification	8%
SBAC Growth	15%	Parent, Staff, & Student Surveys	8%
High School Readiness	7.5%	Student SEL Survey	8%
SRI	7.5%	Suspension/Expulsion Rates	8%
		Chronic Absenteeism	8%
(Montes de la Oca, 2015)			

*Note.* SBAC = Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium: the HSAM used in California as of 2014.

*Table 3:* OUSD SPF for Middle Schools

Utilizing a structure of ranked-choice voting proposed by Schwarz and Associates (2016), part of the interview included three distinct stages (see Appendix D for details):

**Stage 1.** The family was asked to think about the schools they have attended and observed, as well as name the qualities of these schools that were important to them. The family named 10 qualities and then they were presented with the 10 qualities outlined on the OUSD SPF. Duplicates were collaboratively identified and eliminated, resulting in a list of 18 school qualities. All of the qualities were discussed and clarified collaboratively.

**Stage 2.** The family was then asked to collaboratively select the 10 most important items from the list of 18 generated in Stage 1. Each family member selected three or four qualities and briefly discussed why they felt these qualities should be included in this curated list.

**Stage 3.** First, each family member was asked to review the list of 10 qualities and replace any single item with another item not previously selected, giving justification for why they were moving a particular quality out of the list and bringing in another quality as a replacement. This became a source of intriguing interactions and highlighted the tension created by some school qualities being held as more important for particular family members than they were for other members. Finally, this stage of the activity concluded with family members collaboratively deciding, from the list of 10 qualities, what were the five most important school qualities to them as a group, and they were asked to rank them in order of importance. This selection was discussed and, more importantly to this research, helped to identify the key themes for the analysis of the previous interviews.

Following the principles of grounded theory (Corbin, Strauss, & Strauss, 2015; Stern & Porr, 2011), I analyzed the transcripts of the interview sessions, beginning the evaluation of each transcript before engaging in the next interview session. This was made possible by the fact that between the second and third interview sessions, MS left for a trip to Machu Picchu in Peru, a serendipitous event for this research that will be discussed in a later section. Through the process of reading and analyzing the transcripts, I developed 63 different codes, grouped into five categories: (a) identity of speaker; (b) statements about community; (c) statements about home and family; (d) statements about schools; and (e) statements about beliefs (see Appendix E).

Initially, based on my background in discourse analysis<sup>9</sup> (Gee, 2004; Gumperz, 1982; Schiffrin, 1994), the unit of analysis I assumed was at the sentence or phrase level,

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<sup>9</sup>In 1994, I received my Master's in Education from Boston University, where I focused on the analysis of classroom discourse as a means of understanding students' cognitive development of discipline-specific concepts. From 1994 until 1997, I worked as a post-graduate researcher for the Fostering Communities of Learners project at U.C. Berkeley, where I designed and analyzed curriculum-imbedded assessments of collaborative learning tasks for elementary students (Brown & Campione, 1996).

but it soon became clear that this fine-grained unit might be appropriate for analysis of specific uses of language; it served no clear purpose in helping me develop larger theories about the content of the conversations. Finally, I reanalyzed the transcripts with the idea of topic as a unit, with a single topic containing a single sentence, or several sentences, and a single turn, or multiple turns, all the while looking for points of topical and conceptual convergence in the data (Stern & Porr, 2011). This resulted in a total of 4,168 applications of the 63 codes. In retrospect, some of these coding categories could have been combined to result in fewer code applications, but their purpose was served in helping me understand the multiple layers of topic and concept conveyed by the family members.

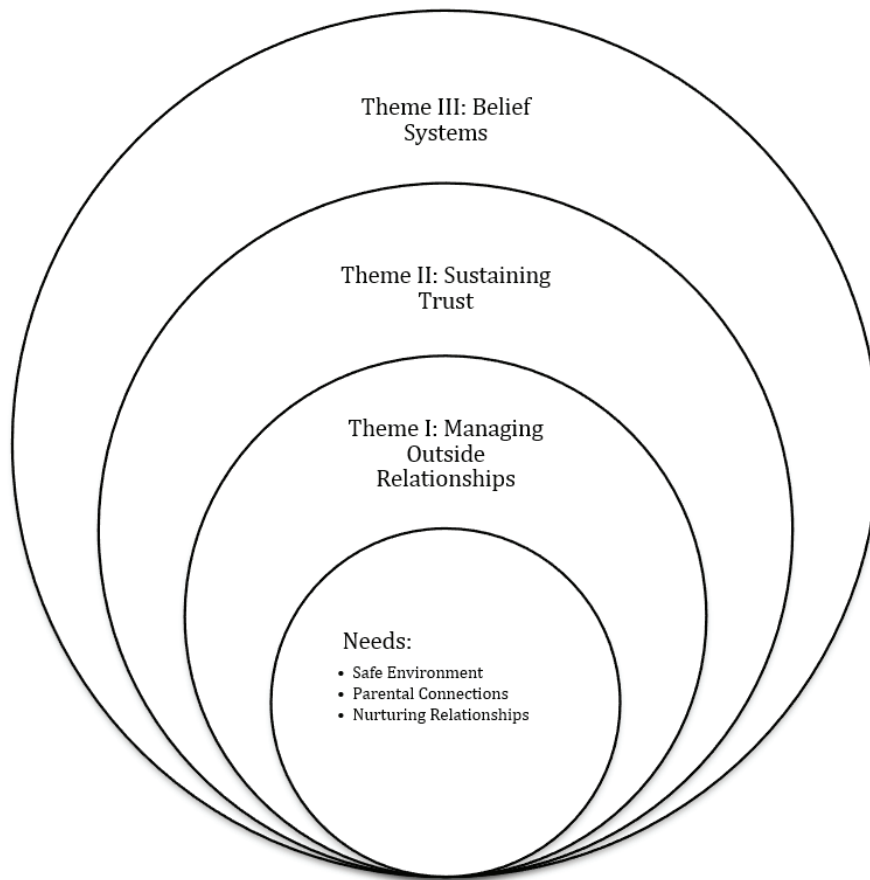
### **Discussion of the Findings**

An analysis of the transcripts from the interviews and the resulting codes led to the identification of three main categories of needs that the Rodríguez family considered important to be fulfilled in judging the quality of the schools with which they have been involved over the years. Using the guiding ideas of grounded theory construction (Corbin et al., 2015; Stern & Porr, 2011), I strove to avoid applying preexisting theoretical structures, which are at the very heart of the ways that SPF are proposed and purposed; instead, I looked for the lived experiences, world views, and belief systems of this family to create the structures for analysis. Even my attempt as a researcher to state a set of research questions needs to be situated somewhere between the specific and the general, allowing for enough detail to create a focus, but not so tightly bound so that the theory cannot be grounded in the data as it develops. As Stern and Porr (2011) point out, as researchers, “you are developing theory grounded in data and theory generation begins

with pinpointing the research problem as perceived by your participants” (p. 48). The three key categories of need that form the smallest structure of this analysis are:

- **Safe Environment:** The need in a stressful and unpredictable world for physical and emotional safety, both at school and in the school’s surrounding community;
- **Parental Connections:** The need for parents to form solid, trusting relationships with school staff and other parents at the school so that they are confident their children will be fully known as individuals and supported in their positive growth and development;
- **Nurturing Relationships:** The need for children to be immersed in positive, nurturing relationships with peers and adults at school so that they can best develop to their full potential as young teenagers.

The categories of need exist within a framework created by the interplay of three key themes, which will be discussed further in Chapter 5. Managing outside relationships with others (e.g., other families, other students, school staff, the larger community, etc.) forms the most concrete of these themes. Sustaining trust throughout all of these relationships forms a second theme level, which is still connected to the daily experiences of being in relationships with others but more personalized for each individual based on previous experiences and current situations and needs. The third theme level of belief system is perhaps the most personalized and the most difficult to articulate, though it actually creates the framework of expectations and aspirations upon which the other two themes, and related needs, are constructed. See Figure 1 for a representation of the interplay among the three themes and the three categories of need.



*Figure 1:* Representation of themes and needs

The following discussion will focus on the specific groups of needs that the Rodríguez family identified as needing to be met in a school and its community, and the three conceptual themes will be revealed through the analysis of the data relative to the original research questions.

### **The Need for a Safe Environment**

As an immigrant family, the Rodríguezes live in a world that straddles boundaries and contexts, a world that is unique to them, but one that is built on similarities to other worlds inhabited by other immigrant families and native-born families within the Northern California Bay Area. While this statement lacks a certain profundity in its



obvious nature, it is nonetheless essential in understanding that each family creates its own definitions of what impacts its physical and emotional safety. Research on Latino family bonding structures (Ayón & Quiroz Villa, 2013; Fernandez, Schwartz, Chun, & Dickson, 2013) indicates that elements valued for creating stability and safety included access to language fluency in different contexts, access to peers with similar experiences, negotiating new cultures and systems, making judgments in current contexts based on a variety of previous experiences and contexts, and understanding what one expects is possible within a given context. Fernandez et al. (2013) found that qualities indicating and promoting individual and familial resilience were especially valued by Latino families; these qualities included goal-setting in both personal and institutional settings, perpetuating language and cultural traditions, and maintaining very close bonds with family members.

Three factors specifically related to maintaining a physically and emotionally safe environment were selected by the family during Stage 3 of the interviews, when they were asked to select the 10 most important qualities of a school. These factors were: (a) having attentive security and staff on campus; (b) knowing that the community immediately surrounding the school was safe; and (c) the implementation of uniforms for students. Relative to the original research question of which factors contained in the SPF are of greater importance to these parents, none of these three factors were described in the OUSD SPF but were, instead, independently identified by the family members. Later in the interviews, when the family was asked to make a final list of the five most important factors for a high-quality school, having attentive security and staff was identified as the single most important quality; maintaining a safe community around the school was the fourth most important factor, and student uniforms was the fifth most important factor. The particular factors, the order in which they were selected,

and the factors that were chosen through the rank-ordered voting process are outlined in Appendix D.

**Attentive security and staff.** In the first interview, LR expressed that the community of East Oakland was at times frightening and unpredictable to her. Given her limited ability to speak and understand English, she had very few extended interactions with community members outside her linguistic and ethnic group. Much of her experience with other types of people, especially African American community members, was influenced by what she had learned from peers or from interpreting the meaning of casual interactions. “Yes, some neighbor, Maria, she live in 106[th Street]. She say she’s dangerous for the Black people there,” LR recounted as proof that the neighborhood of East Oakland was unsafe in general. Describing her experiences in battling the traffic around OUSD Middle School when she dropped off or picked up MJ, LR focused specifically on a negative interaction with an African American community member, saying,

The parking, wow, is amazing. When the parent they took the children to the [car] pool, it says aloud, ‘You know that Black one, [makes beeping sounds] but I got nervous when somebody come in behind me, the [makes beeping sounds], I didn’t know what crossing that red one and the light and the woman she saying [makes beeping sounds], ‘Wow,’ we said, ‘Oh now that’s too much.’

To LR, this interaction with people from different ethnic and linguistic groups trying to negotiate a crowded city street filled with cars and pedestrians was much more stressful than the experience she had had when she walked MJ to OUSD Elementary School. To mediate these and other interactions in the school community that feel unsettled and dangerous, LR and MS both looked to specific staff members at OUSD Middle School to help them feel more assured that threats are noticed and addressed.

Both parents named a school security officer and a teacher's aide as people who provided a consistent and positive presence during the drop-off and pick-up times in the crowded neighborhood streets surrounding the school. Both parents were quick to identify both of these employees as African American, and this was an important factor for them as MS and LR both depended on these employees to step forward to prevent conflicts in situations when MS and LR may not have felt linguistically or culturally equipped to respond independently. MS and LR saw both of these employees as having the cultural and positional authority to be respected and obeyed by all members of the school community.

Given the financial limits that they knew OUSD Middle School faced, MS and LR knew that these two employees could not prevent every conflict from happening, but they relied on them to maintain a base level of regularity and predictability in their response to incidents. For example, LR was very impressed with the female security guard who would wade into traffic to help pedestrians and to minimize conflicts between drivers. Even though they did not know either employee's name, MS and LR relied on them to give them feedback on how MJ was doing in school socially and behaviorally. Brief interactions with these employees each day demonstrated to MS and LR that they knew their son, knew his personality, and knew that he had potential. MS said, "Yeah, sometime she give more information than what she's doing. Sometimes she tells me about MJ, that she hear he had problem with the teacher. He had problems inside the class sometime, or sometime she said, 'MJ be doing really good.'"

In terms of having an attentive and knowledgeable school staff, both MS and LR were hard-pressed to define what it meant exactly in terms of the role of a teacher. They were not able to provide a very nuanced description, though they did refer to specific experiences from their past, as well as some current experiences, to help describe how dedicated and high-quality teachers acted. Both MS and LR went to public schools in

their communities in Honduras, and MS described how the teachers were able to control classrooms of more than 40 students by holding strong behavioral expectations, which were enforced with prompt corporal punishments. MS described that the teachers in his experience remained focused on instructions, but the students often were a force that needed to be controlled, saying, “They were trying to do everything, trying to teach good and everything. Always happen that the kids or me sometimes or my friends that were making too much noise and thing. That happened all the time.” Rarely, MS recalled, would teachers make contact with students’ families, recalling a single time when his father was called by a teacher because of MS’s behavior in school. The incident resulted in a stern talk from his father, but the responsibility for discipline was considered the teacher’s job, and MS’s parents trusted that the appropriate discipline was provided at school.

At the same time, MS’s mother, a former teacher herself, demonstrated respect for all of her children’s teachers. When describing his mother, MS said, “[She] always sent a cake to our teachers. I took a cake to their house and I’d give a cake to them. My mother sent every year, to each teacher of each brother, send a cake . . . It was seven cakes!” Trustworthiness, consistency, and fulfillment of responsibility despite challenging conditions—these are the conditions that MS and LR hold as qualities of a “good teacher.” Previous research (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Vincent, 2013) has shown that these qualities, with an emphasis on trustworthiness, are important qualities that many parents in both urban and suburban settings use to define teacher quality.

At OUSD Middle School, MJ and his parents could name only one teacher who had demonstrated these qualities, though they spoke more positively about the teachers that MJ had had at OUSD Elementary School. In MJ’s current school, his history teacher, Mr. Smith, was seen as consistent, calm, and focused. MS described his behavior, saying,

He help a lot when he say things to encourage MJ to be . . . I see him very prepared to, the way he talk to the kids, the way he talk to MJ for . . . he said MJ was not passing. I checked that too and then I come to him too then . . .

MS and LR also spoke approvingly of the way that Mr. Smith led meetings every two months with them and with all of MJ's other teachers. This showed dedication and responsibility on his part. MJ shared his opinions of Mr. Smith, explaining,

He knows how to control students. He's always advising them, always checking on them. He has a way, I don't know how to explain it, but I rarely see anyone get referred out in this classroom, I guess, being mean, strict is also another reason why he's really strict, but also understand the student, but he's pretty respected by all of us. I rarely see anyone having trouble . . .

In contrast to the qualities demonstrated by Mr. Smith, MJ described difficulties with his PE teacher. In one incident, the teacher confused him in the way that he "played" with the kids, trying to act like a youngster himself. MJ recalled his PE teacher taking his hat without saying anything and then refusing to give it back, provoking MJ almost to the point of crying. "It made me really angry," MJ said. "You know how when sometimes you get angry, and then, you start tearing, like little tears come out?" He told his mother, but she misunderstood that his teacher had hit him. Instead of going to the school administration, she called MS, who was in Honduras. He refused to believe that this could have happened, because there were other students around, and dissuaded her from making a formal complaint.

This incident was just one of several in which MS and LR had different interpretations of what had occurred in interactions between MJ and school staff or other students, with MS deciding that there was no need to contact the principal of the school; as such, these opposing perspectives about how this family managed the quality

of their child's education deserve further discussion through the three themes of outside relationships, trust, and belief systems.

**Safe school community.** Knowing that the community immediately surrounding the school was safe was another factor in supporting the need for a physically and emotionally safe environment. Though the Rodríguez family had few connections to a diverse set of other parents, the parents and community members they did know seemed to be sufficient to the degree that it prevented them from actively looking for another school. In fact, during the eight years that MJ had attended OUSD Elementary and OUSD Middle Schools, the family had actually moved out of Oakland to a neighboring town, and they still continued to drive MJ an even further distance to school, mainly because it was the context of key relationships which they considered important. MS described the situation, saying,

There's more than one things. MJ want to be there, because he say he knows some friends there, names. I believe that the school is doing, the teacher, they doing good work. They trying to do the work well. I know some of the things happen is because the kids. They get, somehow, like don't want to hear, don't want to pay attention in the school. I think what is the problem, that problem could be in any school, I believe. We can move here [to this town's school], because it's closer, MJ can walk there. Sometime it's problem, too, about when I have to go. I told him sometime I forgot, or when he get earlier out of the school. Sometime I forgot. In this school here, he can walk to the house. It's a block. He can go this way . . .

On the surface, the decision to send one's child to a higher-performing school that is in a safer community, and that is located just three blocks from one's home, might seem obvious and logical. However, the Rodríguez family made a choice to keep MJ at

OUSD Middle School, because preexisting and predictable relationships were preferred over a more convenient but unpredictable environment they would encounter at a new school. This attitude resonates with the research of Pattillo (2015) and Mavrogordato and Stein (2014), who found that low-income Latino and African American families in stressful situations often chose the known default of a school based on past experiences, rather than forming new, potentially dangerous, relationships. Not having information that actually matters to a parent, in this case the intersection of personal relationships and safety, about a school, and not knowing how to gather this information inhibits the likelihood of urban parents from taking risks in the selection of new schools (Hastings et al., 2007).

MS frequently spoke about how the teachers, both in his own schooling and those at OUSD Middle School, worked hard, remarking, “I know that is control the kids in this age is not easy. I say sometime, ‘They have a lot of work . . . ’” As a child, MS turned to his mother, a former teacher, and his siblings when he needed academic support, though he did recall one teacher taking time to give him some extra instruction. The help he received from his mother ended quickly, though, as MS recalled, “I remember she only do that at the beginning, at the first grade and then me and all my brother we were like very responsible and all we were doing in the school.” MS expressed some confusion about the current situation and the fact that many students, including his own son, seemed to take little accountability for their own academic life, saying, “I remember that and I was very like . . . because I see now the kids now is more difficult to tell them what they do in the school is very important for them in the future.” In MS’s view, success or failure at school is the choice of the student and the family. On the other hand, MS believes schools and teachers, with whom he credits providing opportunities for students to learn even if students don’t take advantage of these opportunities, hold less sway in determining the academic success or failure of a student than the perspective

and behavior of the student. He maintained this position despite his familiarity with school performance data he encountered during presentations to the SSC and ELAC committees, of which he was a member at OUSD Elementary School, where discussions of teaching techniques and the impact of collaborative planning were discussed as school improvement strategies. The idea that the quality and consistency of the teaching has a major impact in student learning outcomes is supported by the research of both Darling-Hammond (2004) and Solórzano (2008), who found that students' patterns of performance on HSAM could effectively be used to address specific pedagogical and curricular hurdles that were hindering learning.

Despite the success of his siblings in receiving advanced professional degrees and having successful careers in Honduras because of their schooling, MS used his own experience of accomplishing economic success in the United States through personal determination and hard work (and little schooling) as proof that the individual was the driving force in settling one's own future. While his own life history seemed to bear this out for him, MS found himself in conflict with his son's views on the matter. During a portion of the ranked-choice voting process in the third interview, MJ repeatedly tried to include the percentage of students reclassified as fluent English speakers as one of the five most important determinants of school quality. This factor, which was part of the OUSD SPF (Montes de la Oca, 2015), was used by MJ to replace school uniforms in the top-five list. MS then removed English fluency as a factor and returned school uniforms to the list.

Looking back at MS's history, his de-emphasis of an academic metric can be better understood. MS made his way in the United States earning significantly more money than he could have in Honduras, through grueling manual labor to which he was unaccustomed, learning English not at school but through his interactions at work and establishing his own successful contracting firm. Personal experience, personal struggle,



and personal context all seemed to be key drivers of how MS interpreted the role of schools in his family's success. This is not to infer that MS had an anti-intellectual or anti-academic bent to his perspective; however, similar to the mothers described by Dyrness (2011) who worked to build a community school for their children, he built his position from his own life experiences. He saw that his own focus and willingness to adapt to situations had been a key factor in his success, and he wanted his son to find that same kind of individual drive for success. However, the limits of MS's critical perspective were obvious in his almost stalwart refusal to criticize the teachers, the schools, or their organization, or even the limited resources given to the school. Rather than using these moments to call for increased "opportunities to learn" (Solórzano, 2008, p. 263), where schools and instruction are intentionally geared toward the cultural and linguistic needs of their students, MS continued to look within himself for resource and focus, modeling for MJ a response that may have had lasting impressions.

**Student uniforms.** Another factor related to a school's physical and emotional safety was the requirement that students wear uniforms, which was the policy at both OUSD Elementary and OUSD Middle Schools. Even though not all students followed the policy, it was important to both MS and LR (though much less important to MJ) that students were expected to demonstrate a sense of conformity by wearing uniforms. Both parents in the family grew up wearing uniforms to their schools in Honduras, and they both talked about how the entire community knew who they were, where they were headed, and also knew where they shouldn't be, all based on their wearing of school uniforms. LR said, "All the people, the area they respect too, the children with the school with their uniform. A lot of people they say, 'Oh no, he's studying, student.'"

In addition to the sense of being able to identify students and, by extension, hope that the community would be on watch for them and hold some expectations for their behavior, it was also important to MS that uniforms were a physical manifestation of a

larger sense of belonging to an institution and its movements. Describing the work of the principal at OUSD Elementary School, MS said,

Yes, that too, but mainly that I see [his] spirit, the idea that [he] gave to the kids. When [he] talk to them, when [he] make minutes in the morning, I do like that when [he] make them feel like they do good, they can do a lot of things. Not only just the education, not only like robots sometime, they want to do what is . . . Yeah, robot. I see that [he] like to make the kids feel like they can do a lot of things by themselves, like creating. I like that thing, too.

According to MS' perspective, uniforms helped students feel like they belonged to a special group, and, under the right guidance, the group could move beyond mere conformity toward achieving independent thinking and behaving, while still maintaining a sense of personal discipline. This factor, which was clearly important to MS and LR, though unaddressed on the OUSD SPF (Montes de la Oca, 2015), speaks more to the importance placed on belonging to a group, a group with norms and expectations for interactions and behavior. Uniforms are a symbol of belonging, accountability, and explicit role delineation.

When the adults at the school broke from the norms of what MS and LR held for them, like the incident with the playful PE coach who crossed boundaries between expected teacher/student behaviors, or in another incident when MJ's English teacher failed him for his behavior in class but then refused to help LR when she asked for support in understanding what he had actually done, the importance of belonging to a supportive and safe community was actually heightened for MS. He felt that, in both of these situations, the teachers "are doing the best they can," but the students are "too difficult and don't know how to listen yet." Maintaining an amazing sense of optimism despite these negative encounters, MS, and by extension MJ, looked more and more

to the principal of OUSD Middle School to inspire them with her vision, much as the principal at OUSD Elementary School had done. MJ spoke about learning from the principal at OUSD Middle School, Ms. Jones, saying,

[S]he would start coming into the classes, and started saying these speeches about how life we wouldn't pass, if we just kept on fooling around in school. Friends, later in life, are friends you choose not to do anything, will just not be successful in life, and will be asking for money in life. You, if you study and work hard, you can have a job that makes your life better. Not exactly in my words, those weren't her words, but same idea.

All of these ideas are discussed here under the banner of student uniforms because of the ways that uniforms serve as an emblem of a larger community of practice and belief, one that parents and students have to consciously choose to follow. For MJ, his intelligence had served as both a support and a hindrance for him; he was smart enough to get through most of his schooling without trying very hard, but he also deeply questioned the validity and applicability of what the adults in the school community were telling him. Ms. Jones, in her no-nonsense approach to showing students that they can control their own outcomes in school and in life, seemed to have broken through to MJ's sense of duty to himself, in which he moved past his disdain for compliance and realized that he could control his destiny.

In addition, this evolution of attitude on MJ's part coincided with the development of our family interview sessions together over three months. At the outset of the final interview session, MJ excitedly announced that he was not failing any classes for the first time since he had begun middle school, that he had worked with his teachers to change his seating so he was less distracted, and that he had not engaged in any behavior that would warrant school discipline. Is it possible that MJ, listening closely to the

stories his parents told about their own schooling, hearing about the decisions they had to make in life, and reflecting on his parents' beliefs about how life operates and how destiny develops, made the beginning of a conscious effort to control the outcomes in his schooling? Is this evidence that MJ unintentionally began the process of being part of a participatory action research experience (Akorn, 2009; Cammarota & Romero, 2006; Dyrness, 2009)? While this possibility is intriguing, it is beyond the scope of this research study to venture too much further down this pathway. Still, it is heartening to see that MJ began to move past his disdain for compliance within the uniforms and expectations of his school community to take ownership of his own performance and his own behavior. He seemed to have recognized the purpose of the structures and expectations that can make up a safe and supportive school community and was using these structures for his own growth and benefit. Is MJ really taking ownership of his own life, and beginning to develop a critical perspective of the extra challenges and extra work he faces as a child of lower-income immigrants? Or, conversely, is he simply learning how to play a game of quietude and compliance, becoming like the DREAMer students<sup>10</sup> Dhingra (2015) describes as not challenging, just trudging forward? Has MJ further internalized his father's own efforts to apply his critical perspective to his inner life rather than his outer world? A shift was occurring during the period covered by the interview sessions, but the time we spent together was too brief, in reality, to see the trajectory this change would take.

### **The Need for Parental Connections**

A single word that aptly describes the experiences of many urban families is isolation. Because of the cultural instability, economic segregation, and lack of

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<sup>10</sup> This term refers to undocumented Latino or Latina students focused on college entry or military service in hopes of being granted immigration amnesty.

community resources, many poor urban families do not have the interpersonal networks of friends and extended family experienced by many other families in different environments (Dyrness, 2011; Lipman, 2013). This is especially true for immigrant families like the Rodríguezes, who find themselves isolated linguistically, economically, and culturally in the larger context of their neighborhood and school community. LR alluded to this in recounting her nervousness and the fear experienced when trying to negotiate the traffic around OUSD Middle School. The anxiety she felt at the potential of becoming embroiled in a conflict with a stranger with whom she would have trouble communicating or understanding the cultural context of the situation was very real and very alienating for her. Throughout the interview sessions, the desire for a sense of relationship to the school and its community comprised a significant set of factors that they used to define the quality of a school. This set of factors included: (a) reviews and perspectives on a school by other parents and (b) the degree to which parents express a feeling of connectedness to a school.

**School reviews and perspectives of other parents.** The Rodríguez family did not mention relying on information provided by the school, the district, or media-based sources, even though MS stated that he tried to stay informed about the politics of government spending on education, mentioning his opposition to excess spending by governments on prison construction, instead of more robustly funding public education. He said that when he and LR first enrolled their son at OUSD Elementary School, he was interested to learn that it was common in the United States for parents to get involved in guiding the educational programs at public schools, thus leading to his efforts to be a part of the school's parent governance groups. The only source of information named by the family as important to them, aside from their own experiences and perceptions, was how the school was experienced by other parents.

The family had selected OUSD Elementary School based on the advice of a trusted friend, from MJ's preschool days, who also had her son enrolled in kindergarten at the school. She had described to LR and MS the way that the kindergarten teacher structured his class, interacted with students, and maintained close communication with parents. Additionally, she spoke glowingly about the overall way the school was managed and talked about how her son, also an English learner, was making significant progress in a Structured English Immersion class. MS recounted the process of selecting OUSD Elementary School, describing how the opinions of other parents convinced him to select the school, despite information he had learned about the school's prior academic experience:

No, at some point, I was thinking about, because did I know about Oakland's school some time before. Somebody told me something about that school that I don't know what area, I think I hear and I listen, the score of the schools, they were low. Yeah, low academically and about the kids, they were on the school and we're in Math 2, some organization with the teachers and . . . something about that. I was thinking about, not so worried about it, but I was thinking about that. I changed my mind and Susana there, with Romero there, we didn't ask her to talk to us about [the kindergarten teacher]. She said something about [the principal], good things, that [he was] doing good changes in the school, good ideas. I said, 'If I'm getting there with MJ, I want to be in the talking with the teachers, too.' That's why I do remember, I do get a lot in the meetings and start helping. I said, 'I better help.' We so together, but at the school. That's what happened.

All three family members expressed a shared wish that there was a more robust source of parent reviews of schools that they could easily access in print or online. They did not express any familiarity of online tools like GreatSchools.org (GreatSchools, n.d.)

or Yelp.com (Best Schools in Oakland, n.d.), though they were aware of the concept of online reviews. Of greater value to them was the experience of parents in similar circumstances who have similar expectations for their schools. The fact that this family felt isolated from other families and unable to build upon the experiences of peers exemplifies the slanted version of a neoliberal marketplace for public services, described by Whitty (1997) and Apple (2006), where low-income consumers are kept in isolation to prevent them from organizing around similar wants and needs that the marketplace fails to serve. Research has shown that strong parent-school relationships that lead to public reviews and statements of experiences with schools play a strong, regulating force on the overall quality of higher-income schools (Hiltz, 2015) and can also play an important role in low-income, urban schools (Mavrogordato & Stein, 2014). While this factor is not one of those presented on the OUSD SPF (Montes de la Oca, 2015), the concept of parent connections to a school is an important factor in describing a school's climate and culture.

**Parent feelings of connectedness.** The OUSD SPF (Montes de la Oca, 2015) measures the climate and culture of a school partially through an analysis of parent responses to a set of questions on the annual California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS; California Healthy Kids Survey, 2016), which each school is required to administer. The analysis includes both the response rate and the response quality to the following seven statements:

- I feel welcome to participate at this school.
- School staff treats me with respect.
- School staff takes my concerns seriously.
- School staff welcomes my suggestions.
- School staff responds to my needs in a timely manner.
- School staff is helpful.
- My child's background is valued at this school. (Montes de la Oca, 2015)

During the interviews, the areas described by these survey statements were raised repeatedly by the Rodríguez family, though they were generally unaware that these areas were being formally measured by the school or district. MJ had to remind his parents that he had brought home a survey for them to complete during the winter; during the final interview, MS actually asked LR her response to each of these statements while sharing his own perspective.

Even though the topics covered by these statements were regarded as important by all three members of the Rodríguez family during the last interview, comments made during earlier interviews showed an intriguing level of qualification for many of these areas. Specifically, MS and LR seemed to be satisfied that they could respond in the affirmative to most of these areas of inquiry, as long as there was at least one person at the school who made them feel connected and respected, despite repeated instances in which they felt that an employee of the school had been neglectful or had not performed at a high level of caring. The site security staff with whom they interacted daily were important in making them feel connected, as was Mr. Smith, the teacher who had led the recent round of parent-student-teacher conferences, and the principals at both OUSD Elementary and Middle Schools. Even when a crisis would occur, for example, when MJ got in a conflict with his PE teacher or when he broke his arm at school and the school didn't explain the details of the accident, MS and, to a lesser degree, LR were satisfied that all was well as long as someone they trusted would eventually reach out to them.

This almost tacit acceptance of the confused operations and inadequate communications at the school, such as the trite and inconsistent newsletters, and a frequent failure on the part of the office staff to contact the family when MJ had injured himself or was cutting class, was permitted by three related elements of MS's mindset: a belief that all children are inherently difficult, especially in these times and in this society and hence are the real cause of these sorts of problems; a confidence that the adults at the



school were caring and responsible people who should be trusted even when they didn't always perform satisfactorily; and, finally, a very strong belief system on MS's part that each individual's circumstances, challenges, and successes are an inevitable product of a sort of familial karmic indebtedness that each person carries with himself or herself. The struggle to be in good relationship with other people, including school staff, was tied in MS's mind to the constant struggle of each individual to transcend the physical and metaphysical conditions into which he or she had been born. In a later section on the theme of belief systems, this concept, which impacted the family's expectations and acceptance of their connectedness to school, will be more fully discussed.

### **The Need for Nurturing Relationships**

Beyond physical and emotional safety and parental feelings of connectedness, the key determinant of whether a school was of a high quality really rested for the Rodríguez family in the ability of the school to foster nurturing relationships. Ultimately, the family wanted to know that the values of friendliness, helpfulness, responsibility, and determination that they were trying to instill in their son were being reinforced through the relationships MJ was forming in the school context. These seemed to be of greater importance to the family than expectations for academic success, following preexisting pathways for future economic gain, or being well-situated in a competitive future. Neoliberal concepts of a school's role in workforce preparation and social managerialism (Apple, 2006; Au, 2008b) never really raised their heads during the interviews, though it would be presumptuous to assume that these factors weren't implicit in some of the family's concepts of success and happiness. Nevertheless, the key areas of relationship identified by the Rodríguez family were: (a) whether the school promoted a culture of growth mindsets among students, (b) the quality of the student-student relationships, and (c) whether the school supported "good" teachers to lead the students.

**A culture of growth mindsets.** One of the measures on the OUSD SPF (Montes de la Oca, 2015) is focused on the degree to which students report having a growth mindset. A concept developed and popularized by Stanford University researcher Carol Dweck and her team (Dweck, 2006; Dweck & Rule, 2013; Yeager & Dweck, 2012), a growth mindset is based on a belief that intelligence is not a fixed trait but can, instead, be consciously and purposefully developed through a perspective of learning from both failures and successes. On the OUSD SPF, student responses to the following survey statements are measured:

- My intelligence is something that I can't change very much.
- Challenging myself won't make me any smarter.
- There are some things I am not capable of learning.
- If I am not naturally smart in a subject, I will never do well in it.

Prior to reviewing these statements during the beginning of the third interview, the Rodríguez family had not explicitly discussed these ideas of individual potential being linked to perspective and effort, though there had been earlier discussions of times when one of the family members had had a shift in understanding about the reasons for her or his individual success. For example, when MJ described the frequent pep-talks provided by the principal of OUSD Middle School, Ms. Jones, he mentioned how she used examples from her own life, such as when she found herself making poor choices and the resolutions she had to maintain to reform her behavior and life. The fact that Ms. Jones had made a change when she had been raised in circumstances similar to those of her students impressed MJ, and he attributed his recent success, in part, to her serving as a role model.

When the family reviewed the actual statements from the growth mindset survey and selected them as a group as an important factor in determining school quality, MS quickly linked them to his belief that people have to resolve their own issues, whether

they were “bad attitude and not listening” or were “because someone in your family has a secret that is keeping you from being happy.” Something blocks success in MS’s worldview, and the individual has to be in the right context to find out the root cause for the block. The context of a nurturing relationship where a child can feel safe enough to explore his or her own performances as a student and as a maturing individual was important to MS, and it was one of the key features he looked for in a school. Research on the transformative power of classroom culture and instruction focused on addressing the real context of students’ lived experiences of oppressive political and economic situations (Akom, 2009; Kinloch, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999) supports the power of emotional safety in classes, where students know that caring adults will support their exploration of their own lives. MS quickly saw that the ideas contained within the OUSD SPF growth mindset survey statements began to describe his own ideas of each person understanding his or her own struggle throughout life.

**Student-student relationships.** Whereas MS focused on the potentially nurturing relationship that could occur between a student and a caring and consistent teacher, LR focused on the need for nurturing relationships between students. She and MS named this factor as one of the five most important features of a quality school. Throughout the interviews, LR mentioned this idea several times, describing how her favorite traffic and security guards tried to monitor rough playing and potential conflicts between students. LR recalled a scene she often encountered when she went to school to pick up MJ:

[The adults] don’t see when they fight, rob. One time I saw, wow, they all run away. They did have backpack. They throw it like that to girl. I see that nobody say nothing about that. They grab it. The mochila [backpack], the big one, they took it. They hitting with it. I saw that. One morning, when I saw . . . I went in there, you know when the people open the door? You know that? I would step in

there. I see a lot. A lot of children, they fight. They throw the backpack with the little boys. I tell MJ, 'I saw everything. You got to careful. OK? I saw.' So I tell him that.

The fear LR experienced when she saw these situations was magnified by the situations at school where rough playing resulted in MJ becoming injured, breaking his wrist or arm twice since entering OUSD Middle School. MS talked about his wife's feelings, saying,

You not supposed to worry about that. It's like MJ, see, they push him twice. They were kind of playing, maybe a little too hard. LR ask me all the time, 'Why we don't tell, go to the school and say. Be more about the teacher.' When MJ is in class or maybe the security see something there, and why they don't do anything. That's what [she] said.

It is interesting that the family selected this factor of positive peer relationships as a determinant of school quality when they had so much evidence that this factor was not well-developed at OUSD Middle School. Why did they not complain more? Why did they not demand more accountability from the adults at the school when their son had been seriously injured twice? First, given the history of both parents in Honduras, where school discipline and conflicts between students were rarely topics mentioned to families, MS and LR may have been still trying to understand where the problem began and who was really responsible. In their past, there was little expectation that the school would foster any sort of relationship between students. MJ kept telling them that all was fine at school, but after a while the evidence mounted that this was not the case. Now that they had clear proof from their observations and what MJ had experienced through his injuries, they may have realized through the course of the interviews that positive peer relationships were something they really needed to demand. The individual complaints

and incidents had not cohered yet into a direct need until the final hours of the interviews. The preceding discussions about school quality, parent involvement, and the comparison of different schools may have helped this element become more crystalized and evident for them. This may be another case where participants in a collaborative research process discover new understandings and needs from recounting their experiences (Madison, 2011; Seidman, 2013).

“Good” teachers. During the final interviews, having “good” teachers was expressed by the Rodríguez family as the second most important factor in defining school quality; however, when pressed, they were not really able to explain what this meant, except to refer to specific teachers, like Mr. Smith, who exemplified specific qualities of industriousness, seriousness, caring, and being communicative. According to MS, he felt that almost all teachers “try hard,” but it was significant that certain teachers achieved student learning and behavioral outcomes that demonstrated their quality as professionals. Given this perspective, two factors that the family selected separately as important indicators of school quality—HSAM performance and the percentage of students who are chronically absent—are used here to further describe what it meant to the family for a teacher to be described as good.

**HSAM performance.** The family named student performance on the SBAC (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, n.d.), the annual HSAM used in California, as an important factor they would use to judge the quality of a school. In sharp contrast to the paradigm promoted through neoliberal school reform efforts that emphasize the primacy of HSAM performance as a measure of school quality (Au, 2007, 2008b), none of the Rodríguez family members independently mentioned this factor, nor did they make any reference to the importance of HSAM during any of the earlier interviews. However, when the elements of the OUSD SPF were described to them during the ranked-choice voting activity in the third interview, when they were asked to name the

10 most important factors, MJ quickly identified both parts of the HSAM, measurements of proficiency in English Language Arts and Mathematics, as important markers of individual success and school quality. MS conceded that they were indeed important factors, but then he combined them in a more general category of “student performance on SBAC” right before MJ selected the newly grouped factor for the shorter list of top-five factors. Because of the family’s limited focus on HSAM performance until they were reminded of their use on the OUSD SPF (Montes de la Oca, 2015), one wonders why they were selected at all by the family as important. Could this be an example of “the hegemony of good ideas” described by Gramscian theory (Gramsci, 1996; Manders, 2006; Zembylas, 2013) and Willis’ theories of resistance (Burgess et al., 2013; Skeggs, 1992) as methods of continued oppression that prevent the full development of a subaltern identity of personal power and confidence in one’s own beliefs? MJ, who identified HSAM as an important factor, has to exist in two worlds: one, as a son, bounded by his parents’ experiences, hopes, and beliefs, and another, as a student, bounded by the rhetoric of success, competition, and meritocracy promoted by the school and its principal and staff. The difficulty in reconciling these two worldviews is further highlighted by the fact that MJ’s performance on the SBAC in sixth grade was “Standard Nearly Met” for both English Language Arts and Mathematics, standing in contrast to his earlier performance of “Advanced” on both parts of the CST in fourth grade.

A drop in scores like this was not uncommon as schools across the country moved towards Common Core Standards and the more rigorous and aligned assessments like the SBAC (Rothman, 2014), but it also mirrors the poor grades MJ had received thus far in middle school. Perhaps this could, in part, attribute for the lack of focus on academic performance in the earlier interviews, especially considering both MS’s and LR’s experience with how families in their communities in Honduras were considered the key source of academic remediation for failing students. Additionally, the tacit acceptance of

current poor academic performance on MJ's part that his parent's response may indicate could be linked to MS's belief system of familial karmic indebtedness, which will be discussed at greater length in a following section.

**Percentage of students who are chronically absent.** It is somewhat ironic that this factor was selected by members of the family, as MJ had technically been chronically absent from school during the year covered by the interviews, having attended only 89% of his classes. Some of these absences may have been related to his health issues, but other absences are the product of his cutting classes and school altogether, something that he and his parents admitted. The topic of attendance was not raised explicitly during our interviews at any time except during our review of the elements from the OUSD SPF (Montes de la Oca, 2015). The factor of students' attendance rates as a measure of overall school quality was selected by MS to be a part of the top-10 list, with just a brief exchange for translation and clarification between him and LR and no input by MJ.

Why was this factor selected when so little time was spent discussing it or similar issues during the interviews? A possible explanation can be found in two themes that were raised frequently during the interviews. The first is related to MS's, and to a lesser degree LR's, beliefs that a student and his family need to be fairly self-sufficient in solving problems and addressing obstacles that get in the way of success. Both MS and LR recounted how, when they were children in Honduras, the students were expected to behave in class, resolve their own conflicts without assistance from the school, and seek out help within their own resources when faced with academic challenges. At least for MS, his community was small enough and his family was well known, so that his absence from the daily group of students walking to school each day would have been readily noted. If students did not demonstrate self-sufficiency in these learning environments, where class sizes frequently exceeded 40 students, the consequences were clearly known and rapidly executed.

The threat of physical punishment imposed by teachers always loomed over both MS and LR when they were students, with LR recalling that even poor academic performance warranted slaps and hits from teachers, which definitely motivated her to find her own solutions to her academic and interpersonal problems. Even a conflict that she had with another student who was frequently hitting and intimidating her on her way to and from school was not an issue that she brought to the school's attention, choosing instead to have her older brother accompany her until the bullying stopped. This promotion of self-sufficiency on the path to academic success exemplifies elements of Bernstein's pedagogic device (Au, 2008a; Bernstein, 2000, 2003) where one of the conditions for smooth operation of the device is the ability of the home environment to support and reinforce the expectations of the school, rather than the school reinforcing the expectations and needs of the home.

In the context of the Rodríguez family's current school community, attendance seems to be more related to the quality of the relationships between the student and the teacher and the other students at the school. Linked to feelings of emotional and physical safety, feelings of connectedness, as well as a sense of confidence that relationships between adults and students are consistent and accountable, MJ's increased attendance rate during the period of time covered by the interviews was potentially a product of his new sense of potential as a student, which was developed through his improved relationship with key teachers, such as Mr. Smith. Teacher quality, as manifested through clear expectations, unswerving accountability, and consistent fulfillment of roles, seemed to play an important part in improving MJ's sense of utility and fulfillment as a student. The rhetoric of personal drive and long-term success was insufficient to motivate MJ, but being in a relationship with quality teachers seems to have been more inspiring to him. This idea is supported by the research of Boykin and Noguera (2011), which has indicated that trusting, consistent relationships, even with a single teacher, can play vital



roles in determining whether African American and Latino boys begin to take greater ownership of their academic performance. From MS's perspective, this change in MJ's attitude and performance were also linked to his own belief that MJ, for whatever reason, either situational or metaphysical, was previously unable to recognize the benefit he could derive from being in relationship with a high-quality teacher.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Discussion of the Findings**

As discussed in Chapter 4, three categories of need (the need for safety, the need for parental connections, and the need for nurturing relationships) exist within the context of a constant interplay of three conceptual themes that result in an overlapping of ideas and connections of experiences. In this final chapter, the details of the three themes are further discussed with an analysis of how they interplay with the conceptual framework of neoliberalism as a guiding force in school reform and accountability efforts (Leyva, 2009; Lipman, 2013; Tienken, 2013) and the concept of scientific managerialism (Apple, 2006; Au, 2008b).

#### **Theme I: Managing Outside Relationships**

As an immigrant family, the Rodríguez have connections in the United States to only a few other family members and friends from Honduras, but there are not a significant number of other people in their immediate circle to whom they turn for support in navigating the challenges of daily life. LR has always worked either for her sister, who sponsored her entry to the United States, or for the couple that purchased her sister's business. The number of close friends mentioned during the interviews were quite limited and mainly focused on a friend from Honduras who helped them learn about OUSD Elementary School. The only connections with people outside of his family

that MS mentioned were with members of his faith group. Between the second and third interviews, MS became almost impossible to reach, and the reason, he explained, was that he had joined this group on a tour of Machu Picchu in Peru. The purpose of the trip was to connect with one of Earth's "chakra centers," a point of energy where he believes people can realign their own energies to benefit their own lives and the lives of family members. Ivakhiv (2003, 2007) has documented the rise of what he calls New Age pilgrimages as groups of people come together in a practice of a "spirituality of the self." MS explained the significance of going with the group on this self-pilgrimage to reorganize his own energy and karma, saying, "That's why I connect with some people that are making those kind of trips, that they know we have chakra, center point of energies." He further described the choice of location, saying,

[It's a] point of energy in the center of the Earth. The planet has the same type of energies [as people]. We know that the Lake Titicaca is one, for the chakra of the Earth. Monte Shasta, we have another one here in California. I've been there too. When we are in those areas that's what you see, the past, the ancestral people make pyramid on those areas. We have a lot of things that we have to be because they believe in that area because they have big connection with the universe and all that they build pyramid.

For MS, the theme of managing outside relationships plays an important role in managing the present and future outcomes for his family and himself. There is a sort of pragmatism on display here: Relationships with others should benefit your larger life, and it is one's responsibility to ensure that these relationships stay positive and beneficial. For MJ, the friends who influenced him the most at school were not always the best choice, by his own admission, and he saw them as a key reason he had made poor choices in school up to the point of the interviews. On the other hand, he attributed

the recent change in his attitude towards his relationship with school to a series of conversations he had recently had with his cousins. MS's desire that outside relationships should be positive is seen in the way that MJ talked about his change of attitude and his receptiveness to change when he spent time with his cousins when his father was on his trip. They had talked to him, he said, about how he should ignore distracting people at school and how he could form closer relationships with his teachers. MJ described these conversations, saying,

Yeah, [my cousin] attends university. My other cousin, he went about one or two years to University of San Jose. He didn't even tell me exactly what he wanted to do, but he did give me some tips. He talked to me about life, about jobs. He asked me what I want to be when I grow up, and I just told him I don't really know yet. He told me to make sure I get something I like, so later on in your life you'll know you did something you liked . . . [We] didn't really talk about school. We mainly used to talk about basically other stuff and tips for school . . . I already wanted to start doing better before them, but I guess, I got a little bit of motivation from being with them. I know I had to be a little more responsible with my mom and help her bit more with things. My dad was gone and some of the things he didn't, he couldn't do. I didn't really get too much change for me, but I guess . . . I don't think it made too much of a change when my dad was gone, but I guess it did kind of motivate me a bit more.

Is it a coincidence that these transformations in MJ's attitude, his understanding of his personal responsibility for forming better relationships in his life, took place during the time of these interviews? Possibly. Is it also merely a coincidence that MS took his previously unannounced spiritual pilgrimage to reconnect his personal and family energy during the course of these interviews in which we discussed school quality and explored

many of the determinants of school quality? Again, it is possible. It is also possible that the time the family spent openly discussing their histories, experiences, and beliefs about school and life, failures, and successes helped to create the conditions of caring and safety that Cammarota and Romero (2006) and Valenzuela (1999) claim are a necessity to allow for critical consciousness among students and citizens. The narratives that the family experienced through listening to each other also connect to the ideas of critical race theory (Akom, 2009; Brown & Jackson, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1998) and serve as a reclaiming by the family of their stories as they try to understand how to be successful in a challenging environment where communities are not always safe, and schools are not consistently nurturing or accountable to parents' needs and expectations. However, it is important to temper potential enthusiasm about the depth and breadth of the critical consciousness that may have been evidenced on the part of MJ and MS. Similar to the experiences of the working class, struggling "Freeway High girls" Weis portrayed (2004), these "moments of critique" (p. 113) may be a brief flash of awareness on the part of MS and MJ that the modern world of American urban education and its perennial reforms are not sufficient, or even intended to be sufficient, to elevate the experience of lower-income, multilingual immigrant students. Many of Weis' "girls," who were revisited as women years later, lived lives of self-sufficiency and independence many steps removed from that of their mothers, but they also found the rhetoric of middle-class critical feminism inadequate to insulate them from the same brand of male-initiated violence that had terrorized the lives of their families before. MS has turned his critical consciousness towards his metaphysical life, as one realm that he is convinced that he can control. MJ has taken steps down a similar road as his father; he is aware now that he is capable of change, but it's not clear that he understands (nor does his father understand) what racial, linguistic, and class obstacles he will soon encounter as a poor, brown student trying to fit into a neoliberal, free-market world.

During the course of the three interview sessions, the Rodríguez family seemed to coalesce more tightly around MS's beliefs that one's relationships with people in the larger family and in the larger community can have a great influence in the success one can experience. This is not the type of networking and interpersonal gamesmanship described in the neoliberal idea of managerialism (Apple, 2006; Au, 2008b) where one uses strategic connections to compete for the next foothold on one's ascent to academic and economic success. MS's worldview is dominated by a belief that quality relationships with other people at all levels have a primary influence on how we behave in the world, on whether we see potential opportunities before us, and on our ability to move our lives forward. No set of relationships, especially in external communities like schools, will be perfect nor can they be fully controlled; however, from MS's perspective, it is better to stick with relationships where some degree of trust has already been established and then work on one's own ability to improve those relationships for greater benefit. The neoliberal free market of school accountability and scientific measurement is challenged by a subaltern identity and worldview that optimistically looks at school communities as imperfect but subject to improvement and change because of multiple levels of relationship (Apple & Buras, 2006; Spivak, 1988; Zembylas, 2013).

## **Theme II: Sustaining Trust**

A key element of being able to manage outside relationships is the ability to sustain trust that positive intent is driving other people's actions and beliefs. MS's optimism as a parent that he can trust his community, his relationships, and his son's school to do right by him is firmly based in his belief that all people are equal and that all people are interconnected. He described these beliefs, saying,

We only think we are the physical barrier; we feel we are divided. From there, a lot of things, like too many things. Sometimes you get the [people] divided . . .

Like races. We call races for the color wherein we are different. Yeah, sure. In this life and the way we live, we are the type that are confronting. From one city to another city, we are in competitions to more sometimes or fighting somehow, but when we understand the spirit is only one because energy so our life change. Our perception of the life changed. We know if I hurt you, I'm hurting myself. It's a different way to start and I, being with that kind of people around the world.

MS has trust that we are all connected through the same energy and that we all have essentially the same needs and desires. He rejects the ideas of race and class as being artificial categories created to increase competition between different people. His trust that people do not need to be competing with each other for opportunities for success is a direct challenge to the neoliberal concept that the best way to maintain quality in education is achieved through the paradigm of consumers vying for an edge, demanding better services for themselves and, thereby, controlling the marketplace of education (Lipman, 1998, 2011, 2013). Pedroni (2007) has documented how groups of underserved people have attempted to shift the way that they are served by the neoliberal marketplace of education reform and school vouchers by participating in initiatives in unexpected numbers, but he makes it clear that these strategic efforts by communities of color do not amount to an endorsement of the larger aims of decentralization and competition for basic services. The long-term implications of the actions taken by Pedroni's families are not fully considered (for example, the impact that the extended use of vouchers would have on a cash-strapped public education system), but, instead, the immediate gain for their children and their education is their primary focus. MS is similar in his rejection of competition as the only driver for his son's success; his belief system makes him know that MJ must find his way in the world by being true to himself, by living on his virtues, and trusting that this singular focus will see him through. Is

this a delusion or a learned response to crisis? Perhaps it is both in equal parts. Will it safeguard MJ from the inevitable threats of his urban world? Perhaps it will, to the same degree that MS believes that his faith has carried him through. Ultimately, it is a very human response, operating from the heart more than from the head. In itself it is an attempt by MS to proclaim his humanity and individual nature. His siblings may have all gone to university and received advanced degrees while living out the pattern that was expected for them. He, on the other hand, has survived for two decades in a foreign land, made more money than he could have made in Honduras, raised a family, and created a business—all as proof of his faith. His own life is his proof of the power of his unique identity.

MS's beliefs go one step further, rejecting attempts to draw false boundaries between people, recognizing that all parents and families have essentially the same goals for their children: happiness and fulfillment. Sustaining trust is extended not only to the larger school community of students and teachers, but also to one's own responsibility for one's actions. MS explained this by saying,

[What] I was saying is that MJ has a lot of . . . because he's growing. He was more like entertainment and other things, and maybe not paid attention very well. I always say the teacher, they doing what they can. They are good. They trying to . . . it's half on them for middle school, [and it] is not easy . . . I help the teacher too, because [it] is important . . . for me. I see that MJ understand a lot of the things there. I tell him, 'You are not going to pass if . . . ' I make him feel like he's the one, is like when you said that he's growing, so he's the one who's going to take decisions. I didn't tell him, 'I can do what I can,' but I tell him, 'There is going to be a point when he's going to do the things.' Sometimes he's



in the school by himself, so I'm not there. He's the one who's going to have the decisions.

It is important to MS that his family understands that success can be achieved in almost any context and that individual determination plays a key role in that success. Unlike the presumptions of perpetual striving and dissatisfaction that underlie neoliberal concepts of competition-based reforms, MS accepts the conditions in which he finds his family and himself and tries to build off of the trusting relationships that have already been established. Is this response purely based in optimism and a belief in the power of metaphysical relationships to determine destiny, or is it an example of fatalism as a product of living in a marginalized position in an oppressive world? It is difficult to ascertain the exact root of MS's sense of trust that controls his worldview, but it is possible that it is a part of his attempt to form an optimistic identity for himself and his family, part of his work to develop a subaltern position of power in his own life, where he is an active agent in creating change, refusing to serve as a powerless subject manipulated by the uncaring world of competition and struggle (Apple & Buras, 2006; Bathina, 2014; Kumashiro, 2006; Zembylas, 2013).

MS's perspective and belief in the power of trust is not unchallenged, however, even in his own family. Throughout the interviews, MS and LR mentioned that they did not always see eye-to-eye on all issues regarding MJ's schooling. MS explained how LR has learned to trust him, saying,

That's why maybe you see me, and I'm a little different. The way that I see the things sometimes. Some people maybe will think I am crazy sometimes. [laughs] No, it's not that, [LR is] opposite, it's hard for her to believe sometime, but she trusts, she like trust me. Because it's hard if she cannot see what I see, it's hard for her to say, 'Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. I don't know what you're talking about.'

Sometime, this about what I'm saying is sometimes hard for someone that people if they cannot see what I can see, but at least, she understand a lot of things that I'm saying because it's like, I know they're working and say, it's about in your mind, consciousness.

LR's connection to the outside world beyond her family and her work is more constrained than that of MS, mainly because of the differences in their ability to speak English. For example, as demonstrated by her tales of traffic conflicts, LR has a lack of trust of African American people in her community whom she does not know well, and she has few opportunities to deepen those relationships. MS works in the larger community, negotiating his own contracts in English and in Spanish with a more diverse population. MS has experienced success in this community through following his own determination, and a part of that determination is built on trust. MS wants his family to understand and operate from a position of shared trust and self-reliance that has served him well over the years. Rather than seeing MS and his family as anonymous immigrants fitting into a tale of how people must strive in a meritocratic society to assimilate towards a middle-class ideal, it is important to see them from a position grounded in critical race theory where the individual's narrative provides us with new insights into how people respond to and negotiate challenging and potentially oppressive situations (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Buras, 2013). The Rodríguez family consists of real people; they are not a case study. Like any people, they are deeply talented, and deeply flawed. They have aspirations, and frustrations, and they make as many good choices as they do poor ones. This is part of the power of using personal narrative to examine critical consciousness: The researcher quickly sees that any consciousness is not merely a pair of binary states, either "off" or "on." Consciousness is a road, a continuum, an evolution. To that end, it

is possible that the experience of participating in this research has become a part of that path of development.

### **Theme III: Belief System**

The third, and final, theme that operates across the interplay of all of the other needs and themes is the belief system that MS holds and the ways that it influences his actions and decisions. His own explanation has a simple eloquence, and he expressed his wish that schools could teach more about the unity of life and spirit, saying,

It's a spirituality thing, we are now in this physical body. I believe just talk a little more about that, about we are more than the body, that does that thing that I wish you know in the schools. That we are like more spirit, that's the main part of we are, because when we know that, we see the life different. Then we know we are one because we all are spirit and the spirit is energy, and the energy is all one. It's like God. God is one. [I wish they would teach this in schools] a little more, not all what I'm saying but, at least, a little more about spirituality, that we are more than the physical body. We are all one. When we believe that, we know we are together and we are starting working [as] one more joined. [It's] not religion, people are confused about religion and spirituality things. Spirituality is what you really are, what we really are. Religion's about other things, about rules. It's different things. Sometimes those rule is for the convenience of some people, but spiritually thing is what we really are.

MS's idea of spiritual unity crosses between groups of people, national identities, generations, and even time itself. While he did not explicitly use this term, one way of describing MS's belief system is captured by the idea of familial karmic inheritance.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix F for an extended quote explaining MS's belief that prior acts by family members can impact an individual's current life conditions.

This concept that the actions and behaviors of family members from across multiple generations can impact one's current conditions finds its roots in Buddhist and Hindu beliefs (Jones, 1995) and has faced theological challenges from traditional Christianity (Mayhall, 2007), which cannot reconcile the belief that prior familial actions can influence one's destiny with the individual suffering of Christ, the Son of a perfect Father, on the cross. Nevertheless, other researchers have looked into the role that the concept of karmic inheritance has played in understanding people's responses to stressful situations. Morgana (2013) has explored how transgenerational psychotherapy has evolved over recent decades as a method of explaining and treating psychological problems that cannot be attributed to immediate biological or emotional causes. Similarly, looking at how Chinese-Australians responded psychologically to cancer treatments, Barlow-Stewart et al. (2006) developed an understanding of the need for genetic counselors to understand the belief system of familial karmic inheritance.

MS remains resolute in his belief that his destiny and that of his family are tightly controlled by the actions and relationships created by past and current generations of family members. This is not to say, however, that he believes destiny is resolute and cannot be rewritten. For MS, the struggle one faces in life is not against other people or economic systems; the struggle is trying to discover what is emotionally and spiritually blocking one's progress. Through realigning oneself with the energies of the Earth and its people by perhaps going on a pilgrimage to a karmic chakra center like Machu Picchu, or by using personal determination to rewrite one's karmic inheritance through accrued effort and improved interpersonal relationships, MS believes that life can be improved and personal fulfillment can be achieved.

To what degree is MS's reliance on his belief system an attempt to explain and address challenging personal situations? Conversely, is it an apologetic that fails to fully understand the impact of the economic, linguistic, and racial oppression of a poor

urban community with little access to high-quality schools? Bowles and Gintis (1976) offered a neo-Marxian analysis of schooling in the capitalist society of the United States and looked for ways that an inequitable school system replicates class divisions and oppression. Viewed from this perspective, one is reminded of Marx's infamous line that "religion is the opium of the people." However, it is worth viewing this phrase in its larger context. Marx (1975) wrote about religion as an inseparable part of the German economic situation he was critiquing, writing,

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo. (p. 4)

Boer (2011) analyzes the complexity of this statement not as a critique of religion or belief systems as a mask to reality, but as an explanation of an inevitable response to suffering. Within the context of Marx's nineteenth century world, opium was a salve for suffering, not simply a delusory blanket of detachment from reality. Religion exists, Boer's explanation of Marx maintains, because of the existence of suffering, and only a utopic abolition of suffering would lead to a world not requiring religion. This is not the world described by free-market neoliberalism, where competition and meritocracy guide the allocation of educational resources. The neoliberal world is by its definition a world where suffering is perpetuated and, by extension, where religion is a necessity.

MS's attempts to explain his life condition through his belief system is a response to the challenges he has faced and the challenges he knows his son will face. By this light, MS's belief system could be seen, by degrees, as both an explanation and an apologetic for suffering, but the point of this research is not to critique the actions or beliefs of the Rodríguez family. Instead, it is an attempt to understand the depth of the practical, emotional, and spiritual response that this family has had in trying to identify high-quality educational choices for its son. The fact that these responses can be linked to a deeply held system of beliefs demonstrates that a family's interactions with the reality of urban education in the United States is more complicated than can be described by a series of measures on an SPF tool, and it demonstrates the resilience required to develop an identity of agency and power in the face of the neoliberal hegemony of common sense that can prevent the creation of new, personalized responses (Bathina, 2014; Gramsci, 1996; Spivak, 1988; Zembylas, 2013). The humanity of the Rodríguez family has been established, if it even needed doing, with all of their beauty of spirit, their not fully realized understanding of what it takes to succeed in this world, their magnanimous and inclusive view of other people, and their sometimes parochial view of what they can demand of institutions like their son's school. Their humanity is actually the greatest challenge they pose to the hegemony of a neoliberal world where all decisions are figured on a ledger sheet of free-market gains and losses. The Rodríguez family have not, and may never, make all of the perfect choices that a neoliberal world demands of them, abandoning a school because of poor test scores, or striving to leave their community because of real or perceived threats. Their persistence and their adaptability serve as the lessons we can learn from them. A competitive, market-driven, neoliberal world is a world built on perpetual dissatisfaction, a constant striving for better, an anxiety that things aren't ever good enough. The Rodríguez family wants success and fulfillment for themselves, and they recognize the hard work that is required, but along the way they

have certain ideals they will not release: sustaining nurturing relationships, building trust, and staying true to their beliefs.

### **Summary of the Findings**

**Which factors contained in the SPF, relative to each other, are of greater importance to these parents?** As outlined in Appendix D, the following items from the OUSD SPF (Montes de la Oca, 2015) were identified as being important factors in determining school quality. Next to each item, the identity (MS, LR, or MJ) who initiated discussion of the item is indicated.

- Number of students learning English who are reclassified as fluent in English (MJ)
- Percentage of students who are chronically absent (MS)
- SBAC proficiency in ELA (MJ)
- SBAC proficiency in Math (MJ)
- Percentage of parents who feel connected to school (MS)

In terms of the final rank-ordered list of the five most important factors, none of the factors from the SPF are included.

**What factors that are of relevance to these parents are missing from the CORE SPF?** The five most important factors for the Rodríguez family, in order, were:

- Attentive security (LR)
- Good teachers (MJ)
- Good relationships between students (MS)
- Safe area (MS)
- Uniforms (MS)

All of these factors were developed by the family, and, while there are intersections with SPF factors (e.g., “safe area” could be seen as having a connection to the SPF factor of “suspension rates”), the more profound connection between these items can be seen in their link to the needs and themes identified during the preceding sections.

**What factors influence these parents’ perceptions of their ability to choose schools for their children based on information presented in SPF?** The themes identified in this research have more impact in determining the Rodríguez family’s perception of their ability to choose schools than other factors of access, socioeconomics, or class. The impact of managing outside relationships and sustaining trust in an unpredictable and sometimes threatening environment, as well as adhering to an overarching belief system to explain one’s current and future condition, seems to have the greatest impact on influencing this family’s perception of whether other schools could be a practical and viable choice.

### **Implications for Practice**

School districts, as well as local and state governments, would be well-served by creating more opportunities to really engage with a diverse set of parents when proposing tools like more complicated SPF as a part of accountability systems. By better understanding the lived experiences and the real needs of these community members, community schools that can serve as hubs for real social change and improvement can be designed and developed collaboratively with students and families. OUSD’s previous and current strategic plans (Oakland Unified School District, 2011, 2015) would be enhanced by trying to be as accountable to the real needs of its families as they are to neoliberal reform efforts and governmentally mandated accountability points. Rather than building a system of quality that responds solely to one or the other perspective, a healthy



blend of approaches would be the best response, considering, for example, the need to develop the climate and culture of a school as seriously as it takes the need for academic accountability. Poor, urban students are learners and need access to the same academic skills as their middle-class peers, but they also have unique linguistic needs that need to be addressed, just as they have to develop a critical spirit tied with resilience to survive in an oppressive and threatening world while their more privileged peers need to learn the limits and moral implications of that privilege.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Clearly, single-ethnographic case studies, as presented here, have practical limitations in terms of their execution and the generalizability of their results. This research has been an attempt to “go deep” with a single family, to understand better their lived experiences and the factors that influence their choices in schools. Hopefully, the voices of the Rodríguez family have been allowed to be heard, and it is clear that they do not see their world exactly as do designers of SPF and accountability frameworks. If anything, this research is a call for the integration of the voices of the community in the process of reforming schools. Accountability has its role in reform efforts, and the real hopes and expectations of real families should hold equal weight in determining the future course for our public school system.

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## APPENDIX A

### Social Justice: A Group Definition<sup>12</sup>

Social Justice is a condition and a dynamic process that ensures the protection of equal access for all humanity to liberties, rights, and opportunities, while focusing especially on protecting these rights of the least advantaged members of society who have been historically the most oppressed.

The term *social justice*, as used in education, includes implications that involve addressing fairness and equity with regard to gender, race, class, nationality, religion, disability, sexual orientation, gender orientation, and gender expression. Social justice in education also includes an emphasis on developing and being active citizens who promote a sociopolitical consciousness and helping students or individuals develop a positive social and cultural identity.

Social justice includes promoting a just society by challenging injustices and valuing diversity. It exists when participants recognize that all people share a common humanity and therefore have a right to equitable treatment, support for their human rights, and a fair allocation of community resources. In creating the conditions for social justice, people are not discriminated against, nor are their welfare and well-being constrained or prejudiced on the basis of gender, sexuality, religion, political affiliations, age, race, belief, disability, location, social class, socioeconomic circumstances, sexual orientation, gender orientation, gender expression, or other characteristic of background or group membership. At its core, social justice is, first, a sense of personal and mutual

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<sup>12</sup> A collaborative work created by Kathryn Mapps, Gigi Patrick, Brandi Patterson, Nikki Pitcher, Dawn River, Pat Saddler, Ron Smith, and Charles Wilson.

responsibility by the masses to protect each individual. Second, it is the ability to believe in the true equality of all of humanity as an inherent element of one's innate soul. In the absence of either or both of the former conditions, it is a, most simply, a belief system that keeps us whole and united as humanity.

The act of working towards social justice is a continuous effort rooted in the beliefs and actions of individuals to resist and change hegemonic institutional structures by reclaiming or seizing and sustaining the human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in all dimensions of human interactions and transactions. Social justice is perpetuated by allowing individuals to share the stories of their existence and oppression without the effects of institutional filtering, editing, or commentary. Social justice requires the construction of a just system that gives a voice to those who have been or are wronged, while not allowing past or current injustices to go without being questioned and remedied. Social justice is a continual process as much as it is a state of being.

## **APPENDIX B**

Letter of Introduction and Consent Form

**California State University East Bay**

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Research Title: A Critical Analysis of How Parents in Low-Performing, Low-Income Schools Define School Quality Relative to School Performance Frameworks

### **PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND**

The purpose of this research study is to understand how parents in low-performing, low-income schools define the quality of their children's schools and how they use or don't use information from school-performance frameworks provided by the school district.

The researcher, Charles Wilson, is a graduate student at California State University East Bay who is conducting research for a doctoral dissertation.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you were identified by the principal at your child's school as a parent who has shown interest in the quality of your child's schooling.

### **PROCEDURES**

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- You will be interviewed for three or four times for approximately 60–90 minutes per session about how you define the quality of a school.

- The interview will be audiotaped to ensure accuracy in reporting your statements.
- The interview will take place at times and locations convenient to you.
- The researcher may contact you later to clarify your interview answers for approximately 15 to 45 minutes.
- The total time commitment will be between three and five hours.

### **RISKS**

There is a risk of loss of privacy. However, no names or identities will be used in any published reports of the research. Only the researcher will have access to the research data. Also, there is a risk of discomfort or anxiety due to the nature of the questions asked; however, the participant can answer only those questions he/she chooses to answer and can stop participation in the research at any time.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The research data will be kept in a secure location on a password-protected computer, and only the researcher will have access to the data. At the conclusion of the study, all identifying information will be removed, and the data will be kept in a locked cabinet in the office of the researcher. Audiotapes or videotapes will be destroyed at the end of the study.

### **DIRECT BENEFITS**

Benefits for you may include the opportunity to discuss how you can support your child, as well as other parents and other children in your community, in advocating for specific features of your school experience that are important to you.

**COSTS**

There will be no cost to you for participating in this research.

**COMPENSATION**

Compensation for participating in this research will be \$50.00.

**QUESTIONS**

If you have any further questions about the study, you may contact the researcher by e-mail at [REDACTED].

Questions about your rights as a study participant, or comments or complaints about the study, may also be addressed to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at (510) 885-4212.

**CONSENT**

You have been given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY.** You are free to decline to participate in this research study, or to withdraw your participation at any point, without penalty. Your decision whether or not to participate in this research study will have no influence on your present or future status at California State University East Bay.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Research Participant

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher

## APPENDIX C

Sample questions using an ethnographic case study framework proposed by Patton (1990):

- **Behavior or experience questions that describe a person's actions:**
  - Tell me about a time when you spoke to a person at your child's school about his/her experience in school.
  - Tell me about how you came to choose TBD school for your child? What did you do to get your child into this school?
  - Look at some of the categories described on the OUSD School Performance Framework. I'm going to describe each of these, and I'd like you to tell me about a time when you've experienced each at your child's school.
  
- **Opinion or value questions that describe a person's beliefs or perspectives:**
  - When you selected TBD school for your child, what were the most important things you thought about when making that selection?
  - If you had to name the five or six most important qualities or features about a school for you, what would they be? Why?
  - Which one of these features or qualities would be the most important? Why?
  - Which one would be next in importance? Why?
  - Look at some of the categories described on the OUSD School Performance Framework. Some of these are the same as things you've already described and others are different from what you described. Tell me if you think the different ones are important or not and why you think that.

- **Feeling questions that get at a person's sentiments or emotions:**
  - What is it about your child's school that makes you feel the most comfortable or happy? Why?
  - What is it about your child's school that makes you feel the most upset or sad? Why?
  - Look at some of the categories described on the OUSD School Performance Framework. I'm going to describe each of these, and I'd like you to tell me how you feel when you see a lot of or not a lot of this quality at a school.
  
- **Knowledge questions that ask about the information held or believed by a person:**
  - What do you think most people don't know or understand about your child's school?
  - What's one secret that you wish more people knew about?
  - If you could sit down with the superintendent of schools for OUSD, what would you want him to know about you and your child? What do you think that he needs to know about the other parents and children at your child's school?
  
- **Sensory questions that get at the physical sensations experienced by a person in a situation:**
  - When you visit your child's school, what do you see? What are some things you hear? What are some things that you can hear?
  
- **Background questions that describe the familial and community experiences and history of a person:**
  - When you were a child, what kind of school did you go to? Tell me everything you can remember about it.



- How did your family select your own school? What were your parents' opinions or feelings about your school?
- Look at some of the categories described on the OUSD School Performance Framework. I'm going to describe each of these, and I'd like you to tell me about a time when you experienced each of these at your school when you were a child.

## APPENDIX D

### Stage 1

This list contains items named by participants in Stage 1 of rank voting process (Schwarz and Associates, 2016). Underlined items were selected by participants to be included in Stage 2 of rank order voting process.

- Safe Area
- Good Teachers
- Past Reviews by Parents
- Good Relationships between Students
- Uniforms
- Organization of Workers
- Attentive Security
- Location near House

This list contains the school quality areas measured on the OUSD SPF presented to participants in Stage 1 of rank order voting process (Montes de la Oca, 2015). Underlined items were selected by participants to be included in Stage 2 of rank order voting process.

- The percentage of students who are proficient on the state test of English Language Arts / El porcentaje de estudiantes que son competentes en el examen estatal de artes del idioma inglés
- The percentage of students who are proficient on the state test of Mathematics / El porcentaje de estudiantes que son competentes en el examen estatal de matemáticas

- The percentage of students who are reading at grade level / El porcentaje de estudiantes que están leyendo a nivel de grado
- The percentage of eight grade students who are ready for high school (GPA  $\geq$  2.5 / No suspensions / No D's or F's / Attendance  $\geq$  96%) / El porcentaje de estudiantes de 8º grado que están listos para la escuela secundaria (GPA  $\geq$  2,5 / No hay suspensiones / sin D's o F de / Asistencia  $\geq$  96%)
- The percentage of students who are chronically absent ( $\geq$  90%) / El porcentaje de estudiantes que están crónicamente ausentes ( $\geq$  90%)
- The number of students learning English who are reclassified as fluent in English / El número de estudiantes que están aprendiendo Inglés que se reclasifica como fluidez en Inglés
- The percentage of students who feel “connected” to the school / El porcentaje de estudiantes que se sienten “conectados” a la escuela (see list of specific questions for this item below)
- The percentage of parents who feel “connected” to the school / El porcentaje de padres que se sienten “conectados” a la escuela (see list of specific questions for this item below)
- The percentage of staff members who feel “connected” to the school / El porcentaje de miembros del personal que se sienten “conectados” a la escuela (see list of specific questions for this item below)
- The percentage of students who report having a “growth mindset” / el porcentaje de estudiantes que reportan tener una “mentalidad de crecimiento” (see list of specific questions for this item below)

This list contains Climate and Culture survey questions and statements from California Healthy Kids (CHKS) survey measured on the OUSD SPF (California Healthy Kids Survey, 2016; Montes de la Oca, 2015)

### **Questions for students / Preguntas para los estudiantes**

- Do you feel close to people at school? / ¿Se siente cerca de la gente en la escuela?
- Are you happy to be at this school? / ¿Estás contento de estar en esta escuela?
- Do you feel like you are part of this school? / ¿Se siente como si fueras parte de esta escuela?
- Do teachers treat students fairly at school? / ¿Los profesores tratan a los estudiantes bastante en la escuela?
- Do you feel safe at school? / ¿Se siente seguro en la escuela?

### **Statements for parents / Declaraciones para los padres**

- I feel welcome to participate at this school. / Me siento bienvenido a participar en esta escuela.
- School staff treats me with respect. / El personal escolar me trata con respeto.
- School staff takes my concerns seriously. / El personal escolar toma mis preocupaciones en serio.
- School staff welcomes my suggestions. / Personal de la escuela da la bienvenida a mis sugerencias.
- School staff responds to my needs in a timely manner. / El personal escolar responde a mis necesidades de manera oportuna.
- School staff is helpful. / El personal escolar es útil.
- My child's background is valued at this school. / Fondo de mi hijo está valorado en esta escuela.

### **Questions for staff / Preguntas para el personal escolar**

- How many adults at this school have close professional relationships with each other? / ¿Cuántos adultos en esta escuela tienen estrechas relaciones profesionales con los demás?
- How many adults at this school support and treat each other with respect? / ¿Cuántos adultos en este apoyo escolar y tratar a los demás con respeto?
- How many adults at this school feel a responsibility to improve this school? / ¿Cuántos adultos en esta escuela se sienten la responsabilidad de mejorar esta escuela?
- This school is a supportive and inviting place for staff to work. / Esta escuela es un lugar de apoyo y acogedor para el personal trabaje.
- This school promotes trust and collegiality among staff. / Esta escuela promueve la confianza y cooperación entre el personal.
- This school promotes personnel participation in decision-making that affects school practices and policies. / Esta escuela promueve la participación del personal en la toma de decisiones que afectan a las prácticas y políticas de la escuela.

### **Growth mindset statements for students / Declaraciones mentalidad de crecimiento para los estudiantes**

- My intelligence is something that I can't change very much. / Mi inteligencia es algo que no puedo cambiar mucho.
- Challenging myself won't make me any smarter. / Desafiando mismo no me hará más inteligente.
- There are some things I am not capable of learning. / Hay algunas cosas que no soy capaz de aprender.

- If I am not naturally smart in a subject, I will never do well in it. / Si no soy inteligente, naturalmente en un sujeto, que nunca va a hacer bien en ella.

### Stage 2

This list contains items named by participants in Stage 2 of rank voting process (Schwartz and Associates, 2016). Ten items were selected by family and listed by order selected, along with a notation of which participant selected the item (MS / LR / MJ) and whether the item was created by participants (NEW) in Stage 1 or part of existing SPF elements (SPF).

- Good teachers (MJ) (New)
- Attentive security (LR) (NEW)
- Number of students learning English who are reclassified as fluent in English (MJ) (SPF)
- Uniforms (LR) (New)
- Percentage of students who are chronically absent (MS) (SPF)
- SBAC proficiency in ELA (MJ) (SPF)
- SBAC proficiency in math (MJ) (SPF)
- Safe area (MS) (New)
- Good relationships between students (LR) (New)
- Percentage of parents who feel connected to school (MS) (SPF)

### Stage 3

This list contains items selected by participants in Stage 3 of rank voting process (Schwartz and Associates, 2016). There were 10 items selected by family and listed by order selected, along with a notation of which participant (MS / LR / MJ) selected the item to be removed (OUT), included (IN), or combined (COMBO) and whether the item was created by participants (NEW) or part of existing SPF elements (SPF).

**In and out by order completed:**

- Combine SBAC tests in one (MS) (SPF) (COMBO)
- Growth mindset (IN) added to make 10 after SBAC combo (MS) (SPF for SPF)
- Uniforms replaced (OUT) by past reviews by parents (IN) (MJ) (NEW for NEW)
- Past reviews replaced (OUT) by uniforms (IN) (LR) (NEW for NEW)
- English fluency replaced (OUT) by past reviews by parents (IN) (MS) (NEW for SPF)

**Final list of top 10 qualities selected after in / out activity (no particular order):**

- SBAC test performance (SPF)
- Growth mindset among students (SPF)
- Uniforms (NEW)
- Past reviews by parents (NEW)
- Good teachers (NEW)
- Attentive security (NEW)
- Percentage of students who are chronically absent (SPF)
- Safe area (NEW)
- Good relationships between students (NEW)
- Percentage of parents who feel connected to the school (SPF)

**Top five qualities by order of importance and by identity of family member who made selection:**

- Attentive security (LR)
- Good teachers (MJ)
- Good relationships between students (MS)

- Safe area (MS)
- Uniforms (MS)



## APPENDIX E

## List of Codes Used during Analysis of Interview Transcripts and Audio

<b>Group 1:</b>	<b>Group 2: community</b>	<b>Group 3: home and family influences</b>	<b>Group 4: school qualities</b>	<b>Group 5: belief systems</b>
CW Turn	crime	family failure	attendance	forgiveness
LR Turn	current community	family health	class diversity	growth mindset
MJ Turn	negative qualities of community	family poverty	health	holism
MS Turn	original community	family responsibility	home language support	home control of school quality
	parent experiences	family schedule	interesting	independence
	positive qualities of community	family structure	peer relationships	individual capability
	punishment as response to failure	family success	private schools	karmic inheritance
	resources in community	home learning opportunities	race	metaphysics
	safety in community		racial diversity	optimism
			rigor	responsibility
			safety	school as locus of nurturing relationships
			school convenience	school as norming force
			school corporal punishment	school as source for future economic opportunities
			school discipline	secrets
			school distance	shared responsibility
			school finances	theories of causality
			school impact of student behavior	trust
			school nutrition	

Group 1:	Group 2: community	Group 3: home and family influences	Group 4: school qualities	Group 5: belief systems
			school organization	
			school parent and staff relationships	
			school response to achievement	
			school student and staff relationships	
			school uniforms	
			staff dedication	
			staff quality	

Top 15 Qualities Based on Coding Tied to Top 10 Qualities  
from Stage 2 of Ranked-Choice Voting Activity

Top 15 qualities based on coding frequency	Top 10 qualities from Stage 2 of ranked- choice voting activity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student and staff relationships = 77</li> <li>• Shared responsibility = 67</li> <li>• Student behavior = 60</li> <li>• Parent and staff relationships = 49</li> <li>• Response to achievement = 25</li> <li>• Staff quality = 40</li> <li>• Peer relationships = 25</li> <li>• School convenience = 24</li> <li>• Trust = 74</li> <li>• Discipline = 60</li> <li>• Home control of school quality = 58</li> <li>• Safety in community = 54</li> <li>• Staff dedication = 43</li> <li>• School distance = 40</li> <li>• School as locus of nurturing relationships = 26</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer Reviews (N) K / B / D / I / O</li> <li>• HSAM E / F / K</li> <li>• <u>Good Teachers (N) 2</u> A / D / F / I / M / O</li> <li>• Chronic Absenteeism A / B / C / E / G / H / L / N / O</li> <li>• <u>Uniforms (N) 5</u> C / I / J / L / O</li> <li>• <u>Attentive Security (N) 1</u> A / C / F / G / I / J / L / O</li> <li>• Parent Feelings of Connection B / D / I / K / O</li> <li>• <u>Student-Peer Relationships (N) 3</u> C / G / I / J / L / O</li> <li>• Student Growth Mindset A / B / E / G / I / L / M</li> <li>• <u>Safe Area (N) 4</u> C / H / I / J / L / N / O</li> </ul>

## APPENDIX F

Extended Quote from MS that Could Serve as Evidence  
in His Belief in Familial Karmic Inheritance

MS: I believe about these kinds of things, about problems that we have. Emotional problems and that it keeps happening. I was talking about that with MJ last night because I've been watching some videos of some people that get healed of cancer. They have cancer because they have problem from their grandparents, or their parents. The parent of the grandfather, grandparents were doing habits, or things and we are kind of like a pain for that sometimes because we do not correct that. We need to say, 'We're going to stop this problems,' and there's some kind of word that you can say, and then the people get healed. The cancer get healed. It's happening now. I saw those videos in the Internet, it's like something magic. He said because we are kind of bringing all those problems. It caused that we get sick, because we repeat the things, the ideas that my father said and we said, 'Oh, because my father said, it's because my mother said, I want to do it too.' My kid doing that, we're all going to get sick. We need to stop on there and follow some things, some ways that we've been doing things like change some other stuff, sometimes what we eat. Sometimes change things like we think. When some people go to him and say to this guy and he asks them about their father, their mother, their grandfather, things happening about your genealogic tree. He is smart enough, he already knows about that. He said, 'What you have now, it have to be something with your grandmother. It's a secret that she didn't tell you about you. Go with her and ask her something about this and that.' Then, when they go and ask her, and they talk about that, and they get healed. He said, 'Something the mind, what is happening now is about

emotional problems, biological.' I believe in that. It's in my personal belief. I was telling MJ last night because that's too much. It's like a problem. I believe that. I believe the last time that happened, because the last time we did some things, and I have faith, I believe in that we can unblock some things that keep off like repeating thing, I believe . . . That could be related with their parents, what happenings and think over his grandmother, grandfather. I believe part of that it have to be like that. Sometimes we have unblocked things by saying things, by reading one thing and say, 'Well, I will unblock all my things that are grabbing from my father, and my mother, my grandfather, grandmother.' When people say that with faith, it's a miracle, they get healed. Sometime if you go tell your father, 'Father, forgive me for this or for that.' If he tell you to forgive him too, when we say that word, forgive me, a lot of people get healed. It's very important you say, 'Forgive me.' I've been watching a lot of videos, not only one person is giving that new technique. Is a lot of people talking about that now. Then it's very important to forgive. When something happen with like. They said, 'Go with your father, he have a secret that he need to tell you about when you were about to get born. He had problems with his wife, with your mother and they don't want to tell you one thing. Go talk to them about this.' They go and talk to them, and they said, 'Who told you that?' The person said, 'Well, she was in therapy and then...' Just by talking about the problem, he saw the sick, the whatever you have. The people is curing the cancer, because the cancer have the . . . this mainly emotional and biological, that's what they said. When we find out why, they can tell, 'Oh is this problem this.' The women sometime they have a cancer in the, what do you call it, cancer, that. What happens mainly, because the couple is like, they have problem with them. Sometimes what he says, 'Well, you better leave him, or you want to die? If you want to stay with him, you want to die. You need to be separated, because you cannot be. You could have big problems, the really bad problem.' Some people want to be together, even if they have a big problem. What they said is, 'Do you want to go live

another place, you too?' Just by that, they get healed. No more cancer, disappear. They find another person, another couple. They get married, and they happy, is incredible now. I believe in . . . I was talking to my son last night, and [he] don't understand me, what I was telling . . . There's a lot of people are talking about that around the whole world, a lot of people. I don't exactly know, but I know is because he's been repeating that too many times. I think I told him he need to do that like say something with faith that . . .