

Reacting Against Exclusion: Potential School Leavers Speaking Out

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Seventeen years after Fine's landmark study (1991), *Framing Dropouts*, this study of potential school leavers finds Latinos and African Americans in an urban high school continuing to live complex lives that collide with school policies. This eight-year, ethnographic study in an urban Texas school followed three-year ninth grade students caught in a push-out trap that brought high test scores to the school and a 60% dropout rate (McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, Vasquez-Heilig, 2008). In 2004, the study adds a four-month student research project on dropouts by two junior English classes that facilitated the founding of a charter school for returning school leavers. Data was drawn from classroom observations and interviews with students, teachers, and parents. Field notes and transcribed audiotapes of the classroom observations and interviews were combined into thick records. Analysis of the iterative acts in this urban high school revealed the power that high-stakes testing and NCLB have over schools and the control through which the nation, state, city, district and school administrations attempt to manipulate democratic action within the school and its community.

This paper chronicles the intersection of the power of the accountability system, the control of the district, school administration and school leaders, and the silencing of school leavers and potential school leavers. As this researcher was evaluating the work of an urban high school, DHS, (pseudonyms are used throughout this paper) for a major project on educational reform, she realized that over half of the student body was remaining in the 9th grade even as the school's high-stakes testing scores caused it to become a Recognized School making Exemplary Progress in its district. DHS was also one of the schools that reported 0% dropouts during 2002. The study documents the price the school paid with a 60% unreported dropout rate. This was an urban high school where three-year ninth graders became the norm even as its high stakes test scores brought the school an exemplary rating. When discrepancy of dropout reporting in Texas made national news, the principal asked this researcher's help in publicizing the story of the students at this minority urban high school, describing what made staying in school difficult for these students. It is this story of the exclusion of potential and actual school leavers because of the intersection of their school lives with their street lives that follows the initial accountability system intersection with student lives. This is 17 years after Fine's (1991) landmark study told a similar tale of students. The students and dropouts in this study were "framed" by the power of a system that spawned *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), a law that continues to leave behind the very youth it had set out to save.

Context and Background

Positioned in the margins of its Texas city, its community, and its school district DHS resides on the north-eastern quadrant where two major freeways and a major truck route delineate the racial and cultural divides that separate the schools. Whether deliberate or the product of technical planning, the result is tiny, isolated neighborhoods separated by heavy truck traffic, huge factories, monolithic warehouses, gravel service roads, open draining ditches, and huge chain link fences -- around schoolyards, around some homes, around industrial loading docks, around huge, beige, essentially anonymous industrial buildings. A newspaper report describes the area as “a cityscape more hospitable to industry than humanity; yet people live in the seams of the stevedoring companies and trucking firms.”

A DHS Latino student, who had moved from DHS's immediate area to a more hospitable neighborhood, wrote about the change in a paper entitled “A Dream.” This soft-spoken, junior student had passed the original draft of this paper to this researcher as an exemplar of his writing.

I used to live in a neighborhood where I would always hear sirens like a constant cry for attention from a child at night. A person was robbed daily. ... Every once in a while someone would be shot and sometimes killed. My neighbors said, 'It is a place where the sun will not shine.' ... I am very fortunate that I was able to leave my old neighborhood for a new neighborhood near a park where birds sing. (Impressions, 2001)

(The description is ironic because a casual drive through the neighborhood surrounding DHS shows 1950 homes reminiscent of the *Leave it to Beaver* and *Ozzie and Harriet* television-situation-comedy homes.) Latino parents in the community echoed this young man's dream. Families insisted “an education is the only way out of here.” One father explains the community's determination. “What they have gone through has made them determined to get out of their situation. We've always been poor, and we've always been afraid of getting more poor.” The background of this confluence of poverty and marginalization heightens the interplay of the accountability system and the loss of students in this high school.

Methodology

The case study of this urban Texas school, DHS, began as a major project on educational reform. It was during the study of the small learning communities (SLCs) of the high school that its intersection with the accountability system was discovered. In 2004, the principal requested this researcher, two of her university students, and the students of two junior English classes undertake a study to understand the dropout and her difficulties. A small team of these students presented the results of their findings to the superintendent and the mayor's wife at a larger city-wide dropout conference. The students retold their stories in a documentary for which a local television station won an Emmy award.

Participants

During the 8 years of this study (1998-2007), the student population has decreased from 1500 to 933 because of low Annual Yearly Progress (AYPs) under NCLB. The ethnic profile of the student population has shown a growth in its Latinos (58% to 73%) and a decline in African Americans (33% to 23%) and a decline in White students (8% to 4%). During that same period, the ethnic profile of the teachers has not reflected a similar shift. The percentage of White teachers (43% - 41%) has remained constant; the percentage of African American teachers (47% - 43%) has declined while the Latino average has increased slightly (8.4% - 10%).

Procedures

The statistical data sources include standardized test scores, attendance, discipline, dropout, and graduation rates. A strong addition was a longitudinal dataset of 271,000 students in the district of this urban school that dated from 1995–2002. This dataset allowed for descriptive analyses that tracked individual grade-to-grade progression for 1996, 1997, and 1998 9th grade cohorts of students and whether some students graduated. The data set also showed the effects of grade retention on high school progression (McNeil et al., 2008).

Ethnographic data consists of classroom observations, faculty and parent meeting observations, key documents descriptive of the reform, interviews with students, teachers, administrators, and consultants. Field notes and transcribed audiotapes of the observations and interviews were combined into thick records with key documents for analysis.

The first three stages of Carspecken's (1996) critical ethnographic methodology emphasized hermeneutic-reconstructive analysis and the fourth stage used systems analysis. Stage one involved data collection through observation of classroom work and transcription of discussion, student interviews of school leavers, other students, teachers, parents, and administrators. In stage two and three analysis of this data began with the coding of major themes and continued with reconstructive analysis of the data that helps make patterns of performative acts clear. Interviews by this researcher with students and school leavers, the core group of students and the university researchers served as member checks on the developing findings. The last two stages helped discover how routine social actions form and reproduce system relations. In these stages the researcher moves from the hermeneutic/insider position to the third person outsider role. The addition of the statistical district cohort study following three groups facilitated this taking of the outsider role and the realization of system relations in stage four of Carspecken's methodology. In stage five, the micro findings of the first stages are explained through sociological theory.

Intersection of the Accountability System, the Small Learning Communities, and the Loss of Students

This section of the paper traces the workings of the accountability system on both the students and the structure of DHS. The ideology of “*Good Intentions*” that Fine uncovered as she “reframed” her research on dropouts permeates the words of the school administrator and teachers in this segment. The state of Texas, the cities, the school districts were full of good intentions as they sought to gain recognition for impressive gains in high test scores. Their attention was deflected away from the student losses caused by the policy. It was with well-meaning intentions that school board members, central office administration, school administrators, and school faculty implemented a state policy that facilitated the loss of 60% of the African American students, 75% of Latino students, and 80% of English Language Learners (ELL) students. During the study of the district during this period, 1995-2002, there was an overall graduation rate of only 33 % (McNeil et al., 2008). DHS and its district directed their actions “toward well-meaning compliance” with a state accountability system while the school and the district were unintentionally pushing many of its students out of high school.

In 1995, as DHS was restructuring the school into four small learning communities (SLCs) meant to increase personalization and student achievement, the school district was simultaneously implementing reforms to encourage its schools to make strong progress on standardized test scores. One of the school board members during this period verbalized a commonly held theory regarding what the accountability system would do for schools: It would raise teacher capacity and result in the removal of poor teachers.

The test was able to show the teachers, “Look, your fourth-period algebra class is not getting it. Do something.” When that principal was able to move some of these people, or encourage them to retire, or maybe they saw that, you know, the fire was getting hot and decided to leave, and then the math scores improved.

Not only would classroom instruction improve, but it was a mechanism by which inadequate teachers would realize that they were not meeting expectations. The school board and the superintendent were also committed to school progress in improving test scores as a way to improve classroom instruction. As the school board member explained,

In the district’s evaluation system, you have to measure progress. In the standardized test, you don’t have to measure school progress. So some of the schools that were high performing they said, “We don’t have anything to do. We’re already good. So all we have to do is just kind of maintain.” But the district’s system measures progress, and that’s where those schools come in and work at improving their own scores.

DHS was not one of the high performing high schools on the standardized tests. The principal was encouraged by the central administration to use this legal loophole, a waiver that permitted principals to alter the grade-to-grade promotion rules. As McNeil, 2005, explained, a school that the state approved for a waiver could hold back as a 9th grader any student who had failed even one semester or a core 9th grade course (English, math, science, social studies), regardless of the number of credits successfully passed. This excluded the students from the administration of the 10th grade TAAS test, the test on which the school ratings, and the principal's job security, were based.

The principal and teachers in the school knew that it was unethical to invoke the waiver. The principal lamented in an interview, "Ethically, I think it's wrong. But if I'm going to lose my job if my scores don't go up, do I roll over and forget it?" The administrator and the teacher who had started the SLCs in the school a few years earlier felt "like pioneers." Yet they were in the bifurcated position of being true to the personalization of the environment for their students in the SLCs and complying with the demands of the accountability system. The teacher who was the driving spirit of the SLCs offers adds to the duplicity that is characteristic of this ideology of good intentions,

All the schools had it. In fact, we were one of the last schools to accept the waiver because philosophically we thought [to do so] would be cheating. We were testing everybody. We felt we had no choice but to move to that waiver in order to save face and get our scores up.

With the help of the waiver, DHS's accountability rating finally moved from "acceptable with acceptable progress" to "recognized with exemplary progress." This jump earned the school an exemplary progress rating on the district's accountability matrix and another star on the marquee in the front of the school. Scores on standardized tests rose substantially for the school years 1999–2002. Upon the adoption of the waiver, students were required to pass of 4 core subjects (English, social studies, math, science) in 9th grade. The students were retained in 9th grade until all of these courses were mastered. Fine (1991) nails the position of the state, district, and school, in the implementation of this retention policy: "Retention policies institutionalize unequal educational outcomes and have gained enormous, if ironic, popularity in the movement toward "educational excellence" (p. 82),

Dissolution of the small learning communities

The unequal educational opportunities for students at DHS began with the demise of the SLCs with its career themes of engineering and industrial technology, government and public service, environment and technology, and business and commerce. To stave off the problem of the 9th grade glut in 2001, a 9th grade track with no repeating freshmen was put in place. When the freshman SLC had only slightly more than 50% passing on to 10th grade, this special SLC was expanded to include the passing 9th graders plus new 9th graders into a 9th–10th community. However, these small learning communities could not stop the 50% retention rate that was established with the waiver policy. The creation of the 9th grade SLC and then the 9th/10th grade

SLC effectively ended the experiment in career small learning communities. The remaining communities were renamed Track Three and Track Four. Track Four became the dumping ground for the retained 9th graders.

SLC Structural Change

1994-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002
Magnet: International Studies	Magnet: International Studies	Magnet: International Studies
Engineering & Industrial Technology	9th Grade	9th-10th
Governmental & Public Service		
Environmental & Technology	Track Three	Track Three
Business & Commerce	Track Four	Track Four (Dropbacks)

Figure 1. Dissolution of small learning communities

Dropbacks

The retained 9th graders were now called “dropbacks” and their repeating classes were “dropback classes.” Some of their teachers were derisively called “dropback teachers,” and their treatment by consultants and teachers in other SLCs was negative. This naming of students, teachers, and classes replicated what Anagnostopoulos (2006) found in Chicago when 9th graders were retained for not passing the state’s high-stakes test. Just as the students in the Anagnostopolous study had their identities set by their position in school, so these students and teachers knew and felt their positions as “dropbacks.” With no strong academic peers, these repeating 9th graders responded to their teachers by coming to class without books, writing instruments, or assignments. Verbal responses were jokes or sarcastic asides. This climate of failure was exacerbated by an us-versus-them standoff between students and teachers. The teachers saw the students as unmotivated, and the students saw the teachers as uncaring.

Two students who had dropped out and returned to DHS to attend a special dropout recovery program described their time of repeating the same classes over again. The first student, who remained in 9th grade for three years, explained that he was repeating courses he had passed because of his continued freshman status.

Well, that last two years that I was in ninth grade there were finally classes that I passed and got credit for. But they would put me in the same classes again, so then they would catch that later in the year, which they couldn't do nothing about it, you know.

The second student spoke specifically about his difficulty with reassignment to Algebra class as a second year freshman.

Oh, yeah, they had me taking Algebra forever. I passed the first year, so in the second year I just decided not to go. I tried to get it [course schedule] fixed, but they wouldn't fix it. So after the third week trying to get it fixed, I just stopped going.

A repeating 9th grade student that this researcher (2003) shadowed between 1999 and 2001 showed the negative effects that labeling and positioning in school can have on a student's identity and his ability to master his work. This three-year freshman was unable to pass Algebra I until the summer after his *third freshman year*. After his third year of failure, the 9th grader said, *"I'm failing algebra. I failed algebra three times. I'm terrible at it. I don't understand one thing."* The analysis of McNeil et al. (2008) verifies the status of these students with the high retention rate for 7 district high schools from 1999–2002. DHS is School #2 in Figure 1 below

9th Grade Retention

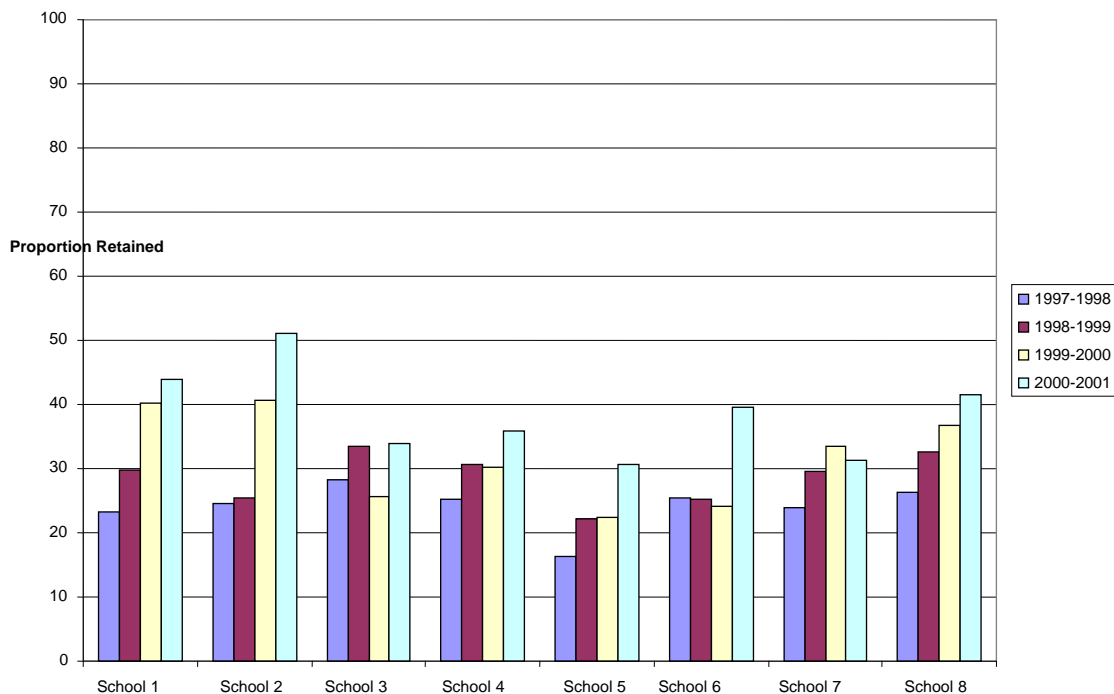


Figure 2. Retention in 9th grade: Seven schools in district (McNeil, 2008)

In this figure, the retention rates of DHS grow from 25% in 1997–1998, prior to the invocation of the waiver, to over 50% in 2001. The bars for DHS, School 2, document the increase in student retention. Additionally, the principal admitted that these minority students, who were repeating 9th grade two and three times “were defeated” and “dropped out.” McNeil et al. (2008) compare the dropout rates in Figure 2 below where DHS is again #2 among the 8 district schools chronicled.

Withdrawal from High School

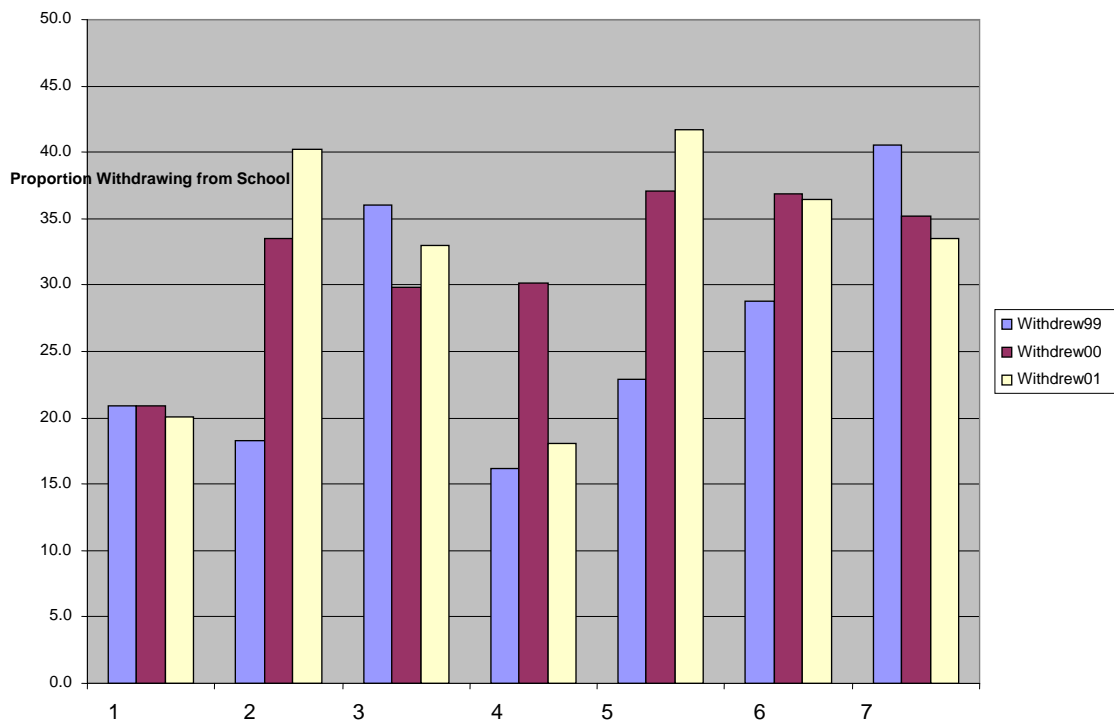


Figure 3. Withdrawal from high school: Seven schools in district (McNeil, 2008)

Notice that DHS shows a spike in withdrawal rates as a 33% rate in 2001 grows sharply to 40% in 2002. The underside of the accountability system can be understood as the loss of minority students intensified. Ironically, DHS reported no dropouts when 40% were withdrawing from school. This discrepancy was revealed to the nation with similar reports in other high schools in the state. The ideology of “*Good Intentions*” that Fine uncovered as she “reframed” her study with the realization that the schools are not serving “public interests” was paramount. The good intentions of the school, the district, the state, the nation were served as student test scores increased, but the hegemony of the invocation of the waiver policy caused student dropout rates to swell to 60% as three cohorts of 271,000 students in an urban district were traced from 1995-2002 (McNeil et al., 2008). Attempts at real school improvement in SLCs at this school were less likely to be rewarded and sustained than those practices which resulted in higher

test scores and corresponding high dropout rates among its students. In this nation, this state, this urban district, reforms which require time and resources were discarded in favor of raising school scores.

When the most powerful, most dominant, and most pervasive policy is an accountability system that ranks schools on the basis of student test scores, effective measures taken toward real structural reform are thwarted. Pressure to produce indicators can lead to school practices which subordinate educational quality and students' progress toward graduation in favor of the production of test scores. When the leadership and faculty jobs are riding on student test scores, good intentions give way to student loss. The DHS story shows how dropping out is, in many cases, a result of the accountability system when it is working as it was designed. The waiver that produced such high 9th grade retention rates and blocked 60% of the students from graduating is now normalized into the accountability system as a customary and expected practice. Is the public interest being served?

Student Research

In the fall of 2003, when the principal turned to me and one of the senior English teachers with a request, "*Why don't we get a group of these kids together and really dig into dropouts.*" Then she asked me specifically, "*Would you help me put together that presentation? Where they (the students) really speak? Would you and some of your university students help me with that?*" Believing this was a valuable project, I agreed.

It was an important request because this urban city and its high schools had received national attention for underreporting their dropout rate. This principal and the teachers at this marginal school wanted to tell the stories behind the numbers of dropouts and to give voice to the students who knew these stories. As Jones and Yonezawa (2007) contend, here was an opportunity, "to involve students as producers of the process and not merely as objects of data collection." (p.326)

Two university students from my fall semester education class joined me in leading the team of researchers that consisted of a high school teacher and two junior English classes with 30 students each. By the end of the project, three students from the junior English classes and three seniors from a legislative project along with the English teacher and the university students comprised the team that worked after school hours to ready the research results for a presentation at a major conference in the city. As noted above in the methodology, the high school students reviewed current dropout literature in small groups during stage one of the process. In the second stage, the students moved into the field to interview students, student leavers, parents, teachers, and administrators. In the third stage, the students developed presentations and individual papers in new small groups based on themes found in the interviews and in the school district's research on dropouts. In the fourth stage, a core group of interested students from the large group met after school to develop the final presentation. In the final stage, the students presented their findings to the district superintendent and the mayor's wife in a city-wide dropout conference. An Emmy award

winning documentary of their work was made by a local television station and was shown in prime time.

Transformation during the initial discussions and literature review

Before we began a literature review on school leavers with the students, we formed small groups in each class with the teacher and the two university students serving with me as group leaders. With time, two senior girls, Dora and Elena, moved into group leader positions. To initiate small group discussion and relate the study to the lives of the students we asked three questions, “*Why do you think kids drop out of school? Do you know anyone who has dropped out? If so, why did they drop out?*” The response was “*They don’t care about school. They’re lazy.*” And the more sophisticated version, “*They’re not motivated.*” Even if the students admitted that they had brothers and sisters who had dropped out of school, they would say their siblings didn’t “*care about school.*” There was a false bravado in their voices as the students discussed the “failures” of their friends, siblings, and parents. The sounds of shame introduced the power of exclusion as these students described their own family members as “*unmotivated.*”

The term, “dropout,” carries a negative connotation that exacerbates the concept of “failure” and continues the exclusionary process. If we use meaning fields from Carspecken’s (1996) reconstructive analysis, we can begin to view the tacit, intersubjective (from the point of view of the speaker) meanings of “*They don’t care about school.*” Example: “*They had trouble passing in school.*” AND/OR “*They didn’t have any meaningful experiences in school.*” AND/OR “*School did not value the experiences these students brought from their out-of-school lives.*” These meanings began to surface as the students read the literature on school leavers and related that literature to their own experiences.

My initial feelings during this early discussion was surprise that these students would be so critical of dropouts. Fine’s fears were mine,

As a culture we need to worry at lot about the adolescents who are being tossed out of public school. But we also need to worry about the racial, cultural, and class-based anesthetizing performed on those students who constitute the “academic successes” of low-income urban schools (p. 137).

The effects of silencing that Fine perceived in CHS showed themselves at DHS,

... many youths themselves viewed these events as individual “choices” or due to personal inadequacies. Perhaps this is the most compelling consequence of institutionalized silencing. When the policies and practices of purging are rendered invisible, no one but the adolescent is held to blame (p. 82).

The students were surprised by the claim of Campbell (2004) that the policies, the curriculum, and rules at their school were determined by a White majority. Reflecting on how little they and their families knew about the system of education, the students began to discuss the elements of their home, work, and social life that were at odds with this “White system” of education.

When students learned that the district’s profile of their school claimed that 76% of them were “at-risk” of dropping out of school, cries of indignation filled the room. Some students made a connection from the Campbell article to what Valencia (1997) terms as “the deficit thinking” model or what one student posed as a question, “*Do they think we’re dumb just because we go to a barrio school?*” This question foreshadowed a similar exclamation made to the superintendent at the final presentation. One of the students said, “*I know you don’t think we kids at this school know anything!*”

Using terms like “at-risk” and “free lunch” carry the connotation that they students are “less than” their White counterparts at the district’s more affluent schools. In the documentary that chronicled these kids’ struggles, one youth said, “*My dad didn’t finish school like those dads on the other side of town. He doesn’t have an office job. He’s not thinking of pushing me through high school.*” These students were making the connection that the inequity of opportunity means “failure” for them. The students were facing the power of exclusion through the inequity of their school and their parentage. These students were learning what Fine writes in the conclusion of *Framing Dropouts*, that the system was “privileging access over outcomes as the measure of educational justice” (p.181).

A gain in momentum came in this first stage of the research process as students realized their position in schooling as recipients of a system to which they and their parents had little input and little access. The students discussed the literature review with a stronger interest, and compared the issues they found with their own home/school experiences. When it was time to present the results of the small group findings to the larger class, the principal attended the presentations.

Interruption for high-stakes testing

What the teacher, the students, and the rest of the team was not prepared for was the Dr. Jekyll-and-Mr. Hyde appearance of this administrator. On day one, the principal was in the class as an observer, listening to the presentations with questions and additions. The next day in class she appeared as an administrator who interrupted the presentations to ask how the students were practicing for the upcoming exit Test of Academic Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) in English. Writing samples were demanded from all students. The teacher’s role in the classroom was usurped. Students followed the principal’s instructions to take out pen and paper and respond to a topic that the literacy coach put on the board. Making sure that each student was writing, the principal and literacy coach patrolled the room. There was stunned silence from all of us. The teacher was embarrassed; and as outside researchers, we wanted to slink away.

When the principal and literacy coach had gone, the teacher asked the students if they understood why the principal has suddenly changed her attitude toward them, the research group that was carrying out the process this administrator had commissioned. We learned that students had been questioned in the previous class about their preparation for the English high-stakes test. When there was no positive accounting given, word was sent to the principal. The principal notified the literacy coach. The two women appeared in the classroom.

This sudden interruption in the name of high-stakes testing brought Stage One of the student research to an abrupt halt. Presentations were left incomplete as the teacher was forced to spend two weeks preparing for the high-stakes test that would allow the students to graduate from high school. The power of academically harmful practices again reared its head in the form of an accountability-mandated practice as the curriculum was narrowed, and students were denied the opportunity to strengthen their analytical skills orally and in writing. Pushing students out with the accountability system was not the only thing that was normalized in school practice. Narrowing the curriculum to teach to the high-stakes test was holding students to activities that were not connected to their lives: present or future. The developing team of high school and university researchers was slapped in the face with the narrowing of the curriculum to test preparation when making high scores in the accountability competition took precedence over a project that was engaging and informing students.

The momentum of our research was broken. The English teacher was intimidated, and her ability to run her class was frozen. The former enthusiasm of the fledgling researchers only came when the university researchers guided their work. The teacher had been shamed, her interest crushed, and she returned to her academic shell for the remainder of the classroom research.

Excitement with classroom interviews

During the second stage, meetings between the English teacher and the Rice team of researchers broke down. The teacher was losing confidence in the project, in her ability to navigate between the politics of what the school required and the steps of the research. The Rice team only came to class three times a week, so when we weren't there the work on the project lapsed. The teacher elected to discontinue the literature review presentations. She began working on interview questions in the second stage that were drawn from a district survey. The questions that she and the students developed were not open-ended and would not give us access to the taken-for-granted experiences of the students.

To give impetus to this stage of the project, the Rice team and I developed interview protocols based on Spradley's (1979) Grand Tour questions, asking school leavers and potential school leavers to discuss their academic lives and the roles their family and friends played in their lives. We pulled in two other Rice researchers and practiced the interview protocol with the junior English students and with students who had left school and now returned.

As these new researchers began to interview each other in small groups, it was difficult to separate the interviewers from the interviewees. Students would discuss teachers they shared and memorable experiences they had in school from elementary through high school. One interview among Latino students turned into a group discussion of a school journey that was stalled in ninth grade before regaining momentum in sophomore year. The students in this group recognized that their stories contrasted with the book (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002) they had read in the first stage of literature review and agreed with one of the articles (Haney, 2004). Their success in elementary school challenged Flores-Gonzalez's claim that the dropout role was set in elementary school and agreed with the Haney's description of the ninth grade leak in the educational pipeline. The students noisily described their fruitful elementary school years filled with academic awards and honors. Middle school brought fewer accolades but more school social activities. Ninth grade was a year of social excitement with new friends from other schools, less supervision than middle school, an easy opportunity to skip classes with friends, and for many, a year of academic failure. Parents, friends and inner resolve encouraged these students to continue their schooling, but many of their friends dropped out.

However, home life and school life appeared in sharp relief in some stories as students explored their family obligations. Students struggled with unusual responsibilities as they lived an adult life at home but returned to a life of adolescent freedom at school. A seemingly carefree African American student laughed off her failing status in school. Her jovial, boisterous nature marked her as a class clown who takes nothing seriously. Her tone became more serious as she talked about her family responsibilities. Like students in Fine's book, this failing student had moved out of her family home into her great grandmother's home to prepare meals, wash clothes, clean house, and help her ailing great grandmother with morning and evening dressing. By the time this young woman appeared in the documentary that concluded the project, her grandmother had died; and this student was preparing to sell the house. She had missed her final exams and needed to find a way to take make-up exams.

In another group, a school leaver who had re-enrolled described his life on the streets. This former drug user explained that he was making a few hundred dollars a day standing in line for his dad's prospective clients (His dad was a bondsman) waiting to get bail bond money. When this former dropout returned to school, he questioned the relevance of what he was learning in comparison with the lives of his family members and the work he was doing on the streets.

Another school leaver was a recent Mexican immigrant who had already graduated from high school in Mexico. She was surprised and frustrated when she did not receive credit for her schooling and was placed in the freshman class. She left school and was called back by the principal who negotiated two years of high school credit for this immigrant. However, we learned later that two more years of high school was more than this student was willing to "serve" as what she saw as "punishment." These stories revealed the lives of students that caused them to be out-of-sync and

excluded from the school process. We were hearing stories that mirrored the “public-private split Fine (1991) described.

The presumption that a school’s responsibility stops at the building door is a profound and deeply held belief that allows unequal outcomes to fester as if immutable and inevitable. (p.183)

Another story revealed the “ninth grade leak” that Haney (2004) had found as students turned to the fun of social life and away from the abstract subject matter, and finally, into dropping out because of failing grades and poor attendance.

It was time for Spring Break. The students were to go out with their tape recorders to interview school leavers. The Rice researchers and I gave our phone numbers and offered to meet at local fast food places or homes. No calls came. No interviews were done. We had no contact with the teacher or the students.

Individual surprises as the project floundered

When we returned from Spring Break, the English teacher tried to reassert herself as the teacher-in-charge. The roles of the university researchers and the teacher in the research process were no longer negotiated. The teacher did not have time to meet with us outside of class time. We only came 3 days a week. The teacher had the classes the other 2 days. Her connection with these classes was disrupted, threatened by our presence. The teacher was dictating what would happen and the university researchers were to assist the students in completing the teacher-initiated work. She had begun a new literature review on themes drawn from the district’s report on dropouts. Racial discrimination, discipline problems, learning problems, alternative education programs, Limited English Proficient (LEP) dropouts, gifted and talented dropouts were the teacher chosen themes.

Some students worked, but most students chose to be with their friends. Groups ranged in size from four to eight. With no preparation and little guidance other than from a couple of handouts, students were to find new articles and books, interview teachers and students. They could also use the interviews they had done in class and some of the previous articles from the initial literature review. Most groups fell apart because they were newly formed and did not have sufficient guidance to come up with a PowerPoint presentation and independent research papers. In our new role as assistants, rather than colleagues we could not influence the timeline or movement of the research project.

However, we did have some surprises as we entered this final stage with the would-be researchers. A Latina student who designed the PowerPoint presentation for her small group spent much of the early days of the project applying makeup and reading beauty magazines. An African American male who was classified as a Special Education student with marginal reading ability made a summary presentation of a

research article from a peer-reviewed journal and organized the PowerPoint presentation for his small group.

Another student who had separated herself from the class, firmly ensconced in front of blank computer screen, head down between folded arms, oblivious to the discussion of research articles and interviews. However, her first writing on the dropout issue showed the strongest writing voice in the two junior English classes. This Latina left the magnet program at in this school after her sister had died the previous year. She had isolated herself from her classmates. Facing mandated school failure because of poor attendance, she had been coaxed into a group where she had contributed literature reviews and this revealing information in an interview for the final project.

As this stage drew to a close, I had finished a PowerPoint presentation with two groups as did the university researchers. These presentations were never put before the class. We never saw the research papers that individual students were suppose to write. The end of the project was never discussed with the students. In fact, the teacher was rarely in the classroom when we were. The English teacher seemed to have abdicated her role when we were present.

When I reviewed this research project with a focus group of students a year later, they explained that the teacher really preferred large group work like vocabulary exercises, lectures, worksheets, and tests. Even though this teacher had asked to do this project with the university participants, the work was more than she had bargained for. When these university strangers entered her room three times a week, the teaching of this English teacher was open to critique. There was no critique in this public sphere unless it came from the hierarchy who determined and enforced the policies. This teacher had been trained in a closed system that acknowledged its hierarchical nature while pretending to be a democracy: a commitment to the asymmetries of power that Fine found in her dropout study. The principal had silenced her for not teaching the test. We were silenced for seeing her fail, for bringing new challenges to the classroom.

Development of the final presentation

As with the first three stages, the Rice team entered into the fourth stage with a determination that this project would have a fruitful conclusion. We sought volunteers from the junior English students to meet after school to examine our classroom findings and do more research and interviews to support our position. We were preparing the results of this four month study to make a presentation to the school superintendent, the mayor's wife, and the media. Three of the junior class leaders volunteered to meet. The senior class president asked to join the group. Two gang leaders from rival groups joined us in the last weeks of our preparation. These last two members added the controversial and often secretive street gang section to our research that was important. All three of the junior class leaders added poignant stories about work, sexual and physical abuse, and a drug overdose. This group of students was the most aware of systemic problems that needed to be acknowledged and addressed for school leavers

and potential school leavers. The English teacher became a stronger supporter once this project moved outside the classroom.

Three days before the presentation, the African American gang leader and I were sitting in the principal's office with the principal and his English teacher. This student had been incarcerated, was out of jail awaiting trial on another charge, and was wearing an ankle bracelet that allowed the police to monitor his whereabouts. He was allowed to finish his final semester if he left school after his last class at 11 am. This day he had remained on campus past curfew, and I was defending his presence. The principal said she could not understand how such a fine, intelligent man could engage in such "amoral" gang behavior as he did. She went through a list of his activities as using the word, "he" as if this young man was not present in the room. "He" and his teacher remained silent. I defended his activity by explaining that he did have morals, that the morals (Anderson, 1994) were well-defined, and that this morality served him well on the street. The next day, the young man gave his teacher a well written note explaining the he could not participate in a presentation if he could not be respected as a human being. I spoke to him by phone, but he refused to return because he was not respected by the principal. This student was tacitly being told to be silent or to leave. He chose to leave the team for violating the rules of "Critique in the Public Sphere." Silencing in this high school continued.

The problem became how to fill the void left by this dynamic young man. The principal and teacher greeted us with a group of actors from the drama class for us to audition. One of these actors could "read" the gang leader's story. It didn't happen. We kept the void.

Negotiating the presentation with the conference organizers

The principal, the English teacher, and the university researchers met at the central administration building of the district to negotiate the presentation of student research with the representatives of the district superintendent and the mayor's wife. What we didn't know when the negotiations began was that this was a conference for the business community. In the interest of "Critique in the Public Sphere," these representatives wanted to know exactly what the students would say. When they heard gang leaders, girls who ran with gangs, former drug addicts and immigrants would be telling their stories, the representatives asked for another meeting to decide how we would fit in. In subsequent meetings, these representatives turned their attention to the principal and the teacher, people they could more easily control through Fine's "asymmetries of power." More important than what these students might say was how the students' presentations might look to the "public," invited business people, and to the invited media. The university researchers left each meeting frustrated. We were never addressed or recognized. Each meeting brought a new directive with "suggested" modifications or other paths for our work. We did not know our exact audience or location for the students' presentations until the day before the conference. We learned that we would present to a small group with the superintendent and the mayor's wife sitting with us at a table at the conference.

The final presentation

The students arrived at the Dropout Conference dressed for church on Sunday. They were surprised when they entered the Grand Ballroom to find that they were the only students present. We had been assigned to our table by the group sessions that we would attend. So the students sat down in the midst of a predominantly white business group, asking, "Where are the other kids?" We looked at the agendas at our table. We were not on the agenda. Were we even suppose to be here? One of the representatives of the mayor's wife assured us that we would be heard. When the business people moved to their small groups to determine what should happen in schools to help keep kids in school, our group of student researchers would give their report to the superintendent and the mayor's wife at one of the large tables in the corner of the ballroom. We liked corners. We were use to working in the margins. We were not new to critique in the public sphere.

As the students told their stories and the stories of school leavers, themes of families in overcrowded homes with family violence and sexual abuse emerged. Stories of neighborhood groups/gangs with a code of the streets that included a loyalty and respect that often meant street violence with other gangs were told. Students explained that work responsibility for some was traffic in drugs and theft for others. They gave examples of activities that brought status in the streets and sanctions in the school. Students who were respected on the streets were fined and/or removed from schools. Students who worked for their families, babysat, took Spanish-only parents to doctors were valued at home and punished with loss of academic credit at school. The students asked for a change in school policies. They called upon the city for a civic recognition and resolution to improve the parks and neighborhoods and to establish more public works jobs and job training for impoverished communities. The students in this school called for a reform of the school policies that favored rich over poor, white over brown and black students, individual goals over group and family loyalty, and voiced hegemony over voiceless oppression.

The students asked for a curriculum that would relate to the lives of the students. Rather than accumulating information for tests in their classrooms, students wanted to use the scientific method, math principles, historical concepts, reading, writing, and speaking skills to solve real-life problems in their families, their communities, and their city. Academic rigor needed to team with multicultural texts and students' real life experiences so that these students could continue analyzing their lives and improve their situations in the community.

The superintendent would interrupt periodically to ask her aides if the students were describing a local or a state law. The problem would usually be caused by a state law beyond the power of the local district. The asymmetry of power in the chain of the system blocked most requests. But the media had drifted to our table from the adult planning sessions, and they were asking questions of the students. That's when a local television reporter asked to do a documentary on the lives of the students, a

documentary that won an Emmy for the television station and continued to give voice to the students. The research project in this study did had a positive ending for the students. They gained a voice in the public sphere, and they spoke in the public interest. The follow-up was an alternative charter school for school leavers. However, that school has only three teachers for 100 students. Returning students receive packets of work to complete. Individual instruction, hands-on activities, and true academic work are missing. Students receive token grades for filling out worksheets. However, students are drilled to pass the exit level high-stakes tests. The theme of access to a school program that Fine discusses in her final chapter on dropouts is not matched by positive academic outcomes. The teachers and the required resources are not present.

Reframing Dropouts

The two segments of this story frame dropouts in much the same way that Fine did 17 years ago. The accountability system played a large role as a waiver policy used to obtain higher test scores, facilitated the loss of 60% of the African American students, 75% of Latino students, and 80% of English Language Learners (ELLs). During the study of the district during this period, 1995-2002, there was an overall graduation rate of only 33 % (McNeil et al., 2008). Fine's theme of Good Intentions, to get higher test scores, motivated the invocation of the waiver. What Fine calls a "well-meaning compliance" contributed to a 60% dropout rate in the school and district and the disappearance of the small learning communities. A 9th grade SLC still has a 50% dropout rate and the "dropbacks" (3-year freshmen) become discouraged and leave school. How did this travesty occur? Under the watchful eye of NCLB? The district wanted to control critique so few dropouts were reported.

Throughout the iterative actions of the principal, teachers, and central office personnel reproduced systems relations that embodied Good Intentions when the school administration offered well-meaning compliance with the accountability system and narrowed the curriculum. The school personnel offered well-meaning compliance with the state mandates that released students for absences when they met family needs and charged \$200 fines to students who had altercations on campus that began in the streets. The asymmetries of power kept students and teachers committed to these iterative acts even as school leavers were emptying school classrooms. Where is critique of the system? It is allowed by those who manage the accountability system, by those who run the city, and by the philanthropists who contribute to the system. The students who gave the final presentation in the research project on dropouts did critique the system. They told their stories in a documentary. Their exposure was instrumental in bringing school leavers back to a recovery charter school. But that school was understaffed and functioned with limited resources. The ideological theme of universal access was marred by a lack of outcomes.

Reclaiming the public sphere

The final chapter in Fine's book on dropouts calls for a reclaiming of the public trust. She notes that, "the State and private business interests enjoy enormous presence inside public schools. That presence has escalated in Texas. The private business interests that are active in public schools readily admit to the dropout problem. They embrace the current dropout problem and are using the high dropout reports as a reason for turning to the free-market economy as a solution. The Fordham Foundation (2006) decried the high dropout rates and offered the 100% solution which would allow monies to follow poor students as they choose other schools in and outside their district. Rod Paige, a former superintendent in Texas, is a trustee with this foundation, and endorses the 100% solution.

Closing the achievement gap is the civil rights issue of our time. Nearly everyone agrees that all young Americans should achieve at high levels regardless of class or special needs. But innumerable studies and plenty of direct experience show that a quality education costs more for some than it does for others. Under today's school-funding arrangements, however, the children who need the greatest education resources frequently end up with the least.

Paige is raising the ideological banner of equal access with the pretense of equal outcomes. "Innumerable studies" also show that these vouchers are not used by the low income students they are designated to support.

The Governor's Council (2004) calls for a more "robust" accountability system, charter schools, and school choice as essential to its goals for better schools in Texas. On March 11, 2008, Scharrer reported that The High School Completion and Success Initiative Council appointed by the Texas Education Agency (TEA), "advocates multiple approaches to address the dropout problem, including 'alternative delivery systems,' which the Texas Freedom Network believes is code language for "school vouchers." Former Houston superintendent Rod Paige sits on this Council also.

As Hursh (2007) has recently claimed, "the ultimate goal of the recent reforms is to convert the educational system into markets and, as much as possible, privatize educational services." Hursh also ties NCLB to this move to privatizing schools. The high number of schools who are failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) will lead to calls for privatizing schools. The high school in this study has failed its AYP for the past five years. This school is facing reconstitution, closing, or takeover.

If businesses continue to be the primary source of power in public education, where is the public interest? Where is voice for those of us who want to maintain an open dialogue with our communities and regrow our impoverished neighborhoods with public works programs, the return of businesses to these areas, higher wages, and more job training? Berliner (2005) and Anyon (2005) know that we need to restore our impoverished inner city communities as we reform our public schools. Let us find more

places where we can give voice to these needs in the public interest. Let us find more places where our students and their parents can tell their stories, recommend, and participate in school and community development.

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