

THE VOICES OF ONE URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT TAKEN OVER BY A STATE

A Dissertation

by

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative research investigates the experiences of education stakeholders in a city that requested a state takeover. Using the voices of stakeholders of one urban school district, this study reveals the real, yet unseen, mechanisms which led to the takeover. These same voices tell of the takeover's resulting impact. These mechanisms are presented using the framework of critical realism to establish the truth found in each voice. Additionally, critical race theory is layered in to understand the mechanisms found in the counter-stories of the voices of one urban district taken over by a state.

Not typically assessed in takeover research, existing literature is scant in its attention to elements of stakeholder voice. Yet, these voices add complexities and thickness to explanations of the lead up to and impact of takeovers. The current literature identifies the actual events of *financial mismanagement* and *test scores/academics* as the actual indicators of a district's prerequisites for takeover. However, these two acts are inadequate in understanding what factors lead to takeovers and its resulting impact. The voices of the stakeholders will respond to these concerns, which are at the heart of the research questions for this study.

This study focused on one urban district with a profile analogous to other urban districts taken over by a state and placed the local actors (the stakeholders) at the center of the investigation. In the extant literature, the findings reveal that the actual events (the seen) of takeovers are fiscal mismanagement, test scores, and board dysfunction. To explore the phenomenon of takeovers and the intersection of stakeholder voices,

additional data sources of newspaper articles and media, board of education meeting transcripts, and semi-structured interviews were used in this study. Interpretive phenomenological analysis and content analysis guided the data's examination, leading to this study's findings, which add depth to the findings in the literature. Moreover, the researcher of this study, who has worked as an educator in a district taken over by the state, provides an insider perspective.

In response to the first research question, the findings tell us the voices point to three major areas of concern that led up to the takeover of the school district: (1) finances, (2) internal BOE concerns, and (3) safety. The subthemes of: (a) academics, (b) school policy, (c) people connections, and (d) personnel were also present in the concern of the voices prior to the takeover. The voices also tell us that, in response to research question two of this study, the impact of the takeover had four findings; the takeover: (1) had no impact, (2) attempted privatization, (3) excluded some parents and excluded other parents, and (4) exposed the relationship between the city and the district. Finally, the study's recommendations and conclusions points to three implications for practice and several recommendations regarding community voice and takeovers.

## DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated to many amazing women (and a few good men) in my life who made it possible for me to complete this wondrous cycle of my life. In no order of love or light, I dedicate this to my mother Annie Ruth Liles; Drs. Barnett, Carter, Larke, Webb-Hasan, Craig, Lincoln, Bown, Samples-Smart, McDermott and Ward; my sisters Malene Djenaba Barnett and Alvena Watkins; Cousins Punkin and Gwendolyn Jean King; my Aunt Hilda; my niece and nephews Nook, little Saul and little Dwayne and my mentees: Cathy, Diaghilev, Emily, Demetri, and Jeffrey. Much love to my brothers and my step dad Saul Jordan; and to the soon to be Drs. Sonia Marrero, Donna Druery, Nickolaus Ortiz, Vernee Butterfield, Alisha Jean-Denis, Sandy Smith, Martin Mendoza, Jose Luis Zelaya, Wenhong Guo, Daiboa Guo, Grace Ko, Lobat Asadi, Vickie Mokuria, and Dominique Williams.

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## NOMENCLATURE

BOE	Board of Education
SDE	State Department of Education
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
CR	Critical Realism
CRT	Critical Race Theory
MBR	Minimum Budget Requirement
EMO	Education Management Organization
POV	Point of View

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Takeovers of school districts by state departments of education have happened for decades and occur to this day. Today, however, Trump is president and Betsy DeVos is the Secretary of Education in the United States. With DeVos' vocal support of private schools and school choice, reform of public schooling is on the table, so too are takeovers (Barnum, 2017). Choice and vouchers are the language used, but to arrive at those options, poorly performing and financially mismanaged school districts need their schools in the control of the state (Anyon, 2005; Lipman, 2013; & Ravitch, 2015). This gives new attention to the U.S. public education system and leads this researcher to rethink an aspect of reform – takeovers – from the perspective of the community. Communities impacted by the conditions leading to state takeovers are not without the power and ability to assess the local educational environment. We will use the lens of community to gain new insight to old problems – state takeovers of local schools.

State (and mayoral) takeovers of local school districts have happened in more than twenty-four states, made possible with laws enacted allowing takeovers in thirty-seven states across America (Craciun & Ziebarth, 2002). Takeovers of schools or districts have some aspect of their educational system removed from local control and handed to an appointed governing body for the specific purpose of reform. There can, however, be several reasons for a state takeover.

Early in the formation of these laws, the reasons for takeovers were strictly financial but with academic accountability measures increasing as a result of the No Child Left Behind legislation, more states began to increase and vary their reform efforts (Ziebarth, 2002). Within these takeovers, “school” and “district” are taken over in similar manners, for similar reasons, and are referred to within this context as near equals; as so, states may have the right, within their laws, to takeover either individual schools and/or entire districts.

The operation of a takeover falls under the general umbrella of school reform, in many instances; while the actual circumstances that led up to the takeovers range, as have the responses from the districts and their stakeholders. Nonetheless, the shared categorical reasons for takeovers are the same for all and are under the umbrella of academic and/or financial; therefore, the districts share many structural attributes (Bowles, 2002; Sewall, 1996; Suarez, 1991; Wong & Shen, 2001). The problems of these districts however, can be taken back to the very formation of boards of education.

School boards have had several iterations. During the progressive era there was a call to separate the corruption of politics from local systems of education. At that time, traditional boards of education were a part of the city’s entire municipal functions. During this time city councils were rife with corruption, cronyism, and unskilled membership. Therefore, school boards moved to stand-alone operators of schools. This move started unfortunate and unintended issues, such as under-representation of certain neighborhoods and the exploitation of neighborhood tensions (Viteritti, 2009). In light of the criticisms that underlie the issues for takeovers, it is ironic that what may have

weakened school boards, was meant to strengthen them. The move to separate management of schools from the city was done to keep the focus on the needs of students. However, the board members were still elected officials.

Board roles typically attract lower-skilled candidates. This is mostly attributed to minor scrutiny of the roles and general low voter turnout for these lesser known local actors. Low skills and little oversight has meant poor budgeting and management skills have gone unaddressed. Consequently, districts have been unable to stave the devastation caused by neglectful urban programming and planning (Anyon, 2005). This historical context gives us some clue to the indirect mechanisms responsible for takeovers; however, within the literature there are several other unaddressed and unattributed mechanisms related to school takeovers.

Academics and financial structures are not the entire story when understanding takeovers. Even with the manner and volume in which takeovers are possible, two additional key understandings are still needed for clearer phenomenological understanding. The first piece of information needed is a discussion on the impact of takeovers without limiting the conversation to academics and economics. The approach of community assessment systems leaves room for going beyond understanding takeovers more broadly. The current limitations are in part due to the lack of comprehensive longitudinal evaluation. However, there is much to examine and understand. Indeed, this understanding of takeovers matters because the children and families of these communities matter.



For educators focused on urban education the topic of reform is salient because what is objectively clear is that takeovers are happening primarily in districts where poor students of color are the majority population, in cities such as Bridgeport, Jersey City, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Baltimore City (Karp, 2005; Sikkenga, 2000; Useem, Christman & Boyd, 2006; Weiner, 2001; Wong and Shen, 2003). Despite this over emphasis on poor urban communities, there is scant attention paid to the perspective of those who live in these areas, evidenced by the lack of research focused on stakeholder voice during the ensuing literature review.

Stakeholder voice on the issues encompassing takeovers is the second piece of needed information. This omission of stakeholder voice in these discussions is reminiscent of a paternal hegemonic approach to education for Blacks, Indigenous people and other people of color in America, where they are told what is best for them, despite their cries for self-determination (Carter, 2003). In fact, in order to dive into a close analysis of takeovers, which will help get at this needed information, the context of schooling in America is warranted. This will allow contextual understanding provided by the benchmarks and milestones that paved the way to our current system of education in the United States, helping us to understand how urban schools are harmed under specific policies. It is this harm that sets the foundation for takeovers.

The system of education for all was a battle fought by many for many. Education in America was designated for wealthy White males, when using as evidence those who were allowed schooling during much of America's early existence (Guttek, 1995). This is certainly further evidenced by the makeup of those who populated

universities and created the legislation to keep the school system homogeneous, again the children of landowning White males (Anderson, 1988). Early on, Indigenous people of America were educated only in that they were stripped of their culture through what served as schooling for their children, the Indian Boarding schools (Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture and Lifeways, 2011). Overall, it was African Americans, White women, and poor Whites who were largely disconnected from formal education in America prior to the Civil War (Anderson, 1988).

After the war, and with the resulting reconstruction, newly freed Africans in America continued to address their need for public education. Moreover, as a result, during reconstruction significant gains in politics were made by Blacks in the south (Anderson, 1988; Du Bois, 1935). Formal political roles would allow African Americans to create the legislation to undergird free education for Blacks (Anderson, 1988; Woodson, 1933). During reconstruction, there were increases in political attainments for Blacks, however, this gains during reconstruction incited heavy resistance from Whites during and post-reconstruction – a fear of the positive impacts on the Black community (Du Bois, 1935).

Several attempts were made by a handful of White legislators to create a 14<sup>th</sup> amendment that specifically used the language of “race” and “color” as a way to address the rights of all citizens in America to be free to vote without fear of disenfranchisement from within states. Each time a proposal was introduced by a House representative, or Senator, during the 1865 and 1866 session, it was defeated with only 10 or fewer votes in support. What was ultimately passed, intentionally and strategically, excludes

language that would have made voter disenfranchisement nearly impossible (Anderson, 2015).

Deductively, it can be reasoned that there was a deliberate choice to create circumstances which would disallow African Americans the right to vote or, by extension, the power of elected roles in politics. Yet, despite this intense push to contain (and suppress) the gains of African Americans in the South (where the majority of African Americans lived until the Great Migration), the demand for universal education, as a concept, happened in the late 1800s by the African American community (Anderson, 1988; Wilkerson, 2010). And, so began the immediate resistance and protracted struggle to ensure a divided education existed in America.

Today, the work for accessible and fair education for everyone is still on the battlefield. Where it can be seen best is in urban schools where one of the latest attempts comes in the form of reform, and for this paper in particular – takeovers; however, the current stakeholders are different. Unlike the work of notable Black intellectuals and politicians, such as DuBois, Wells, and Washington, the current voices of the community are not creating the agendas for public discourse on education or driving reform (Burns, 2003; Garrett, 1996; Normore, Rodriguez, & Wynne, 2007; Smith, 2009; Woodson, 1933). Of course, families and community members have long intimate histories with the public education system and this is cultural capital (Bucher & Bucher, 2015). This may prove valuable to the issues we see and experience in schools today. The personal experiences are rich narratives from which to gain greater clarity in the subject of public education in America.

## **Personal Story: Counter Storytelling**

In a system which should build, I have experienced how education destroys futures. I have four brothers who each have had immensely dysfunctional relationships with public schools; while my experience was unhealthy most often. We grew up in urban/suburban area in a northeastern state. It is in a wealthy county; where you can find some of the richest families and materially well-resourced schools. Financially, the area in which I grew up is significantly populated with upper middle class and working middle class families – median income is about \$76, 000 compared to \$70,000 for the state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). However, as one of the only affordable places in this wealthy county, for those who labor, it still has its share of the relatively poor.

My family was one of them. In this urban/suburban town, the public schools have a fairly clear system of tracking called stanines. What I came to notice with tracking is that despite a student's actual abilities, if you were poor and of color, you would be assigned the lowest stanine classes. This was the case for me as well as the case for all of my brothers. Yet, due to myriad reasons, between elementary and middle schools I pulled myself out of the lower track. However, my brothers were not able to do this; unfortunately, they were without the help of my mother.

My mother knew very little about northern public education having been raised in the segregated south - despite her enrollment and attendance after the Brown v. Board of Education ruling (Brown v. Board of Educ., 1954). Of my four brothers, none graduated from a traditional high school's general education program. My oldest graduated from a local alternative high school. My youngest brother graduated from the

special education program but cannot read above a second-grade level. My second youngest graduated from the high school's special education program; he attempted college because he was a sportsman. He was injured in his first semester and then failed out of school – he was not academically prepared for college. Finally, my third youngest brother dropped out after being told to attend night school after a minor discipline incident.

The story I just told is not the story school faculty or staff would tell via a researcher; however, typically they are precisely the ones who tell the story of the marginalized. The voices of those most impacted are minimized in their own stories too often, as Nikki Giovanni poetically muses in her classic poem, *Nikki Rosa* (Giovanni, 1968). This section of the study will be an opportunity to create a new reality, a personal narrative, from the perspective of the marginalized.

In keeping with the critical methodology of counter storytelling, which is a tenet of critical race theory, my personal story speaks from the perspective of my brothers and me (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002). Rather than our educational outcomes defining who we are, where my brothers were depicted as uneducable and I, a despite-the-odds success – based on our circumstances of poverty and other deficits, our voices will define us. In our counter story, the school is held responsible for their low-expectations and actions, which supported their predetermined beliefs (Ford & Moore, 2013). This gives our previously silenced voices the ability to create a counter narrative, which considers our perspective as one that can reconsider and challenge the majority narrative. This allows a new reality to be considered in our educational experiences and a new narrative

available for others to leverage. Within the following counter stories of this research, emerges understandings and experiences about family, mothers, siblings, and communities who need this space.

These outcomes are nods to their lived experiences within a school system that did not address their academic needs, held low expectations, yet disciplined and regulated their Black maleness to be criminal. Again, I fared slightly better because, by high school, I managed to connect with healthy academic-based, yet outside-of-school, programming that supported me to create a new narrative. I had to achieve a new narrative outside of the one given to me by the school. It is in this space, of community support, that I learned to be self-determined. This included being somewhat liberated from my family, who had no positive hope to further their education and could not help me do so.

I am involved in education because I want to change how it reacts to Black families, Latina/o communities, Indigenous people, and the poor. Currently, public schools are dismissive and hostile to these groups as evidenced by the disproportionate rates of discipline, low graduation rates, and poor conditions of the schools where they predominate (Anyon, 2005; Noguera, 2001). Yet, change can and should look like the five dimensions of education articulated by Banks and Banks (2010). Content integration, knowledge construction, equity pedagogy, prejudice reduction, and empowering school culture are the ways in which schools can transform to respond to the needs of dimensions of diversity such as the many cultures, abilities, genders, socio-

economic realities, exceptionalities, languages, and religions which abound in communities (Loden & Rosener, 1991). More so, this process is a cooperative endeavor.

Through my personal experience I have concluded that the greatest source of positive change for these issues will come through the people who are most affected by the problems; most especially, scholars such as Karenga (1982) identify power as “the social capacity of a group to realize its will, even in opposition to others” (p. 227). Historically, this has been true for progress made in Black, Latina/o, Asian, and Native American communities and a portion of that truth shows in the most educated amongst these racial groups, who have a critical responsibility in supporting and, at times, leading the way to change (Kuo, 1998; Williamson, Rhodes, & Dunson, 2007; Woodson, 1933).

I attended the University of Pittsburgh for my undergraduate studies. I immediately knew that to do the professional and community work I planned, I would have to be a Black Studies and Political Science major. I thought this would allow me the critical understanding of American politics. Unfortunately, I learned that American politics is not a place that welcomes critique. The mostly White male peers I had in political science were not prone to questioning a system from which they benefitted most greatly – I understand this now. As a consequence, there was more focus on engaging in compliments of capitalism and a decided diversion from constructive critique of American systems; I no longer wanted to pursue the analysis of American politics. However, I loved my work in Black Studies.

I learned through this coursework that power rests with the people; a disempowered community is not a forgone conclusion for Black, Latina/o, Indigenous,

and poor people (Karenga, 1982). Eventually, I advanced my schooling to a master's in education. Subsequently, I deliberately sought employment with community-based education programs where I was tasked to work with families and community partners. I thought this was the best path for my focus on the power of the people and their ability to change education.

I happened to find a need to bring empowered voices to policy in the city where I would live a significant portion of my adult life. After finding work at the board of education, I moved to Water City, in a small northeastern state (the largest city in the state and one of the poorest) and, as a homeowner, saw potential to get involved with municipal power structures at the grassroots level. At that point I knew education was inextricably tied to municipal and state politics and that I needed to be connected to both in order to be effective. Initially, in coming to the city, I worked in the Water City school system and learned that it was an economically devastated community and that this impacted the school system in tragic ways.

### **District History**

In the early 1900s Water City ranked at the top with regard to educational conditions, as compiled by the state's Board of Education. The areas in which they ranked highest - second, out of 168 towns and cities in the state - were: population, valuation of property, educational funds received from the state, and children enumerated. They were third in "average attendance" and "children enrolled" and only fourth in the category of "teachers". Yet, in the categories of "school expenditure per child enrolled" and "school expenditure per child in average attendance" they ranked



153 and 154, respectively (Van Sickle, 1913, p. 26). There were about 800 high school students in 1910, in Water City, and in the report by Van Sickle (1913), it states that the high school was insufficient; the school was not equipped with the resources needed to educate for the curriculum. It is these conditions that were cited as the reason the high school enrollment was half of what it should be. Another consideration with regard to the low enrollment is that during this industrial time, children were working in factories (History.com, 2009).

However, in Water City, when the industries started to fade, more children were available for school. Directly after this awareness of the conditions for high school students in Water City, attention was given to increasing the physical building capacity for schooling. With more schools, Water City then became a place for a premier education in the region; however, over the decades, the demographics and economics of the city changed greatly. In 1910, according to the U.S. census, the total population of Water City was 102,650 and was identified as one of the 50 cities in America with a population of 100,000 or more.

The demographics, over time, reflected changing times. In 1990, of the 102,650, 98.6% were classified as White, 1.3% were documented as Negro, and a third group consisting of Indian, Chinese, and Japanese (also titled “all other”) were .07% of the total (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990). However, over time the community became poorer and browner. As of the 2010 census, the White population was 34.6%, African American 34.6%, and listed separately – Asian 3.4%, Native American .5%, and Pacific Islander .1%; the population, after an increase, has gone down to 144,229 (U.S. Census

Bureau, 2015). Significant numbers of White families moved out and those that stayed sent their children to schools outside of the district. The economics of the city never recovered from the loss of industry and more corrupt leadership emerged (Rierden, 1990).

In the 1990s, economics and fiscal stability continued to be hard for Water City. In fact, Water City moved from just being on the brink to actually becoming the first major city in over a decade to enter bankruptcy court (Judson, 1991). It was national news for this city that was once a major industrial port to now be notorious for the physical abandonment left by companies long gone, leaving in their wake impoverished neighborhoods sandwiched between wealthy towns who wanted none of their problems. Problems which would intensify over time.

In 2001, the federal legislation of No Child Left Behind was enacted and since has made a significant impact on public education. For example, the story of Major H.S. will serve as an allegory for the entire district. In the decade opening this new millennium, Major High School (once a premier school in the region) was experiencing its lowest point, in its over seventy-year history. The school's test scores, which were the meat of the legislation, were low and the local economy greatly impacted the city's ability to fully fund the needs of their schools – the state was also not funding at accurate levels (Jones & Desroches, 2016)). No longer was it easy for most to recall the award-laden past of academic accomplishments and rich student-centered programming. Instead, Major H.S. is now notorious for its place on the list of the lowest performing schools in the state (Hartford Courant, 2012).

The approximate population of Major H.S. has held steady at about 1150 students in the first decade with about 97% of the population Latino, Black and Asian (Bridgeport school webpages.com, n.d.). The goals of the school, as stated on its website, are related either to the state standardized tests, decreasing dropout, or increasing graduation. Indications that the school's glory has now faded can be seen in the rate of students who intend to pursue post-secondary education; as of the 2011-12 school year only 14.4% as compared to the state rate of 82.6% (Bridgeport school webpages.com, n.d.).

The school was granted a School Improvement Grant (SIG) in 2009 where it was able to take approximately \$700,000 for three years and employ a turnaround school model (Hartford Courant, 2012). This would require that Major H.S. partner with an education agency – for them a state university – to incorporate a new model of school academic management and priorities. The state university's Progress model was chosen because it incorporated the community, teachers' and students' voice. Fred Bonito would be the Principal who would see them through this transition. It also called for the implementation of a School Government Council who would advise Principal Bonito. Some of the immediate and most obvious changes were the requirement of high school uniform – the first such requirement ever – and the arrangement of academies for each grade; these would delineate freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors. Teachers were working together in teams to decide the direction of the curriculum and there was, generally, a good feeling that the school's direction was improving.

However, in 2011, Major H.S. (in now what is usual fashion) was the center of controversy when the Board of Education was taken over by the state after voting to disband. This was preceded by a series of district-level events including the frustration of trying to live with a flat budget of 215.8 million for the fourth year in a row (Lambeck, L.C., 2010, November 24). Next, the state chose the new board members, bereft of party members who were most oppositional to the process. In this reconfiguration it also chose a new Superintendent who was both loved and hated. But as for Major H.S., the impact is the work that started with Progress and Principal Bonito was cut short when, as with most reform changes, he was removed and replaced with another Principal and the work that began with Progress was sharply cut.

The building itself is in terribly poor shape. Graffiti, poor landscaping, worn pavement, considerable amounts of debris on the grounds and no delineation between the school property and the street; additionally, poor signage that does not indicate it is a place that welcomes students and staff, much less visitors, greet the students daily. The once great place of pride is now a source of embarrassment with rodents, walls in need of paint, a malfunctioning heating and cooling system and classrooms that do not have updated technology.

As you have read, the budget issues of the city contributed greatly to the physical deterioration but so did the mismanagement of the schools; an issue that has not been corrected. In fact, the school has not received an athletic field; of which the lack was noted in an award-winning documentary done by the Major High video class in 2010 (Sepulveda, 2010). This issue was highlighted again in a media report showcasing

Coach Run Moore who had been working to build the track and field sports program at the school since the 1980s (Lambeck, L.C., 2010, November 24). The sports teams go to a local park that is about a five-minute walk from the school, which is, unfortunately, seen as unsafe by students and residents of the community. These issues contributed to the overall despondent review of the school that was often heard throughout the community.

The students were not proud of the school, the teachers were frustrated with the constant changes in administration and their lack of empowerment in decision-making and parents did not believe the school did what it could to improve the education of their children (Nix, 2016). Major H.S. continued to have inadequate counseling, based partly on staffing needs that disallowed time for counselors to support college bound students. The focus at the school was and still is testing and graduation, which have already been noted as low by any measure. However, the future promises changes for Major H.S. but one cannot tell if they are just more distractions as it continues to fade or if real differences will start its return it to fresh and thriving.

In the recent past, one of the scheduled changes for the decreased population of 1,000 students were four new principals. Each grade had a new principal in a small learning environment (Lambeck, 2014). The new superintendent at the time, who stepped in after the appointed Superintendent ended his term, decided a new direction was needed; especially, after the accrediting body cited the school with 42 areas of improvement needed before accreditation would be granted (Lambeck, 2014).

Additionally, more electives and extra-curricular classes were added in hopes to give students more appealing academic options.

The community at large was not hopeful. They heard a lot in the last several decades and only received less than what was anticipated. However, there were some parents, students, and staff who worked hard to support greater outcomes for students; additionally, the school board promised physical changes would come, eventually. These changes included the school's needed new roof, technology systems, heating and cooling unit, and gymnasium improvements. The rest rooms and auditorium needed an overhaul as well; and finally, a renovation was required to remove asbestos. It was about 113 million dollars if done correctly. There were, however, no solid plans to start the work (Lambeck, 2014).

The journey from Major H.S.'s fresh start, and promise, to its faded struggle to survive as an educational institution is a story worth telling, if for no other reason than as the start to understanding how an urban school descends to the bottom – as so many have. This story did little to focus on the students' outcomes and subsequent impact but these matter as it is the basis for reform – and perhaps another takeover. What this is, is a tale of woe, which indicates that economics, politics, and changing demographics can intersect to create the conditions Major H.S. has experienced for the past few decades.

Returning to the power and purpose of the counter narrative, and within the context of the community, we have an opportunity in this research to add to the literature of reform. In my personal narrative, I presented a counter story to my brothers' and my experiences. Likewise, in this specific project, the community voices will start the

process toward a counter narrative that will interrupt the majority story that explains takeovers as benign linear processes. This opens the conversation for greater clinical analysis. And this district's stakeholder voice, and many like it, will help construct a new reality for change – for reform, in education. As stated in Solorzano and Yasso (2002, p. 156), "...they can teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone."

The literature review tells of many tales of woe in urban and rural school districts but the literature does not tell enough. As you will read, the literature is broad, policy-based, and does not cover the community – the students even – who are most directly impacted by the work, with depth or as the central subject. Therefore, my personal experience in an urban public school as a student and subsequent work in an urban public school as a staff person highlight the unsettled conflicts between education's purpose and education's dysfunction. State takeovers are presented as a potential intervention to this conflict.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The takeover of schools and districts are widespread and numerous. But for my study, a more important factor is that solutions are too often presented, discussed, processed, and solved by those who are outside the community. As is my training, my approach is that the community holds the answers; therefore, the problem I will address in this study is the problem of the disenfranchised community. Solorazo and Yasso (2002), in their conversation on critical race theory and counter storytelling, give a nod

to Ralph Ellison when they say our efforts towards social justice are thwarted when our voices are silenced. A community that, in practice, holds no power, continues to be disenfranchised when the dominate literature silences and marginalizes their voice when discussing the issues and solutions.

In hegemonic relationships, community has input but only in a manner that has no real strength (Carter, 2003). In districts taken over by the state, the state is doing reform via proxy but in the name of the children and families. We do not know the actual voice of the children and families. Thus, additional studies are warranted to elicit the voices of the community of one urban school district in order to hear their analysis of the dynamics of the reform. As an academic in urban education, it is incumbent on me to be a vessel for the community, as Woodson (1933) articulated. To have urban communities under the direction of those who “socially proscribe” the education of the people does not help increase the capacity of the district to meet the needs of the students and families (Woodson, 1933, p. 22).

In this research, takeovers will be reexamined and reimaged by the stakeholders. The community needs the empowerment of their own narratives, to not only share their voice but to exercise their power. It is imperative to build a process that leads to agenda-setting and is instructional for local politicians, central administration, and board members who are entrusted with managing the local educational institution. This ensures the voice of the community is at the mouths and pens of the policy-makers; which would mean the voice of the community is embedded within the policies.



## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to analyze the stakeholders' experiences of one city's state takeover of their school district. This will allow the primary players in the takeover to provide their insider perspective to a takeover that played itself out, loudly, in the media but was not transparent. This study will provide some of that transparency and, further, set the stage for the process to stimulate a grassroots plan for change that comes from the bottom up, not the top down.

The historical context of the state takeovers is inherently negative and disempowering for the communities impacted. A binary approach to takeovers presents a quandary, because the takeovers start from very valid concerns. Yet, the source of the concerns is at debate. Poor fiscal management, poor student performance, and low-test scores are valid concerns, and are at the heart of takeover rationale, but the underlying issues causing the takeovers are not so clear. Takeovers exist to correct the overt issues mentioned: fiscal mismanagement, poor student outcomes, which include low test scores but are those who would be most impacted by a takeover, either positively or negatively, in agreement on the reasons for the takeover?

My research will get at the heart of the purpose of the takeover. Yet, the research will go further. Pointing to the underlying issues that I have included in the historical understanding of takeovers, an issue such as community vulnerability does not have a straight line, which we can connect to fiscal mismanagement or poor outcomes. Communities and neighborhoods, which are subject to federal and regional laws, have politicians, and policies that uphold and perpetuate poverty, systems that support

unequal resource allotment, and actors who facilitate chaos. All of these produce vulnerable communities and have intersecting compounded effects on each other (Anyon, 2005). As a researcher, I wonder if these real structures/objects can be tied, through the views of stakeholders, to the real structures/objects, as we see in the CR model, in figure 1. These mechanisms, such as racism and vulnerability, are significant in the analysis of a phenomenon (the empirical) in CR.

### **Significance of the Study**

For the communities who are a part of the takeovers, their children who innocently attend the schools and experience the effects of chaotic systems and structures; this study matters because it begins the process to identify how takeovers as reform can be instructional and foundational for education reform through community. Community can offer alternatives to the “either or” attitude that prevails in education; this attitude says local elections (through minimal votes) or state takeovers (where beyond electing representatives to represent you at the state department of education level, community has little hand in decision-making) are the choices for communities. There is another choice; and more realistically; there are several choices to be found in those who are impacted by these policies and practices most. As an academic, I can provide the research analysis and insights that might bring changes that are desperately needed in public schools.

## **Research Questions**

My research questions are:

1. How do stakeholders describe the socio-political development of a state takeover on one school district?
2. How do the experiences of stakeholders (a former mayor, one former superintendent, a parent, two board members, and a community activist) describe the socio-political impact of a state takeover on their community?

## **Definition of Terms**

In this study, I will refer to the following terms with these specific meanings.

The following are the definitions for this study:

*School/district* – will be used interchangeably in the text because states may have the right, within their laws, to takeover either individual schools and/or entire districts.

*Takeover* – schools or districts that have some aspect of their school, usually financial or academic, in the control of an appointed body.

*Reconstitute* – After a takeover a new set of members and school staff are appointed in roles such as the Superintendent and/or board members.

*Dissolve* – the process to remove the current board or publicly elected body in a takeover.

*Stakeholders* – members of the district's local community with education as part of their wheelhouse.

*African American/Black* - these terms will be used interchangeably throughout the text.

## **Assumptions**

The following assumptions are made in this study:

1. Participants were willing to share their experiences in the interview supported with their signature on the agreement prior to the interview and their understanding that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The participants actively participated in the interview and were candid with their responses
2. Considerable effort was made to establish a rapport with the participants. The issue of takeovers in the district was highly contentious and may bring up tensions and concern. The participants were told to share as they feel comfortable and that their identity would be anonymized in the report.
3. All participants were highly engaged in the local school system and have a great amount of knowledge to provide to the study.

## **Limitations of the Study**

There are several limitations to this study that are out of the researcher's control. This project proposes to provide the voices of the community on the takeover of a school district. With choosing five stakeholders, it cannot claim to represent the entire community but it does lay the foundation and track the potential issues that may resonate with the remainder of the community.

## **Delimitations**

1. The topic of takeovers is chosen because in today's concern with the privatization of the public education and the role reform plays, takeover as reform needs to be revisited. Takeovers can be a direct way to bring in private leadership and remove

local control but it does not have to happen. Addressing this issue can be a way to interrupt the possible negative impact.

2. The sample was purposive. I was looking for specific roles but not specific people; although, certain roles greatly limited who could participate.

3. The results of this study while focusing on one district the findings (a) can be generalized to many districts that experience takeovers, (b) the methodology can be used to understand local systems and (c) inform local actions.

4. This study required participants who worked or were active in the district school system within the years 2000 to 2013, in some capacity. This ensures the participants would have an experience with the district's takeover.

### **Organization of the Study**

In this dissertation, I have five chapters. In the first chapter, I am providing the overview of the topic and its rationale as well as the guiding research questions. Within this framing, I will outline the problem of a district taken over by the state. To have the research properly situated I give definitions specific to this study, limitations, and delimitations also. Chapter two will provide a review of the literature which brings attention to the legal reasons that allow takeovers but does not fully recognize the direct and deep influence state government can exert on urban education policy. In chapter three, the methodology of the study is outlined and shows the analysis is guided by the theoretical frame of critical realism where I understand that what is most obvious does not always tell the entire story. Critical realism allows me to look through a lens that sees the experiences of the stakeholders of a district as meaningful to understand the full

experience of the takeover. The laws, academic outcomes, and financial disarray are not adequate in explaining the phenomenon. Subsequently, in chapter four, the findings from the data analysis are presented and, finally, in chapter five there is discussion and summary where we review what we found in the literature review for what it can mean with our actual findings and what that means.

### **Summary**

Schools have faced challenges with meeting outcomes of students since schools became available to all. What has also been persistent are the inequities between schools. To address these disparities, without consideration of the causal factors, districts are creating reforms based on the obvious and notable challenges: financial mismanagement and persistently poor student outcomes. A major reform, and often considered the last step, is a takeover of the district. These efforts take many factors into consideration but one glaring factor not considered are the voices of the community and stakeholders. So, we will begin with takeovers, as it is a specific type of reform, and investigate perspectives. Then, we will review my analysis and proposal of stakeholder perceptions and assessments of takeovers as a way to address the removal of the community voice in conversations and solutions to public schooling.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter reviews the literature of this study. First, I look at several large urban districts and the general issues faced nationally during district takeovers. With more specificity, I delve into the background information for the district that will provide the case for stakeholder voice, hence the data for this study. This district is similar to the large metropolitan centers where takeovers have happened - including the persistent turbulence between local actors and within operations. Next, my process of finding the extant literature is reviewed. This more extensive look at the literature provides a foundation to understanding the reasons for the takeovers and their impact. This drilling into the literature also establishes two categories that respond to the research inquiries and is presented in its organizational context of two overarching categories with three sub-headings each. Finally, after the findings from the literature are presented, the theoretical framing for the study will be discussed. I give a review of how I theoretically framed my research, so that my ontological and epistemological views are known, which guide the analysis, findings, and discussion.

#### **Urban Takeovers**

##### *Background*

Even with the awareness of racism, marginalization of the people living in urban centers has persisted. These areas are ripe with culture and resources; parks alive with

activity, street art with vibrant colors, and proximity to amenities such as coastal access. However, history will tell us, as noted earlier, that there has been deliberate effort placed in creating state, federal, and local systems of housing and economics that urge Blacks, Latinos, and the poor towards education that do not provide adequate resources - from financial to human (Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture and Lifeways, 2011). These cities, when left to languish are also left with an educational system that reproduces the social class of the families who attend. With 35 states with laws allowing for takeovers, this is not a niche issue. Yet, with people of color as the majority of those affected, it is not an issue that is given its rightful attention. As examples, Philadelphia, Newark, and New Orleans each have similar experiences with corruption and mismanagement hindering their human capital development.

The financial troubles of Philadelphia kept the city in need of intervention through several litigious battles and appeals to the state (Gold, Cucchiara, Simon & Riffer, 2005). Preceding its takeover, Newark officials were found to use education funding to take vacations and buy cars (Burns, 2003). In Louisiana, 70% of the schools were eligible for takeover because of students' inadequate performance on measurements such as dropout rates, attendance, and standardized tests. This equated to 55 of 79 schools, eligible for takeover in Louisiana, coming out of New Orleans (Burns, 2010). For state governance, who want to maximize the use of these urban centers to attract tourists and economic development, removing the exorbitant costs of public education from the responsibility of the public to those of investors seems logical.



However, this type of reform is a manner in which the state's interests are addressed but is not a panacea that has proven to reach the local community's needs.

To answer the questions guiding this research I focus on one urban center. This city is representative of the many cities who have had takeovers. It is in a metropolitan area, it has had persistent issues with economic development with both the city municipality and the school as municipality, and there were similar resources introduced to the district during the reform as found in many high-profile districts, such as Paul Vallas as the new Superintendent - Philadelphia, Chicago, and New Orleans (Burns, 2003; Burns, 2010; Gold et al., 2005; Rhim, 2005; Smith, 2012; Useem, Christman, & Boyd, 2006). In Water City, the primary district of focus in this research, a review of the timeline leading to their takeover will serve as the historical understanding to the data collected. The history of Water City as a municipality serves as informative as well and will be reviewed for its relevant information in this study. The narrative of the lead up to the takeover will carry some of the city's related historical issues.

In 2001, No Child Left Behind (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002) is the guiding law for school districts with regard to their accountability measures and reporting. This has major impacts on school districts who have significant numbers of students, who are not academically on target, be it in certain districts or concentrated in specific schools. There comes with this law significant accountability measures. Unfortunately, Water City is consistently at the bottom of the assessment rankings for measures that matter in NCLB (edsight.ct.gov, 2015). What this law also does is usher

in language that will allow states to intervene in districts who are performing poorly.

Water City continues to have challenges during the height of the NCLB act.

The struggles shown in the district were related to low graduation rates and poor results on the state examinations that indicate students are not at grade level in reading, writing, and math. Additionally, the outcomes showed difficulty retaining good teachers, under-resourced schools in need of basic day-to-day curriculum supplies, chaotic functioning within schools, and a school board who could not communicate well with each other. These issues were repeatedly covered in the local media.

Depending on how you look at it, the story of Water City Board of Education takeover is one of a heroic rescue of the downtrodden or a cowardly assault on the poor. In a city within one of the wealthiest counties in America, you find some of the state's poorest families. What you will also find is some of the most dysfunctional politics. In fact, looking back on the history of politics in Water City you will find stories that can best be described as "cable TV ready". Case in point, the nickname for the state is "Dishonesttute". In a quick jaunt down memory lane we can get a sense of how it has earned this reputation. The former and current Mayor went to jail with convictions of racketeering, bribery, extortion, and charged with six counts of mail fraud; a former state senator was convicted of three counts of bribery, mail fraud, and tax evasion; and former a Mayor who admitted to drug use and alcohol abuse while in office – admitted it while in office and consumed while in office, to be clear. One is to wonder that, if city hall is an incubator for misdeeds, that another important office, in the same building, has its own share of dysfunction and corruption?

The board of education of Water City has a long history of what most people politely call challenges. If we are raw with our honesty and if we are overhearing a conversation on the street, we hear Water City's schools are trash. Evidence suggests that hyperbole is not involved in this depiction. The poor performance on state tests, the constant budget issues, the lack of textbooks, the city's filing of bankruptcy in 1991, which threatened the close of at least one high school, and the revolving door of superintendents are evidence of the profundity of work needed in this district.

However, this work will use the lenses of critical realism (CR) and critical race theory (CRT) to examine the claims of the literature and the data. Critical frames allow (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011) action to be suggested and social justice to run as a vein guiding my interpretation. In the work of education policy analysis and specifically takeovers, a critical lens gives opportunities to stay in the vein of change, which is implied in reform. The need for increased positive educational outcomes for America's students is uncontested. America's prominence globally has long rested on its ability to produce a highly educated electorate, as can be seen in the Coleman report's findings (Coleman, 1966). This focus on outcomes has resulted in reforms for communities and consequences for American education (Greene, 1993).

### *Themes in the Literature*

In reviewing the literature, there are several layers of themes that emerged. Much of the actual content has overlapping themes, as does the research approach to the topic of takeovers. The prevalent use of policy brief (Bulkey & Mindell, 2004; Gold, Cucchiara, Simon & Riffer, 2005; Ramirez, 2007; Rhim 2005; Smith, 2009; Useem,

Offenberg, Farley, 2007) and case study (Burns, 2003; Dolan, 1992; Fry, 1992; Rettig, 1992; Weiner, 2001) are telling about the approach to the study of takeovers in academia (as well as outside of academia, where most of the writing on takeovers is concentrated). Another theme found in the literature is the position of the author(s). There seems to be little critique of the need for a takeover, as evidenced by the policy briefs, law reviews, and case studies that offer few critical analyses. If a school or district is historically and persistently poorly performing the authors do not question these as overt reasons for the intervention. There are several exceptions, such as Gold, Cucchiara, Simon and Riffer (2005), Jones (2005), and Lipman (2013) who look at the work from a greater review of economic and community impact; essentially though, the remaining literature does not complicate the issues of takeovers but recounts the occurrences.

In looking at the general themes of the content addressed in the literature, the literature contains these reoccurring key words: “financial”, “low-performance”, “political”, “challenge”, “Paul Vallas”, and “community”. These words tease at the literature themes that emerged most often in the literature reviewed in the 41 articles. The words help describe the takeovers and the micro level interventions that result; but can also potentially be used to open important conversations on structures, which influence events and phenomena; this becomes important in trying to move beyond descriptive case study and policy reports. Going further to examine the context of these terms, is warranted.

While many schools and districts cite the role of *finance*, in some capacity, as a precursor to the takeover, few articles – seven – focused on funding as an area to explore

deeply. Nearly all were referencing districts with some fiscal issues; yet, the underlying issues and structures were not addressed. In a closer reading of this topic, one can assume the acceptance of poverty as an unavoidable and symptomatic of the community. To not question the historical origins of municipal poverty in a district and its possible connection to race and its citizenship is missing a potentially significant piece of the puzzle. With the same number of keyword mentions (seven), *low-performance* is given the same treatment as finance; again, considered a “state of affairs” for without which there would be none. The inability of these districts to overcome poor achievement is seen as only addressable through takeover reform. I am not making a statement to what is needed to replace takeovers nor proposing an alternative but stating that, with the exception of Lipman (2013), the literature does not either. Most surprisingly is that the term *political*, played a pretty minimal role in the analysis of takeovers in the review of literature. Of course, the implicit nature of politics was present but the role of politics was avoided.

An obvious area for discussion is politics, since reform is political. However, there is a downplay of politics as a central issue of importance to understanding takeovers and seems to be suggested or stated as fact in only a few of the articles (Burns, 2003; Lippman, 2013; Oluwole & Green, 2009; Useem, 2009). *Challenges* to the takeovers were noted, when appropriate, throughout the literature. After reviewing the literature, not many districts were able to present a successful challenge to their takeover but challenges are present; especially because takeovers are legal statutes and litigation is needed to reverse them. Receiving neutral or positive treatment in the literature,

having come up three times in the notable keywords is *Paul Vallas*. Starting with Chicago, he has been part of at least four major metropolitan takeovers (Rhim, 2005; Smith, 2012; Useem, Christian & Boyd, 2006). Based on this, it is surprising that there isn't more attention played to what he represents in takeovers, not him as a person but an element of the system of takeovers. To do so would be ironic though because the literature treats takeovers as individual stories and not indicative of something more systemic – again, the exceptions identify takeovers with a neoliberal agenda (Lipman, 2013) that is ultimately looking to privatize education. While this may hold validity, there is a lack of literature that analyzes this contention. Correlating with the idea that there is an underlying economic agenda is the role the term *community* plays in the themes. Most often, community is noted because the literature mentions the lack of community cooperation and/or input.

The lack of community voice in the literature is obvious. Greene (1995) is fervent that it is a false equivalence to posit the dominate narrative as a narrative aligned with the community, which is assumed when the literature lacks the distinct voice of the community. Allowing the conflation of the voice of the community with the legal allowance for takeovers is false. When these two are assumed to be one voice, when the variety of voices from the community manage to rise to earshot, they are assumed to be invalid - especially if their narrative is different from the majority narrative. This is why it is dangerous to take the voice of the majority only. It further contributes to the silencing of an already silenced community.

Even when researchers are backed by research (in reports, case study, etc.), and purport to speak for the community, it can serve as another way to silence the community. Unless our research is reaching directly to and coming from the people who are most impacted by policies, positively or negatively, we cannot make legitimate these claims of understanding. As Greene (2000) and Oakeshott (1962) have posited, the community voice is a personal way of understanding an issue, which has value in and of itself. This being in conversation with each other contributes in ways that erode hierarchy and dominance. Yet, again, without this much needed voice, this conversation with the community, we are left with the majority voice and reinforced hegemony.

Overall, the literature leaves one with an understanding of what happened and to whom, in state takeovers but not with analysis or a review of overlapping issues in which if one were altered, may produce a different result, or tell a more complete story. One is left with a fairly straightforward review from one dominant voice. From the critical frames of CRT and critical realism (CR), one is also left without the complexity of an important issue that along with the needed critical analysis, something further is missing in that the community voice does not give its weight to the findings but for two articles (Jones, 2005; Burns, 2010). However, what can be found will help direct the conversation with the community. Two areas, finance and academics, are the major findings that help explain the findings of the literature.

### **Finance: Destabilized Communities**

It is nearly insurmountable for a community to overcome decades-long systemic economic challenges. As Anyon points out in her book, *Radical Possibilities* (2005),

social and economic policies, which leave urban communities susceptible to weak development, low property rates, and corruption are leaving the schools in their neighborhoods vulnerable to the same issues of corruption, poor funding, and underdevelopment. More so, it leaves families unable to balance creating lives that can also support a strong school system while also creating a strong economically empowered home.

It is important to distinguish the issues of personal household poverty that persists in many urban households, and the stressors related to such an economic position, from the issues of its school system. In districts with takeovers, the school system is vulnerable to the same stressors as the city. It is not families, who are impoverished themselves, that cause the poor outcomes in urban schools but that these schools reside in communities where policies around housing, poverty alleviation, and job creation keep their institutions under-resourced (Anyon, 2005; Noguera, 2003). Without highly functioning local systems that lead to stable economics, there is little help that schools, which function as a municipality within that system will escape the dysfunction (Viteritti, 2009). Cities such as Boston, Detroit, and Chicago have all had economic challenges in their city government and school systems - this is not a coincidence. Oftentimes, urban cities struggle with their municipal budget and, by logical extension, so does the local school budget struggle (Dolan, 1992; Rettig, 1992; Wong & Shen, 2002).

An unstable local government is tied to politicians who have been accused and are at times guilty of corruption, poor management, and cronyism. The politicians of



these urban environments come from the local population, as do the members of the board of education; yet, both entities need people with the skills to overcome the local challenges enumerated above – yet, these urban environments are not proving to consistently attract those with the needed skills. Hence, for an educator working within these systems, one key area (the city’s budget), which affects the resources available for their work, is constrained by factors outside of their control.

### **Finance: Chaotic Operations**

Mismanagement and general chaotic district operations impact many of the districts that have their operations turned over to the state. School boards in urban and rural areas have most often been the subject of takeovers (Hammer, 2005; Lipman, 2013). The reports of districts with takeovers indicate that board members have internal strife, which contributes to the reasons for the takeover (Burns, 2003; Hall, 1998; Ramirez, 2007; Smith, 2012). In some districts there was indication that local board meetings typically did not include discussion of academic issues (Dolan, 1992). Other districts point to corruption on boards that disabled proper operations and as a result, matters of finance have been poorly handled (Fry, 1992; Weiner, 2001; Chadwick, 2002). Ultimately, this chaos is used to help move in an agenda that furthers a de-centered focus on student and community interests (Lipman, 2013). There, however, is some documentation that in other districts the takeover process leads to the contentious environment (Karp, 2005; Jones, 2005). This supports additional evidence in the review of literature indicating the chaos in school districts is manufactured in order to support the interests of neo-liberalism (Arsen & Mason, 2013; Hall, 1998)

### **Finance: Neo-liberal Movements**

Neo-liberalism is understood, in America, to be an underlying ideology to capitalism. In regard to neo-liberal movements and schools, it is often discussed as the precursor to takeovers, if not, its hand-in-hand partner. Yet, it is also notable that not all references to neo-liberalism within this context is negative and in keeping with the tone of most of the literature, neutral (Arsen & Mason, 2013; Bulkey & Mindell, 2004; Gold et al., 2005; Lipman, 2013; Rhim, 2005; Useem et al., 2006). Districts that are pushing back cite the privatization of educational services as the real reason for takeovers. What this also leads to is a reduced role for central offices across districts, school boards, and unions (Arsen & Mason; 2013; Lipman, 2013). Once these roles are reduced and systemized, there is almost no chance to regain the power they once had; especially, as district reforms build with sustainability in mind (Useem et al., 2006).

### **Academics: Testing Requirements**

One of the strongest indicators of takeover vulnerability is poor academic outcomes. NCLB is often cited as the legislation that created the circumstances for takeover laws (Craciun & Ziebarth, 2002; Karp, 2005; Useem, Offenburg & Farley; 2007). NCLB is also laden with testing as its core measure of progress (NCLB, 2002). However, the resulting outcomes over the years have not supported the claim that increased testing positively affected student outcomes. In fact, testing scores are shown to have a positive correlation to local SES (Ravitch, 2015). Most literature does not question, nor give counter-evidence to the narrative of poor test scores in districts that have been taken over; the test scores are low, overall. Yet, in seeming contradiction,

despite the evidence that these districts in fact have low scores on standardized tests, the same accountability measures are cited as the tools used to hold districts accountable after the takeover. This is seemingly a contradiction because they further destabilize school districts (Lipman, 2013; Ravitch 2015); especially, because so little of reform is directed at classroom instruction. Not so, ironically, it is noted that even with testing outcomes as a significant measure of district performance, there is not much evidence that takeovers have successfully increased and bettered their outcomes (Wong & Shen, 2001; Ziebarth, 2002). Despite laws that make room for what is called a “friendly” takeover versus a “hostile” takeover; where the school district asks the state to takeover and manage in a way that seems more supportive, friendly takeovers do not support testing outcomes. Yet, in the “hostile” takeover, which is more typical, there is resistance and pushback on the necessity of the takeover (Hassel, Hassel, Arkin, Keval, & Steiner, 2006). Ultimately, neither version has resulted in better testing outcomes, by and large. Not surprisingly, test scores are not alone to blame; teaching staff are co-dependents.

### **Academics: Teachers**

Teachers are part of the fallout of the takeovers when there is a choice to exercise restructuring of the school staff. For some time, schools have turned to accountability measures as a method to determine a school’s success or failure (Hammer, 2005). According to accounts within the literature, several districts have chosen to restructure staff and staffing personnel when these accountability measures indicate a school’s failure over a consistent period (Arsen & Mason, 2013; Hammer, 2005). Within the

reports, the only evidence that is offered of teachers' culpability is that the districts are failing. That is enough to warrant action such as creating new procedures and processes in personnel and human resource allocations, such as benefits. These decisions are made by appointed persons coming from outside the academic profession and more so from business administration (Jones, 2005). Many see the work of takeovers as the work of addressing both the academic issues and the financial issues, even when those called in to takeover have expertise in one but not the other (Arsen & Mason, 2013; Dolan, 1992; Ramirez, 2007; Rettig, 1992; Useem et al., 2007). Due to this, some districts do not have changes that reach the classroom and therefore, the teachers. When this happens, it is not necessarily a good thing because the work of the takeover, while stated to improve the district, has not effectively changed academics. Teachers, however, have pushed back and attempted to speak for their needs, through their unions (Burns, 2010). Interestingly, though, when teachers have their benefits reduced in the process of the takeover, they advocate for their benefits but not necessarily social justice and a call; therefore, for the rightful needs of their students and families (Weiner, 2001).

### **Academics: Socio-economic Status**

As noted, it is typically urban and rural districts that experience takeovers. Also typical are claims made to connect SES status and academic performance. It is not by coincidence that these areas experience this phenomenon – indicative of weakened local systems, as noted by Anyon (2005). Looking at some of the geographical areas in which takeovers occur (and a select few cities are where much of the literature is concentrated): Philadelphia, Jersey City and other urban centers in New Jersey in general, Hartford,

Baltimore City, Boston, Chicago, Compton, and New Orleans, one can see the connection to issues of poverty (Zeibarth, 2002). In 2004, according to an analysis by Hammer (2005), 74% of the districts in takeovers had over half of their students identified as Black, Latino, Native American, and/or Asian. Similar findings were reviewed in Oluwole and Green, (2009), where six out of 18 districts, which were in some phase of a takeover, had overwhelmingly significant numbers of students of color. In the rural areas with takeovers, only half were from districts with majority persons of color but even where they were not the majority, they were impoverished. There is additional, and strong, evidence that while these districts improve their functioning financially and administratively, they do not improve student academics for the majority students of color and impoverished. One suggestion is perhaps the effects of repeated years of poor academics is too embedded to be repaired in a short period of time (Jones, 2005).

### **Filling the Gap**

This study provides stakeholder descriptions of the socio-political development of a state takeover on one school district. These answers fill a gap in the literature. Community understanding of takeovers provide essential missing knowledge - creating a more complex narrative. In the review of the literature, there is an underlying assumption that local control is comprised inert local people (Burns, 2003; Burns, 2010; Rhim, 2005). Within the literature, community is narrowly defined as non-elected, non-political actors. My study allows for the possibility that some local actors in community

politics are not acting as locals but as the other and those who may be labeled friendly to takeovers as not so.

Dissatisfaction is expressed within the two levels of government - state agents and local agents (Burns, 2010) and differing along race identification. In the literature, these levels of government are presented as a hard and fast dichotomy – opposing forces - but community sees it differently. For example, there is an argument put forth, in making the case for neo-liberalism that positions the state against the local government in failing districts. This creates a sharp line drawing sides – one or the other should have control. When in fact, historically, state and local governments have had a complementary relationship, as it regards financing schools. However, the well-known Brown v. Board of Education ruling (Brown v. Board of Educ., 1954) shows us how the federal level of government intervened to redirect the systemic discrimination practiced at the state and local level. The depiction of solid and thick lines; therefore, implies the issues are clearly on one side or the other. Without stakeholders’ voice of the families who become civil rights leaders and resisted their local, state, and federal complacency with an unjust school system, the majority narrative tells us education prior to 1954 was separate but equal. To allow a dichotomous takeover narrative to exist without community voice almost serves to diminish the voice of the community by removing the real structures impacting reform. Neoliberalism or local incompetence are positioned as separate uncontrollable force, over which the local community has no control.

Within the literature review the state and local were presented as a dichotomy, which also indicates top/down control, no matter which “side” you choose. This is

possible when grassroots force is not at the table, and again, the literature supports a lack of community empowerment in the education system. Where I start with this study is not with an assumption of who is “for” the people and who is not, nor who has a seat and who does not. Using theoretical frameworks that give me the latitude to discover unseen and marginalized voices allow a new narrative to emerge.

### **Critical Realism**

I am using critical realism to best respond to the research questions. Bhaskar (1975) is credited with the concept of critical realism (CR). Bhaskar says there are three strands to CR and for this study we are using what he calls basic critical realism, “the theory and practice of science, social science, and critique.” (n.p.). CR can be described as residing within differing layers of realist ontology. This is due to its position between positivism/empiricism and anti-naturalism/interpretivism. It does not confine itself to one or the other. So, when looking at a phenomenon we are not merely considering empirical information and also not only considering what the person has experienced. This ability to consider what is experienced as well as what is real – regardless of us – is a distinguishing component of CR. This is also why it is said that this framework lends itself well to mixed methods research. Smith (as cited in Zachariadis, 2013, p. 857) describes CR as, “...the process of scientific knowledge is viewed as historically emergent, political, and imperfect.”

When approaching the topic of school takeovers, based on the previous literature, a simple review of a story of a state takeover of a local school board is inadequate. What my research will do is discuss how stakeholders, within the city of such an action,

understand the takeover phenomena; leading to an analysis of the social issues involved and suggesting a new narrative to the causal and explanatory analysis of takeovers. To get at the purpose of my topic, I plan to use the methodological framework of CR and CRT. According to Sullivan (2010):

Knowledge is seen as historically and culturally specific. Similarly, research methods can never be objective from this point of view and research is seen as a special process that is always conducted in the context of values...Knowledge of this reality is always distorted to some extent by our perspectives, by power and by culture. This means that truth claims can be evaluated against evidence. But, knowledge and truth are still recognised as being, to some extent, socially constructed. (p. 30)

CR will allow me the latitude to consider that each stakeholder's perspective, while competitively positioned, are also mutually connected. In this work, consider that the superintendent of a school district may have a perspective that identifies the takeover as harmful to the district. Alternatively, consider, the parent of a child in the district may see the takeover as the solution to improving schools in the district, especially for her child. Both perspectives are valid in understanding the efficacy of the takeover. These are both realities; there is not one we must choose in order to understand the issue. What I would typically decide in traditional research is to draw a conclusion and determine a reality based on causality. However, for this research that is not adequate. What is real does not automatically translate to what I know to be reality. This is important because in the extant literature, on the subject of takeovers, most is presented without a guiding

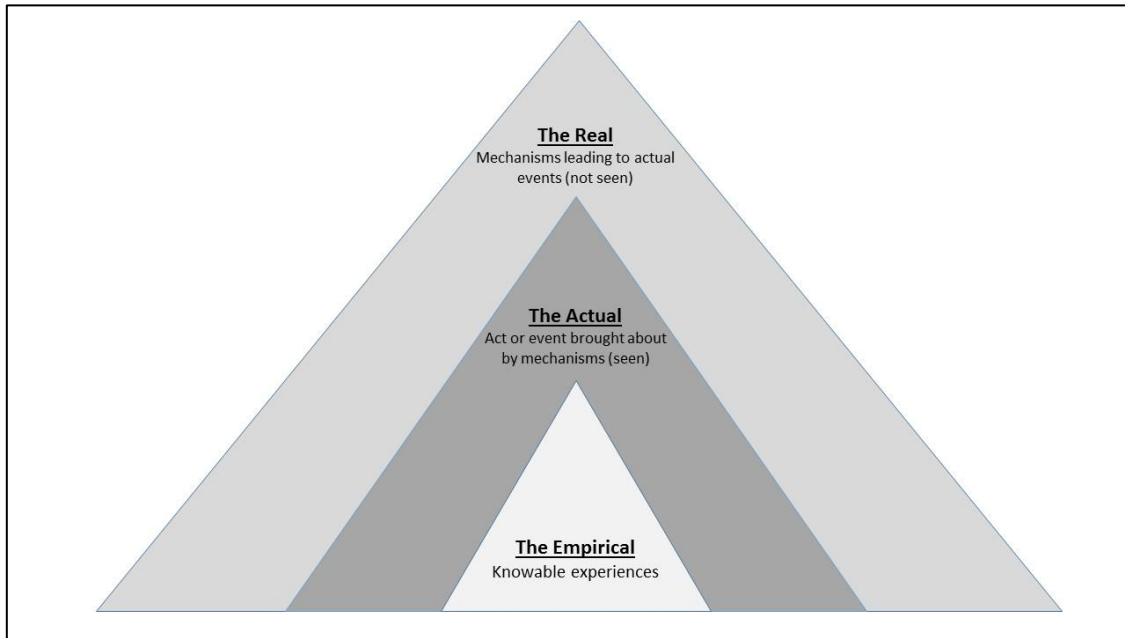


theory. There are a few notable exceptions such as the work of Wong and Shen (2001, 2002, 2003, 2007) but most are case studies and policy briefs. Takeovers are seen as: 1) a method to improve schools or 2) a method to privatize schools, which implies districts with poor performance caused the takeover or privatization causes the demise of a strong healthy system. If you take over a school district, you are only trying to improve the schools, or you are ultimately trying to remove public education to create a privatized school system; thereby, “1. to transfer from public or government control or ownership to private enterprise: a campaign promise to privatize some of the public lands.” (Privatization, n.d.). By using critical realism, I am hoping to analyze and explain the layers and complexity of takeovers in a way that constructs a new narrative about reform, in the hope of producing real change in order to meet the needs of children.

According to Fletcher (2016), critical realism (CR) is more popular in the last several decades as a philosophical framework in social science. As a realist philosophy (Zachariadis 2013), taking parts of positivism and constructivism, CR allows for greater understanding of ontology and epistemology. To consider our reality is a priori and a posteriori, coming from outside of us, from our experiences with the world around us, and within our actual experiences in order to construct our understanding of reality, is essential to this framework. We take this constructed reality, and practically, use it to search for causality in social events; this allows for recommendations for changes to policy or actions around social change.

An additional (and important) dimension to CR is its construct of the real, the actual, and the empirical. This stratified ontology (Bhaskar n.d, 1975, 2012) states that,

although, we may have one reality, we cannot necessarily identify it in all of its parts. Within this are objects and structures that are not only not seen but are also causal – presented in Figure 1, is the model described.



**Figure 1 Critical Realism**

In this model you see the object that then causes the act, which leads to the phenomenon. One may or may not observe the mechanism but it has a presence and impact. This has implications for methodology. In this research one is to understand the empirical in order to call out the unobservable mechanisms. Accordingly, when used to identify causation, it is not only predicated on relationships between the events but also about understanding their relationships to processes and conditions (structures and mechanisms); whereby, one event causes the other. It is not such a concrete and

straightforward process. In evaluating an outcome, one does not clearly indicate that a specific event causes another; it is that a confluence of events and structures that cause a phenomenon. The conditions, which help the mechanism operate, are not so definitive; so, to say so would not be correct analysis. We must acknowledge the structures, powers, and liabilities in our analysis to display the conditions in which we experience mechanisms. Therefore, our ability to identify causality is confounded.

In my research, CR is important because ontologically I view the underlying truth of takeovers come from multiple realities. These multiple realities are informed by varied structures and these structures can be said to be influenced by several mechanisms, ultimately, these structures and mechanisms can be said to create a phenomenon. How stakeholders describe a phenomenon - and the reasons they attribute to the phenomenon - are varied and equally legitimate. This understanding that stakeholders have a multitude of viewpoints on takeovers is not covered in the literature in any considerable depth or breadth. So, the possibility of a new narrative in state takeovers is not considered in the literature, much less its implications for a more complex understanding of reform.

Zachariadis (2013) states, "...the existence of social laws assumes an assertion about the activity of some mechanism and not about the conditions under which the mechanism operates; hence, it is difficult to make statements about the results of the activity" (p. 857). In CR, understanding that there is a complexity to understanding realities is key. This situates the researcher to examine the conditions in which one experiences the mechanism. Adding the conditions to the equation, which includes the

structures, makes for a more complex, but perhaps, meaningful analysis. In the current literature of stakeholders there is a definite identification of linear relationships: No Child Left Behind (NCLB) opened the door to address poorly performing schools and districts. Next, laws were created to take over schools not doing well. If a school or district was not succeeding based on a set of measurements, the school/district was given a chance to improve. Consequently, if the school/district did not improve, control of the school/district was taken by the state. As a result, researchers are looking at the results of the takeover or are critiquing/examining the overt reasons for the takeover. Yet, for example, race, which is not easy to pinpoint as a cause in today's social interactions, was only mentioned in three articles examined for this study (Dolan, 1992; Jones, 2005; Weiner, 2001). However, the makeup of the schools and districts in the takeovers are overwhelmingly Black and Latino (Council of Great City Schools, n.d.). I would like to account for this consideration of race in my research as well as other unexplored mechanisms, which may come up for the stakeholders in my research.

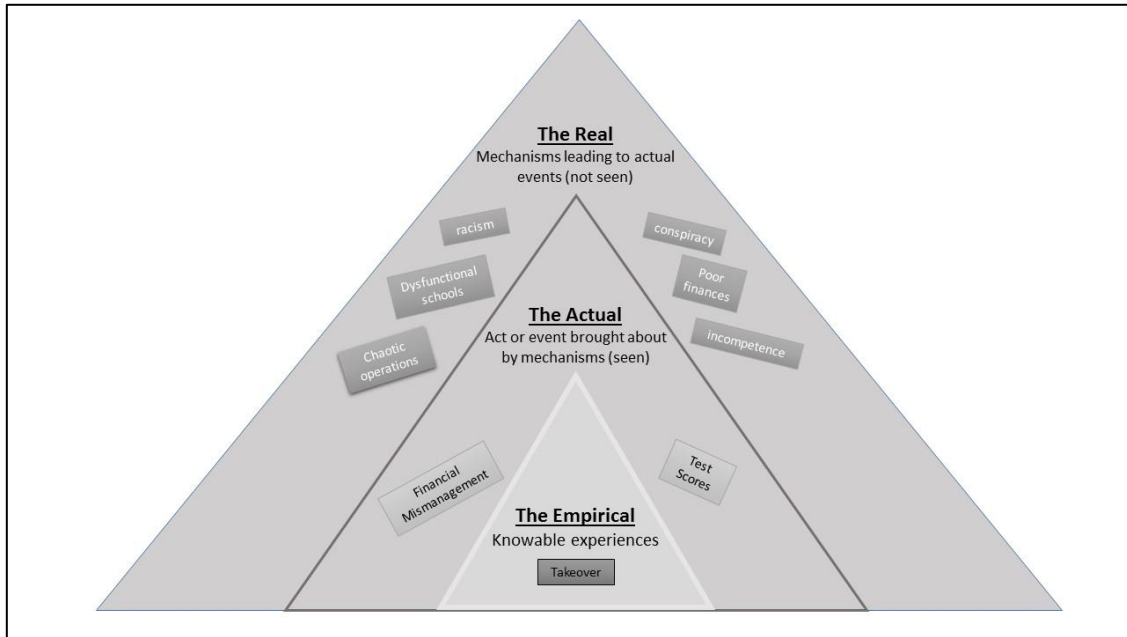
In order to do this CR uses a method called retroduction (Fletcher, 2016). This mode of inference allows for the researcher to examine the empirical events that result from actual events and draw conclusions. These conclusions can be the basis for creating ontology-grounded hypotheses and can explain some of what cannot be seen. If one can use the interactions between the actual and the empirical to create a hypothesis, one can change one's hypothesis if reconsidering the interplay between the mechanisms. As in qualitative research, you can re-examine your hypothesis with the introduction of new information discovered in your data collection and analysis. One significant aspect of

CR to note is that it has been touted as a great theoretical framework for mixed method studies. Using this design one can take qualitative methods and quantitative methods and use them both as complements to create new knowledge out of the considered old knowledge.

As examined in the literature review, the stakeholders have little space in the research on state takeovers. There is the occasional mention, as a way of acknowledging those who are impacted, but there is no perspective of stakeholders. The stories in the extant literature are not told from how they experience the takeover but more about the reasons leading up to the takeover, the laws that created the opportunity for the takeover, and the outcomes expected as a result of the takeover. There is little information, as well, on the actual outcomes. In this research, through using CR, I hope to clarify the experiences and impact of the takeovers, as told by the stakeholders in order to identify the rationale and expected outcomes not previously considered. This opens the door for a greater analysis on how reform can happen best; given the widely held assumption, no matter your political, social, or economic affiliation that reform needs to happen in these schools and districts. Ultimately, my hope is this research and analysis will reshape reform and give it new meaning thus removing the old behavior and connotations associated with the notion of reform.

The structures in the research, which are real, can most certainly be examined as independent entities regardless of knowing the actual mechanisms that result from them but the structures can be better understood if one does consider these mechanisms as

interdependent to their existence. I present the framework, which will be used in this study in Figure 2.



**Figure 2 Critical Realism in State Takeovers**

### **Social Constructivism and Phenomenology**

As a philosophical viewpoint, social constructivism and phenomenology also guide this study. These two work well together in that they make central the personal experience, which is at the heart of my research questions. As I interacted with the interviewees and the data, I was thinking about their framing and experiences as truth – without comparing it to another’s experience for confirmation or falsehood. Because of this, both fit neatly within the CR framework because, with social constructivism, knowledge is built from our interactions and involvement with our world - as is a

consideration in constructing reality in CR. Phenomenology says that the speaker's experience in the nexus of understanding, which allows me as the researcher to consider this in the actual mechanisms which produced the empirical. Knowledge is not there as pre-constructed information that is available for all no matter the circumstances. Our time and place in relation to our interactions within that space is what is most relevant to our knowledge (Zachariadis, Scott, & Barrett, 2013).

These epistemologies were used to frame and give weight to the voices of stakeholders. The qualitative methods used reveal multiple points of view, which are not simple but potentially messy - messy because, with each person's account, they unveil complexity in takeovers. Yet, this framing allows me to hear their descriptions as rich contextual stories that redefine the urban environment, which is often narrowly depicted in the literature as dysfunctional, especially when looking at cities such as Philadelphia and Jersey City with complex and long histories of complications. While depictions of maladaptive behavior may be a part of the narrative the voices describe, it may be but one descriptor among others that speak to the environments support for children. Lipman (2006), puts it well when she says, "Current policies driving education in the United States negate the context of public education when that context is one of increasing cultural racial diversity coupled with economic inequity, racial marginalization, and militarization. (p. 112). The voices of the stakeholders in reform districts matter because they can bring the missing context.

## **Critical Race Theory**

Another critical method, which sits well with the aims of this research project is CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT was first introduced by Bell (1995) but it's application to education, as articulated by Ladson-Billings and Tate, are four tenets that are most relevant to this study: a) race is normalized within American society b) Whites primarily benefit from civil rights and the like c) a critique of liberalism needs to be understood and d) storytelling is as a tool of empowerment. Racism is seen as a pervasive presence in the systems and institutions of America that we can manage but can do little eradicate. Understanding this allows us to more appropriately address its presence. In the literature of takeovers, very rarely does the omnipresent role of racism come up as critical to understanding the trouble of districts, even though we know that the majority of districts taken over have enrolled many more students of color than not. This racism even interrupted the hard work of freedom fighters; interest convergence tells us that liberals will support and move forward ideals that also meet their interests. If White people do not see their interests in the efforts to move forward a Black agenda, then they will not support the efforts of that movement. An oft cited example is seen in CRT's lens into the results of civil rights and the concrete data that shows the primary recipients of the efforts of Civil Rights reforms were White people; especially seen when looking at the gains of White women after this time period and the implementation of Affirmative Action (Guy-Sheftall, 1991). Insomuch, this then allows a critique of liberalism.



It is 2017, at the time of this study and we are still discussing the quest for equity in schools. In fact, if embracing the viewpoint of neoliberalism (Lipman, 2013; Ravitch, 2015), we are talking about a more intensive drilling down on a system that is plagued by racism. This long arduous legal road to equity has not resulted in lasting gains. Taking the laws created to allow for takeovers, it can be said that private for-profits and corporate charters have been the primary beneficiaries. The majority of students of color are left in schools that are more and more under-resourced, while those most adept and prepared to compete in capitalism are benefitting most. The last tenet to explore is used throughout this research project as a tool for empowerment. Storytelling allows people who have had their voices marginalized the instrument to create their own narratives, which can be used to tell their own stories and support their own self-analysis. At the same time, their voice becomes heard. The dominate narratives for marginalized people is a narrative developed by others. In CRT, stories are valued and added to the discourse. In districts the parents may have a tale to tell that speaks to their unique experience and at the same time interrupts the literature's narrative of poor performance and test scores as the lone rangers causing a district's demise and subsequent need for intervention. While the lack of focus on direct classroom instruction seems to explain the weak results from takeovers in the literature, a new narrative may add an unseen mechanism that explains the outcome more clearly.

### **Summary**

Overall, my theoretical framework emphasizes the lived experiences of the stakeholders in a community where a state takeover occurred. This best approach to

answering my research questions allow further research and greater national application. In this innovative approach to understanding takeovers, not only do I contribute to the extant literature, I am creating a new narrative and direction for further research of takeovers and contribute to the creation of improved and responsive laws and action plans to improve schools in urban communities. Yet, this critical framework is most complimented with an interpretive perspective.

In this research project, the voices of the stakeholders became a part of the narrative. The lead up to the takeover of one school district and its resulting impact will include the experiences of those who had direct stake in the district. Their voices will be weighted equally alongside the dominate narrative that says academics and finance are the only issues that preclude takeovers. What the voices of stakeholders will inform are those mechanism (which are not seen) but have significance in what is occurring in school districts and inform the issues of poor academics and ineffective financial oversight.

In terms of the two main criteria for takeovers, financial mismanagement and poor academic outcomes, the literature shows that there are several categories provided as a sub-set. Destabilized communities, chaotic operations, and neo-liberal movements have been cited within the literature as the pre-cursors and motivations for takeovers. Testing requirements, teachers, and the socio-economic status of the community are given as the reasons for the persistent low performance of students within these districts. In looking at the stakeholders' responses to the motivations, pre-cursors, and reasons for

the takeover, this study will support or vary from – in part or in whole, the results of the a priori knowledge.

## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section reviews the qualitative methodology used for this study. In this use of the qualitative, I selected a district and community that best represents the profile of urban districts taken over by the state; from here, I searched for the voices who serve as my unit of analysis. To do this, I used local media sources and other media documents to hone in on the timeline of the local takeover by the state. Then, from the media reports of the takeover, I determined the stakeholder roles I would use for this study; these roles yielded the voices for this study. This review of the initial data also gave me insight into who occupied the stakeholder's roles at the time leading to, during, and after the local school district takeover by the state, necessitating purposive sampling; the stakeholder roles limited who could be a participant. This compilation of data from the transcripts and my semi-structured interviews gave way to my findings. These findings were examined within the frames of content and interpretive phenomenological analysis in my conclusions and recommendations. The details of this process continue in this chapter.

#### **Qualitative Design**

Qualitative design allows the exploration of lived experiences. Hence, my study sought to not only understand takeovers beyond a simple retelling of events, but also incorporated the perspectives of stakeholders to govern nuance about their experiences. As found in my literature review, there has been minimal work, as it directly relates to

takeovers, that can explain takeovers from the stakeholders' voices; to this end, a qualitative method was needed.

There are clear purposes for takeovers laws, yet none demonstrate consideration of community voice. Hence, there is no indication of how takeovers are experienced by the community, and by extension, what value stakeholders can add to the conversation. I contend that we can find new directions for school district improvement from the knowledge and experience of community stakeholders. This requires qualitative methods of interviews and content analysis. With laws still on the books for takeovers, adding currently missing community voice in the literature will provide new knowledge to an ongoing phenomenon. Ultimately, the findings of this study aid in understanding this method of reform from a new perspective. This effort of adding community voice to takeovers, through qualitative methodology provides a counter story to the phenomenon of takeovers. This work explored the breadth and depth of one community's perspective of a national phenomenon in order to identify the mechanisms and structures explaining the takeover. As explained in chapter two, critical realism (CR) and critical race theory (CRT) guides this analysis, which allowed me to assess the stakeholder voices as valid knowledge on the matter of state takeovers.

The design of this study helps respond to the following research questions:

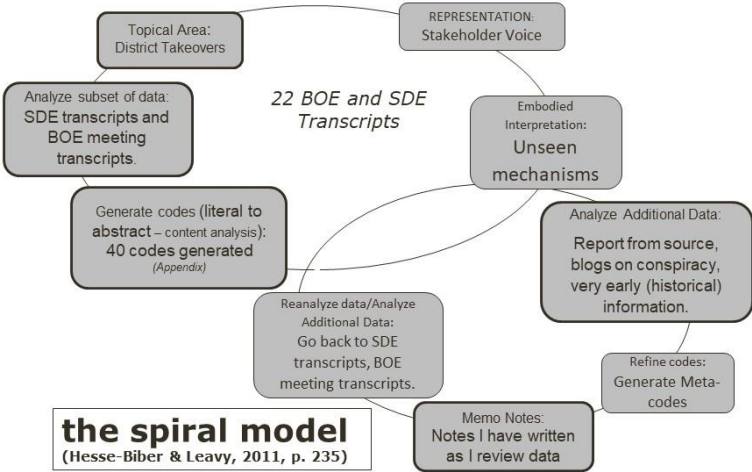
- 1) How do stakeholders describe the socio-political development of a state takeover in one school district?

2) How do the experiences of stakeholders (a former mayor, one former superintendent, a parent, two board members, and a community activist) describe the socio-political impact of a state takeover on their community?

These questions require qualitative methodologies, which capture the experiences leading to unseen causes of the takeovers. Asking the stakeholders for their experiences provides a thickness (or specificity) that can be analyzed for greater substance and not just a recounting of local issues, which are categorized as seen mechanisms. The substance revealed in the voices is critical realism's unseen and is also the crux of CRT's storytelling – to see beyond the dominate narrative. Discovering the mechanisms of a district's takeover beyond the extant literature is at the core of my analysis methods.

I designed my research using existing models of qualitative methodology. Using the spiral model (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011), see Figure 3, allowed me room to dive in and out of the data at different collection and review points of the data. First, I analyzed my collected data, which were three different sources (newspaper and media articles, BOE meeting transcripts, and stakeholder interviews) and each source not only succeeded each other chronologically, each provided confirmation and validation of each other. Next, I identified the voices from within the data and labeled their viewpoints, identifying the speakers (parent, administration, BOE member, etc.). Based on their statements, which elucidated their positions and perspectives, stakeholders were placed within these categorized roles. Hence, stakeholders' fit into five roles, from which I identified voices; each stakeholder role (parent, BOE member, mayor, superintendent, and community activist) could have been represented by several people – because there

were several people who spoke as parents or cross-categorized as a parent and a teacher. They are not represented in the data as separate voices; however, for the interviews I chose six people to represent the roles. Trying to represent each person as a separate voice would make the data and reporting too broad and too copious at the same time; my research would have focused on many people and not the voices found within stakeholders' roles – a necessary efficiency for this project. After identifying the stakeholders' roles, I went back to each dataset and coded their thoughts based on their actual words from the newspaper, board meetings, or state testimony. These codes and thoughts, in addition to my research questions, enabled me to frame my semi-structured interviews.



**Figure 3 Data Analysis Model**

The semi-structured interviews allowed me to create an interview protocol. This guide allowed the participant to more so directly answer my questions because I focused the questions on their experiences leading up to, during, and after the takeover. Much of what they told me was captured in their real-time statements made during the lead up to and after the takeover – in board testimony transcripts; but, I also gave them room to provide any additional information they wanted about their experience with the takeover. Hence, the interviews were an extension of their many statements made at the time leading up to and during the takeover (found in the BOE and SDE transcripts). I have actual words submitted during meetings in 2010-11, in transcripts of the meetings, but then the six participants recount and provide their analysis to the events six years later; allowing a richer understanding to takeovers that is not offered elsewhere in the extant research.

Confirmation and validation was important. To use these data for validation purposes, as I confirmed statements, I reviewed the context between statements to build themes. For example, the parent action committee president discussed uniforms as did a high school cheerleader. I confirmed that thematically, although different perspectives, they both spoke to the same theme. In doing this I am building interpretive analytical codes (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). At the same time, my positionality was asserted through the memo-ing process (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which allowed me to return to these notes for my chapter six discussion. This created better connection to the data's content in real time (because real-time review of data allows me to connect my thoughts directly to the speaker's words) and crafted more focused coding. Additionally, my



analysis was connected to the data and not to my understanding of the extant literature. My interpretation of the data and the discussion of the interpretation are two thought-processes on which I elaborated in the latter two chapters.

In my final steps, after a second and third review of the data, I went back and recoded and/or reaffirmed the codes (labeling each speaker's thoughts). This allowed me to then group the codes into themes, which serve as the findings. These themes are then used to situate any additional data I have gathered, such as published blogs and historical content about the district. These findings were then layered as major themes and subthemes and are the voice of the stakeholders. Below, I provide more details to support my methodology.

#### *Purposive Sampling*

The participants were selected based on their role in the takeover. There are two main time periods that will be considered; one is the time prior to the takeover, the lead up to the takeover, so to speak. The other is the time during the actual takeover. With the framework of critical realism (CR) allowing for the merging of the real and unseen mechanisms, to construct a phenomenon, stakeholders will need to cover a wide range of viewpoints. To this end, this study uses purposive sampling to choose the interview participants. This method allowed participants to be chosen based on specific characteristics, with the goal being a diverse sample (Crowley, 2010). Additionally, in keeping with the theoretical framework of CRT, I will present their stories in a narrative style, in this section and again in the findings. You will read a counter story from each

participant told creatively and in keeping with creative analytical processes (CAP) style discussed by Denzin and Lincoln (2005).

There were guiding standards used to determine who could be a participant. The criteria for each participant is that the interviewee must live or work within the greater city area, without regard to gender, income or education level but have worked, served, or lived in Water City during the years 2000 to 2012. It is during these years that crucial legislation was enacted, and the budget issues became contentious for all – including the local government, superintendent, and board of education. Because of the enormous amount of non-resident city employees and officials, the criteria considered a broader geographical range – they did not have to live within the city of focus. There was not an assessment of their actual commitment to the district, their work and presence at state and local meetings were taken as having a stake in local education without consideration of residence alone as commitment to the city. The roles used to define a stakeholder for this study were decided after the literature review, which established little with regard to stakeholders; yet, even though, in this previous research, parents and community members were not main participants, their voice will be a part of this research process. In reviewing the literature and the a priori information, in cities experiencing a takeover, the role of the mayor, superintendent, and the board of education were the major voices. However, as stated before, parents and community members' perspectives are crucial to respond to the research questions of this study.

### *Instrumentation*

The interview process was in keeping with the guidelines for interviews suggested by Lincoln (1985). In my process, after choosing the participants, I prepped for the interview, reviewed the study with the participant, made sure my questions and comments kept the participant stimulated to keep speaking, and closed the interview with what the participant could expect next. There were several other details I needed to consider as a part of an effective interview, which are detailed next.

#### **Internal Review Board**

The internal review board (IRB) process enabled me to design a data collection process that protected the participants. While my study is minimal risk, there were considerations. I was required to provide all instruments to the IRB prior to approval of my study. Each participant was required to read the non-disclosure agreement that told the participant their rights in this project. I also had to submit my interview protocol and recruiting script. Further, I was required to explain my entire project; especially, the methodology and the participant selection process, including the participants themselves. Overall, this process reviewed my methodology and participant selection to ensure no harm is committed as a result of my study.

#### **Instrument Design**

The design of the interview questions was derived from the focus on my research questions and the intentions of IPA. I asked simple questions that would stimulate an outpouring of information. This phenomenon is typically a dramatic and emotional journey for those involved. I did not think this would not be the case for this

district. I hoped that in asking simple and straightforward questions about their experiences with the takeover, before and after, I would generate generous portions of information. The interview instrument was virtually the same for each participant. I asked initial base questions where they confirmed that they are education stakeholders for the district in question. The remaining questions were simply to guide them to speak with depth about their experiences specifically with two things: the lead up and the impact of the takeover. I also placed them at ease but letting them explicitly know that I was not looking for them to criticize another person in their responses.

### **Logistics**

I conducted the interviews on the participants' territory and in person. I went to the current workplaces of the former superintendent and the former mayor. They were able to be flexible and had the authority to hold the meetings at their locations because they are both the head of their departments. The community activist and board members were able to meet me at a public business. I wanted to conduct the meetings at their local library, but the hours were not convenient for the participants; I was able to find alternative quiet, but public, spaces. All places were frequented by only a few people who were not interruptive to the interviews. The parent asked me to come to the home of her parents, where she is a caregiving for her father, who is ill. I made sure to be accommodating to the participant and this was helpful in making the interviews happen. For one participant, I was not sure if there would be a response to my request to finalize the details of the interview because there was no response but at the last minute, before I had to leave town, I got a response.

I initially used emails to reach out to the potential participants and they eventually agreed to hear my longer pitch for their participation, they preferred to communicate via text or phone. With the support of a mutual contact, each person I reached out to responded; except for the last-minute communicate with one participant (which led to me securing the sixth participant), I was able to interview my first choices. Again, the rapport I had with each participant was healthy because they recognized me as a peer. My knowledge of the background was also a contributing factor and I was pleased to be able to share the knowledge I had of the region, being a resident for about a decade. Overall, the interview process was fruitful, as expected with the protocol I developed for this study.

### *The District*

I started this process as an investigation. Initially, I did not know the voices of the community. My review of literature and the findings of “finances and academic” helped organize wherein I would find stakeholder roles, and more importantly, how to identify them in my data. The district used has all the elements of districts taken over by the state, which illustrates this national phenomenon. As reviewed in chapter two, it is urban, impoverished, a history of persistently poor academic performance under NCLB, documented board strife, and economic woes within the educational municipality and district-wide. Furthermore, my knowledge of school systems gave me the understanding with which to identify specific stakeholder roles: community activist, parent, mayor, superintendent, and board member.

These five roles were evident within the context of the data I collected. Evident in the twenty local BOE transcripts are that parents attended every board meeting; additionally, clear was the stake school administration and community members, who are tax payers, have a in education. Additionally, at SDE convened meetings the mayor, parents, and community members gave testimony. The newspaper articles also provided much needed context to the stakeholders' thoughts on the takeover in one school district. While this is a national phenomenon, it would be too laborious to gather the voices on a national scope. Overall, there were enough findings from the literature to allow the voices of one school district to provide the necessary information to answer my research questions. As stated, nationally, there is a shallow understanding of the reasons for and the impact of takeovers, yet this research asked, would those reasons hold true if we know and inserted the voices of the community into the narrative? Therefore, focusing on one school district allowed me to garner a rich and thick understanding of community voice regarding takeovers.

### *The Community*

#### **The Stakeholders**

There were five major stakeholder categories. The mayor because the mayor's budget partially funds the school, which clearly indicates a stake in the school system. The mayor chosen for this study was in office from 2007 to 2015 as a Democrat and was in office during the takeover and its lead-up. Next, the superintendency for the takeover spanned two administrations. One superintendent, who participates in this study served from 2005 to 2011 and was in place at the takeover. The second superintendent was in

office for a much shorter period, but after the takeover. Generally, the superintendent carries the weight of answering to the parents, community, his or her management team, and the board of education. Third, the board of education, introduces and approves policies and procedures that meet the mission of the district regarding education; both the superintendent and the board members have significant stake in the schools' functioning and health. The board representatives chosen here include one who has been a member since 2005, and is currently a member; the other was on the board immediately after the takeover but his voice is also heard during the lead up to the takeover in the transcripts. Fourth, parents are a significant voice in a large urban district. The parent of focus in this study has a child in the school system but was actively working with parent advocate groups, within the school and district, during the time of the takeover. Last, the community member was consistently active at board meetings for the time period identified for this study; his recorded attendance to the meetings and home address was used to indicate stakeholder eligibility. While without children in the district, this activist clearly expressed his stake in the school. This group of participants served as the participants for the interviews. Their responses serve to confirm and extend the narrative found in the transcripts six years after the takeover. Following, is a summary of their profiles; these profiles give context to their experiences, based on the data from the newspapers, press release, and early SDE testimony, from which I derived the stakeholders' roles that would provide the voices. Their profiles are told as counter-stories; I use a narrative style to share these voices.

## **Stakeholders: The Voice of the Superintendent**

The problems of this one school district were placed in an appeal to a higher power – the State Board of Education. Water City schools have been underfunded from the state, according to the education cost sharing formula (ECS), for decades and is pending verdict of a 2005 lawsuit against the state. The Superintendent who ushered in the takeover, Dr. Laidback Barack, hoped his legacy would be of moving a mountain, to do what was needed to be done for decades – achieving the fifty percent of the 50/50 cost share from the state (Lambeck, L. C., 2011, April 6). Unfortunately, he was in the battle for too long without an army. Those who were supposed to be in his ranks, the local board of education, were having their own battle. The nine-member board struggled just to have civil conversations at most meetings.

Documented in the board meeting minutes (Loh, T., 2011, July 27) is a meeting where the committee positions were chosen for the newly elected board and members arguing over the appointments - how many were allotted per person and who was chairing the committees. In that first action of the new board, Dr. Barack could see the road would not be easy and he would not get the team players he so desperately needed for his vision of obtaining equity in the ECS formula; thereby, gaining the added funds to Water City that was terribly needed. And it was not as if people did not see the need for the funds. Most of the board members, teachers, business community, parents, and local politicians could tell, statewide, the district was coming in at the near bottom on the math and reading assessments scores that matter most to student's educational development. Dr. Barack just could not make a change without a board of education



who could manage their responsibilities to the schools and parents. It was even more challenging with the budget they were allotted. Appeals were made to the board to explain the tough cuts Dr. Barack would have to make if Water City did not get financial support. But the help was not coming. Hence, Dr. Barack, along with other BOE members, agreed to ask the state to take over the local board of education (Loh, T., 2011, July 27).

### **Stakeholders: The Voice of the Mayor**

For the Mayor of Water City, there were significant difficulties in the years running up to the state takeover, starting in 2007. These difficulties, which continued to the mayor's last day in office (occurring after the takeover), were found in highest concentration in working with the local board of education. When first elected there were nine members who, for all accounts, were functioning – dealing with the cards given them the best they could. Water City schools were challenged because, one could say, the issues of low academic outcomes are attributed to a budget that is disproportionate to the needs of the schools. Within the Mayor's tenure, as the supporter of the BOE's budget as a line item within the city's larger budget, this issue was called into question. The year of the state takeover, 2011, and in fact several years prior, there was a significant amount of unrest between the members on the board. There was change to the positions and parties; the Working Families Party (WFP) seemed to have ushered in the significant conflict on the board. In the years to follow it has seemed more so those who represent the party are at issue, not the party nationally. One, former democrat, who was not endorsed by the Democratic Party moved to the WFP, won, and

seemed to bring hostility and resentment to her role. The other two WFP representatives were disruptive to the process of the board of education. The mayor chose to not fund the schools' budget with the city's full portion. The level of dysfunction seemed to exceed the trust of the board's ability to manage a nearly 220-million-dollar budget for over twenty-thousand students (Gomes, J., 2011, June 15).

The mayor used the control he possessed of the city budget to make a "power" move, it seemed. Even the city's actual budget was in dire straits, which helped make the decision for the takeover clearer. So, when the call came to have the school board vote for a state takeover, the Mayor offered no objections.

### **Stakeholders: The Voice of the Board of Education**

Laidback Barack was superintendent for six years in Water City. He could not change the test scores or create a budget that matched the flat funding from the city. A lot of the blame went to the Superintendent but there was some to be shared with the Board of Education. The board met with the superintendent to discuss the possibility of dissolving as a board, indicating both sides understood the problem to be more than that of the Superintendent. There were changes that addressed the needs of the district to avoid sanctions from the state, but the single digit improvements were below the needed double-digit improvement which was required. Additionally, the superintendent wanted to close schools as a solution to the budget gap and the parents would not allow for that. From the board's point of view, the superintendent needed to find better solutions. The superintendent received some support from the board but, on the whole, it was highly difficult to achieve consensus. It was almost paralyzing; so, a strategic solution was to

create an environment where the board's functioning was at the hands of those who were deemed to be more functional (Lambeck, L. C., 2010, January 14).

Once such case in point was the actual budget. Some on the board (and others) believe the incompetence of the Superintendent disallowed a solution to the over fifteen-million-dollar budget gap between the actual funding and the expected expenses in 2011. There was speculation suggesting that it was deliberate neglect in order to make the dysfunction crippling where there needed to be dissolution. The votes of the board were always down the line between the two major parties and the WFP, which meant a nearly consistent 6-3 vote. Deciding to not approve a budget in a school district that is strapped financially was neglectful but not for the reasons used to support the takeover. In fact, it wasn't neglectful, it was cunning - if you are looking to create the conditions for a takeover. However, if you listen to the reports, there were many attempts at change; coming from many directions (Lambeck, L. C., 2010, February 13).

### **Stakeholders: The Voice of a Community Activist**

Eddie Oldtimer is a strident advocate for education. He cannot tell you where this story started but he can tell you where he came in: right after that shyster, Seymour Reform, took office as the appointed superintendent. And he does mean, "Took". The board of education took away his rights as a voting member of this community. He may not have children in the school, but he has a heart in it. Besides, it gives him something to do in the evening every other week. He attends the meetings to hear what is being said firsthand, get on the docket for public comment, and support the Working Families Party (WFP).

Eddie had been supporting them since they came onto the board in the early 2000s. None of the other Democrats would listen to him and did not seem to need his vote. Well, the WFP needed his vote, they were working their way up to the majority representation on the board. As it were, they only had three votes to six. So, most often, when an item went to vote, if the Democratic and Republican Party did not want it, it did not happen. He picked up on what the WFP was doing after a while; they would argue so much that work could not get done. Nothing would go to vote, and people would be so frustrated and confused they didn't know with whom to be upset. He picked up on that piece of strategy and added himself into the mix. Mr. Oldtimer would get to the meeting early enough, so he was sure to be on the list for public comment and when he got on the mic, he would accuse any and every one of wrongdoings – well, except for the WFP. It seemed to work. He got pats on the back as well as eyes rolled at him.

What happened with the state takeover was not expected by Eddie. He stayed with the plan though. He still showed up to disrupt what he could; although, it was harder because the state appointed group were much more civil and tended to agree with each other. But, when that Seymour Reform was brought in, he found a new target – and it worked.

For some in the community the board of education takeover took away the community's rights to be voting members of the community. The Working Families Party were, directly before the takeover, the consistent dissenting votes and many in the community supported their elected representatives since they came onto the board in the early 2000s. Many felt the Democrats would not listen to them because they did not

seem to need to appeal to voters in a city with the votes consistently and overwhelmingly democratic. Typically, the WFP had three votes to six in most matters. So, most often when an item went to vote, if the Democratic and Republican Party did not want it, it did not happen. What happened with the state takeover seemed to be unexpected by the community; especially, the parents (Lambeck, L. C., 2011, July 12).

### **Stakeholders: The Voice of the Parent**

Attending the Board of Education meetings was an experience for parents. The meetings were contentious before the board dissolved itself but after the new Superintendent arrived, post takeover, and the appointed board was removed - making room for the removed member to return; the meetings were even more challenging. The meetings lasted for two or more hours and this could be seen as a deterrent for some families who, by their presence, wanted to be there for their children's education but could not afford (literally and figuratively) to give the time needed to endure the chaos of the meetings. The community comments section would be crowded with community members who were upset. Some of the words berated the members of the board who weren't members of the WFP and some supported the other faction of democrats. The state takeover was in question from its moment of resolution for some parents, but others had the perspective that it was needed for positive change (Lambeck, L. C., 2011, August 4).

### *Data Collection*

The purpose of this study was to capture the voices of stakeholders who experienced a takeover in their district. Therefore, the data for the voices included 20

transcripts from the board of education meetings from the 2010-2011 school years, seven state department of education meeting transcripts spanning the years 2008-2012, and six interviews with stakeholders from five categories.

The five roles needed for the interviews were chosen based on voices that emerged as stakeholders, resulting from the transcripts, state testimony, and newspaper articles. The voices of these stakeholders reveal information that is not captured in the extant literature on takeovers and subsequently provide the data needed for my interview questions.

### **Newspaper Articles**

Newspapers were essential to the background knowledge. News articles gave me the essential historical understanding of the timeline of events. I used a snowball process to determine the articles; one article would point me to the next. All articles were found on the internet; this electronic method was efficient because each article included a hyperlink pointing to related articles. Within each article found, I was able to construct a guide to the events to which I should give attention. I also used the newspapers to direct me as to who was speaking and on what issue they were speaking. For example, there was one reporter working for the local major newspaper used in review for this project, which allowed a sense of continuity and trust of the issue, while I understand this potentially allowed bias. Again, using many data sources helped demarcate these biases and make them transparent. After understanding the timeline and the issues through this medium, I turned to board and state education meetings.

## **BOE and SDE Transcripts and Meeting Minutes**

Public documents provide open data with rich content. Transcript data were found using purposive sampling – after snowball sampling of the newspaper articles enabled me to locate a timeline of activities for one school district. The transcripts provided specificity on the events of the timeline and stakeholders voices. At public state department of education and local board of education meetings, anyone can sign up and state their issues and pleasures with the education system, which are then recorded and transcribed. These transcriptions gave real-time narratives of stakeholder thoughts and enabled their voices to become a part of the narrative. Yet, with meeting minutes, I got a general summary of each meeting, which provided a big-picture view of the content of each meeting. In this way, transcripts and meeting minutes were complementary.

In this study, it was important to hear another perspective of the story of takeovers. As seen in the model of CRT, there is a reality offered in an alternative to the majority narrative that is more rich and instructive to impoverished communities of color. Including these two public comment outlets (the BOE and SDE meetings) allowed for voices to be heard at both the state and local levels. The implications for analysis is that I use the testimony to confirm and validate each speaker's comments, but also to provide a greater range of information in the research.

The data was plentiful. Within the first review of public data, I established constraints for my interview selection. One year of transcripts from one school board provides hundreds of pages of actual dialogue, which also include the makings of

decisions and indecisions from parents, political parties, and administration. The transcripts are loaded with information, from which I then understood the scope of the of board members' work, the position objectives of the Superintendent of schools, and the community's thoughts. The data explained the underlying mechanisms and structures as described by critical realism and CRT. The timeframe of the BOE transcripts were over one school year and the BOE meeting minutes are from the subsequent year.

Next, the state department of education documents contain information from a local and non-local perspective. The state was instrumental in the process, first by taking testimonies from local stakeholders, when stakeholders asked for help and support for their poorly performing district prior to the takeover, and then by granting the takeover. Additionally, in these testimonies are accounts from business persons, the community at-large (without children in the district but residing in the district), non-profit organizations, and parents – giving a wider scope of stakeholder perspectives.

Finally, to be clear, the use of meeting minutes of local and state school board meetings provides not as many detailed accounts, but it serves as an official record of decisions and matters up for discussion and speaks to policy. Policy is at the heart of school takeovers because it is policy, specifically NCLB and state policies that opened the pathway. The meeting minutes are snapshots of the process subsequent to the takeover and insight into the roles played by the stakeholders. The details are also useful as a cross reference with the other data.



## **Interviews**

There are many reasons to conduct an interview in qualitative research. Mainly, interviews are necessary for this qualitative study because they provide the depth to the topics generated from all the voices. I was able to: capture the real-time accounts of the takeover (event or phenomenon), get a reconstructed account of the takeover (the past event), have a look forward on thoughts of what was to come, and have the verification of captured data and constructed meaning (Lincoln, 1985). Hence, because I had a lot of data, with voices speaking to the takeover as it happened, I approached my interviews with the purpose of verification of captured data and triangulation. In interviewing the participants, I asked questions about missing links and got a new perspective on a phenomenon that occurred in the not-so-distant past. The interview also provided further validation of the voices found in the newspaper data: giving the thickness to already rich data. The participants become these three-dimensional instruments that are not captured in the extant literature. Overall, interviews allow participants to become three-dimensional beyond the extant literature.

### *Data Analysis*

Starting with the Internal Review Board (IRB), I shared my initial proposal's plan to identify my participant based on their role during the years prior to the takeover and during the short-lived takeover. Again, this approach used purposive sampling because, as a result of my document analysis, I identified seventeen people who fit the roles that I classified as stakeholders – mayor, superintendent, community activist, parent, and board member. In these five roles only seventeen voices were

simultaneously found in the existing documents and within the proper timeline – during the period of 2009 to 2012. Ultimately, I secured interviews with six participants.

These six would satisfy the needs of my research questions. As I documented in the protocol submitted to the IRB, I required each participant to meet with me in person and to agree to be audio-recorded. Again, in order to secure the interviews, I reached out to each targeted participant after contacting a mutual connection – this was after a few cold contacts did not work. Having a mutual connection allowed them to vouch for my role as a researcher, which allowed me entrée to introduce myself directly, after the potential participant agreed to hear my proposal.

I sent my approved script to request the interview to each of the participants. They all agreed to be interviewed; however, a current BOE member, who agreed initially, did not respond to my messages to secure a day and time. I moved to contact my sixth participant – a second past BOE member, who agreed as well, and set a time and place. Immediately after I secured this day and time with the sixth participant, the fifth participant responded to my messages and gave me a time and place for the interview. In all, I interviewed six qualified participants.

The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to almost two hours. Since my interview questions asked about their experiences, the only true restriction was time and each participant had different time constraints. Nonetheless, each interviewee had generous information that allowed me to address the research questions. I met each person in their respective environments, whether it was their office, home, or a public meeting space such as the library or café, and all participants signed a non-disclosure agreement

(NDA). The agreement states that each interviewee is anonymized throughout this study, which was essential to capturing open and free-flowing responses; although, several of the participants told me they were fine with their names being used. In fact, a couple of the participants seemed disappointed that they would not be identified. Based on the interviews, the subject of takeovers comes with a lot of passion, which connects to the emotions conveyed around takeovers nationally.

Due to my extensive document review of data (newspapers, press release, and state testimony), I was able to share my knowledge of the historical context of the takeover. I shared some of my literature review findings and asked them to think about where their experiences fell within my findings from the literature review. However, they first confirmed their status as a stakeholder and then answered general questions about their experiences with the lead up to the takeover and the actual takeover impact. Each participant seemed at ease in sharing the details, from their perspective, of the causes and impact of the takeover. I, again, reassured them that I was not looking for any commentary on any other persons, as a personal attack or to disparage another person's character.

### *Positionality*

As a part of my positionality, I am a peer with the participant; we are colleagues in education. I have worked in education for two decades and aligned this work with community work, where I help people connect with opportunities in education. I have a degree in education and understand the structures and systems of school districts through my work in the central offices of school districts as well as with schools directly. This

insider knowledge helped set-up the semi-structured format of the interview and allowed me to use questions based on the aims of my study. Additionally, it also gave room for the participant to provide any information they would like. As I conducted the interviews, I did not have an issue with stimulating the conversation. Asking the initial questions and then asking for their experience with the lead up to the takeover and its impact was enough to stimulate hours of interview audio.

#### *Ethical considerations*

Anonymity of the participants is important. Identifiable regions and locations were protected for anonymity. The names of the participants were changed to give guise to their actual identities. As well, the historical context is broad and certainly does not connect data to specific persons, or provide reference in connection to a state or district. Also, including other urban systems in the literature ensures that one district is not the sole focus. The district is here for illustrative reference only.

#### **Complementary Data Gathering Techniques**

In order to capture the thickness of the data, other techniques and tools will be used. Following the interviews, I adhered to a complementary process data gathering to enhance the collection and interpretation of my data. The use of these will bring depth to the data and make for stronger meaning-making. Recordings, field notes, and non-verbal cues will be used and documented. A recorder will capture the interviews and a transcription service will be used for all interviews. Field notes and memo-ing will be used to document my thoughts, comments, interactions with the participants, and additional descriptions. Field notes will complement my memo-ing as a reflexive tool.

Considering my theoretical framing, I wanted each unique voice to emerge. I did not insist that any participant censor their words (other than discouraging any disparagement of others) and did not want them to otherwise feel confined in their answers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I was careful to consider each interviewees' way of speaking, all their words and manners, as well as their body language. As with all the review of data, I memo-ed extensively as I contrasted the interviews with the existing data. I also used field notes, which I captured during the interviews. These notes helped bring clarity to any confusion I had with the transcripts when reviewing the data after the interview. There were also several notes written after the interviews where I reflected on the differences between their responses.

Using semi-structured interviews, also supported my theoretical framework of CR, which allowed me to draw inferences. In this approach, I considered if there was information to be uncovered which had not been obvious within the structures identified in the takeover or if there is meaning within these structures that have not been considered. For example, the local city budget is a real structure leading to the empirical reality of the takeover; however, the Mayor, in his interview, cited the chaos of the school board as another reason (an unseen mechanism) to not contribute greater city funds to the district's budget. Exploring this meaning-making in my interviews was an important analysis result from the interviews because it is not simply what was documented as the reasons for the takeover that my analysis explored but how these experiences influenced the understanding of the cause and effect of the takeover (Gibson & Riley, 2010). The interviews were a necessary tool in getting a subjective account of

the takeover, which CR considers valid in the construction of the empirical understanding of the phenomenon.

Content and IPA analysis was applied to the data as a multi-tiered interactive process. As a result, the interpretation of this analysis will provide a response to this studies' research questions. As I read each document: transcripts (interviews, BOE and SDE meetings), newspaper articles, and press release I was looking for the voices and categorizing what I hear. Using IPA as an analytical tool allows me to be interactive with the data; I listened to hear what the experiences of the district and the takeover was like from the stakeholder's point of view. All the while, I must consider that I have made myself a stakeholder in this process as I am engaging in this project. An important note when reading the findings is that: 1) In the BOE transcripts all BOE members will be presented as one voice, not nine distinct voices. 2) I found that the participants did not want to talk about the takeover directly, they want to talk about the district, the politics, especially, their story – and in some ways their personal emotions and frustrations. I allowed for this to come through.

### **Content Analysis**

Content analysis is a method that allows the use of data that can be obtained without interference and a logical place to begin this research project. Within the content of data is room for analysis of meaning, as well as the understanding of themes, making way for further investigation – an aspect of CR, which makes it complementary with content analysis. This type of data analysis can tell us what lies within decisions as well as the choice to not decide. The use of transcripts, meeting minutes, newspaper

articles and testimonies were examined for their consistency, inconsistency, connectedness, and disconnectedness. Using content analysis, I looked for frequency of key terms, specific distinctions, named qualities, and categories.

As stated, content analysis fit well with critical realism. CR can be quantitative or qualitative and serves well to influence policy – as can content analysis. Also, it complements the use of an inductive method in this analysis – the spiral model (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). In this model there is a process of refining and constant analysis of the data, which allows the researcher to interact with the content throughout the analysis. As researcher, I was able to discover new meanings within the data as new layers of information were considered.

In the first step, the data is considered from this researcher's epistemological point of view, which I have already articulated. The research questions of this study are measured with the data after applying codes, which were generated based on what is discovered in the data. With these new codes, as the researcher, I used the categories to re-examine all the data for fit. During this process, research memos were used to keep track of discoveries from the data. Specifically, text analysis was used in the analysis allowing me to define a stakeholder's viewpoint. In reviewing the data for its overlapping elements, it may determine the mechanisms and structures pertinent to the takeover. This deconstruction gave glimpses to what is not obvious without this process. The process of coding will aid in this development.

The transcripts were read and coded for themes, in addition, the stakeholders at play in these board of education meetings were categorized; additionally, their

statements were categorized and attributed to their actions. Again, the data were reviewed but with the added layer of new categories and codes. The Dedoose system was used to help store, code, and simplify analysis. Using this electronic system allowed more efficient analysis but did not interfere with my role as a researcher in discovering meaning from the data.

Reading and thinking about the data was important to the process. Additionally, important, was deciding what was necessary based on my research questions. Memo-ing guided this process. It helped decide what fit, what was problematic, and allowed the development of ideas in the first review of the data. Next, I started the coding process. The data was coded as it was reviewed, which meant the data was reviewed several times in the process as new data was reviewed. It was a process of collection, review, analysis. The questions I asked during the data review were meant to further my interpretation of the data: What is going on; what are the people doing; what are the people saying; what do these actions and statements take for granted; and how do structure and content serve to support, maintain, impede, or change these actions and statements (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004)? In this coding, after process and refinement, categories were created, and concepts considered. I did not intentionally look for theory to emerge from this process but allowed it to come forth.

Coding and memo-ing go hand-in-hand. Assigning words to parts of text, reassigning text new codes, making the text more useful for interpretations, and creating concepts for analysis are tools for this process. In memo-ing, as the researcher, I will summarize, create quotes and ideas from the data as I interrogate the data. The resulting



product will be a rich and thick understanding of the resources used to explain the cause and effect of the takeover.

Supporting the documents is the analysis of key interviews of stakeholders. I recorded my interviews with a voice recorder. Then, I used a transcription company for word-for-word records, including all emotions of the interviews. I used the entire interview in my analysis. As the researcher, I did not want to bring my positionality to the initial examination of the data and used the exact words and emotions of the interviewee for analysis. This allowed the interpretation of the data to follow the process dictated by qualitative content analysis.

During this coding and memo-ing process new information emerged that lent itself to the interpretation of the data. In looking at the data for information that stood out and connected I also benefited from seeing the data points that did not connect. As described by Hesse and Leavy (2011) the first step was preparing the data (transcription and database entry), the second step was exploring the data (read and re-read, highlight standout points, sit with data, memo), and the third step was reducing the data through memo-ing, coding, and patterning. The final step was interpretation, which, for the purposes of this study allowed stories to emerge. These stories provide the answers to the second question of this study.

Validity and reliability of my data is seen in the stories that emerge, the interconnectedness of the themes, and outliers in the data. Using the outcomes from this data analysis, I consulted the existing data from the literature review for connection. Finally, I examined my analysis for discussion. Speaking to reliability, there are several

sub-commands considered, which show my findings' consistency: confirming the methods make sense, being clear the methods were appropriate to the research questions.

In order to set the environment for the structures, which will be examined in the data analysis, I construct the context for the stakeholders. These structures are the positions and vantage points with which the data engaged to explain the causes and climate prior to but more specifically, directly leading to the takeover. The background and context for these stakeholders will serve as the foundation to understanding their words and perspectives.

IPA. Another approach to analysis in this study incorporates an interpretive perspective. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is about constructing reality; not a truth out of the control of human interactions. The truth can be discovered and therefore, needs interpretation. Meaning comes as a result of the interaction with the data, data that depicts the roles and actions of people within a specific context, which for this study is within one school district. Interpretive analysis is a descendent of the hermeneutic tradition and is attributed to Heidegger (Koch, 1995). This tradition calls for meaning interpretation within interactions, actions, and objects. The people involved within these interactions are positioned best as the holders of reality. Inclusive to the understanding of hermeneutics is background, pre-understanding, co-constitution, and interpretation - all provided by the data.

### **Codes**

Many of the excerpts taken from the transcripts use codes that are co-occurring. This happens because in listening to the voice of a stakeholder, a particular concern,

depending on how it's expressed, may speak to two distinct codes – *budget* and *support staff*, for example. Moreover, another voice may speak about *support staff* but, due to this speaker's particular issue, it may also align with *unions*. Yet, another speaker may speak on the same issue but instead of two codes it is just coded with *support staff*. Again, by applying IPA analysis, I gained the nuanced distinction between two voices. Retaining and honoring these distinctions is important in this study, which focuses on the voices of those who have been silenced. However, I used my privilege as the researcher to decide where the codes connect and detract. Using my positionality and methodology, I also made decisions to where the refined codes were grouped.

My coding and their allocation throughout the transcripts was generous and therefore broad to start. After reading the presentation of a stakeholders' thoughts in a transcript, where someone exhibited frustration, concern, anger, dislike, and/or condemnation with a district-related incident, I gave it a categorical code. As I tagged these comments there was an accumulation of codes that I then sorted in order of scope and inter-relatedness. Upon this second review, I eliminated any codes that were redundant or not useful but then also added new codes. These connected areas were then identified as themes.

### **Themes**

After the data were coded they were placed into thematic areas. To guide these themes, I used my research questions and positionality. These themes come from inter-related codes and are also confounded. In other words, I coded an issue, such as *budget*, but that same issue may have been coded *financial* because, not only did it

impact the budget directly, it was also an issue of financial processing for the board: for example, cell phones usage was brought up by a board member looking to reduce line items in the budget but also because, for her, the district needs to look at their financial controls more closely. Whereas, an issue, such as the city administration changing how they charged an item expected from the BOE on their budget (excerpt citation), was coded *budget* and *board process* but not *financial* because the incident was truly not about their finances but about the functioning of the BOE's budget and an administrative process. Yet, even considering these specific distinctions, when I grouped them, I had to look at how they were similar. For example, all *invoking* of the school and greater community, came together under one theme. Having a near intimate experience reviewing the data in three rotations allowed me to know how, seemingly unacquainted, codes were, in fact, related. In total, there are seven themes that headline the rich content of the data. Subsequently, in this next chapter are the findings from the transcript data.

### *Trustworthiness and Credibility*

As suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), my triangulation of the data will serve as the audit for the interviews and their complements. This will allow my organization of the data to support the analysis. I provided my participants with privacy, confidentiality, and meaningful participation in the process. Methodology begets objectivity when it is well-designed. Using several perspectives on the same phenomenon aided in this objectivity.

### *Member Checking*

As credibility assurance, member checking will be a part of the analysis process; whereby, participants will verify the data, review the interpretations of the interviews – either formally or informally, and have room to share additional information. This will also provide an opportunity to correct mistakes and review the interview in whole. The participants will also receive a copy of the entire interview for this purpose.

### *Transferability*

As with the need for validity in qualitative research, there is a need for reliability; in fact, it is the prerequisite to validity. Dependability considers the presence of instability and phenomenon or research design created change (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this research, the data will be checked for authenticity and accuracy. Verification of the data happens during the collection and analysis sections of the project in order to assure objectivity.

Again, Lincoln and Guba (1985), suggest transferability for what is called external validity in quantitative research. In this, the validity must be confirmed in those who will take the research further through their own use; therefore, I am not to generalize beyond my specific use. Its applicability is not for me to say; therefore, my meaning will be specific to my research.

### *Dependability and Confirmability*

This study will be supported with the aid of an audit, so to speak, to aid in the review of the design and actual process of the study. Looking to see the findings, interpretations, and recommendations are solid, will allow for the next step. When it can

be confirmed that both were in fidelity to the scope and expectations of the study – and in line with the data used, then confirmability is established. The use of the reflexive journal and triangulation with the audit is seamless and complementary.

### **Summary**

In this study, the ontological understanding is that reality is constructed from experiences seen and unseen, real and hidden. It is through the work of identifying stakeholders based on their relation to, and interaction with, the district during the time of the takeover that will provide substance to respond to the research questions. Critical realism allows for combining the seen and unobservable, but it is through IPA, content, and narrative analysis that will help give substance to that which is not necessarily known.

Seven stakeholders will be interviewed. Data from several sources: newspapers, transcripts, minutes, and testimonies will be coded and analyzed. These sources combined will provide the response to the research questions as well as implications for further research.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS OF THE STUDY: MEDIA DOCUMENTS AND BOE TRANSCRIPTS;

In this chapter, findings from the review of BOE transcript data are explained through direct quotations of the voices of stakeholders. By this, you will hear the stakeholders' experiences using their own language – not my summations. As mentioned, the data came in several forms: newspapers (pre), transcripts (during), and interviews (after) and can be looked at chronologically. This sorting of the data was done in order to have better access and malleability within such a large collection of written information. For the newspapers, content analysis revealed the local actors and places to find the voices. IPA and constant comparative analysis were used when looking across the BOE, SDE, and interview transcripts; the analysis between the BOE/SDE transcripts and the interviews were primarily to confirm stakeholders' voices.

First, I reviewed data from newspapers, regional media, etc., to identify the voices for the study (parent, superintendent, mayor, community activist, and BOE member). Then, I analyzed transcripts and captured voices during the lead up to and during the takeover, six years prior. The semi-structured interviews with six participants provided confirmation of my findings. Overall, the thematically coded data captured the continuity of the stakeholders' voices. The interviews are located in chapter five and use counter-storytelling to display the voice of each interview. Finally, the interpretation analysis of the findings is located in chapter six. In the following sections, I elaborate on my process to sort and organize the data.

I convey the voice of the stakeholders through excerpts taken directly from the transcripts of BOE meetings. Excerpts are complete parts of public comments and interviews that illustrate the findings. These public comments come directly from the board of education meetings for this district. Each participating community member has two minutes in which they can share any comment, concern, or praise with the board - the meeting is open to all. The only restriction, outside of the time constraint, is that the commenter cannot disparage anyone by name or use violent or vulgar language. In these years before the takeover, a person could sign up, not speak, but pass his or her time to another speaker. This allowed many people to be recognized by the board but narrowed the scope of actual voices. The district no longer allows this practice; this, however, did not dampen the volume of thoughts. To be clearer, the findings from transcripts are not inter-arranged with the interview data; I did not overlap findings from data sources. The codes, however, are consistent for all findings. Chapter four sets the thoughts leading up to the takeover and chapter five serves to confirm these thoughts and transmit the findings on the impact of the takeover.

### **Finding the Voices: Media Sources**

The first sources of data are newspaper articles, one press release, and two blog posts. The newspaper articles range from July 3, 2006 to September 27, 2016 - the highest concentration of reports was between 2011 and 2012 - and come from local, regional, and state papers. The bulk of the papers come from a regional newspaper and mostly still from one reporter; this centrality of articles by one person may have added some bias. Yet, this also may have given the reports greater insight because the reporter



knew the takeover events at some depth. This contrasts with the other articles. The remaining newspapers were national and popular, which shows this district's connection to this issue as a national topic; however, the accounts from these papers were many fewer. Next, there were a couple of blog posts directly about the takeover, but they served more as a community perspective since there is no assumption that a blog writer has training as a reporter. While there were many blog posts on the educational issues of the district, I only used them to support and verify another stakeholder's voice. Finally, there is a press release from a local child advocacy organization, completing a range of data sources. These data sources mostly provided additional information to contextualize the thoughts of the stakeholders.

The newspaper articles were of best use at the first moment of the study. Starting with journalistic coverage of the topic gives a start to the perspectives on the lead-up and impact of the takeover. I was able to read for background and gain understanding of how this district generally became ripe for a takeover, and at the same time, use these accounts to drill into the possible voices. Thus, these data provided one-third of the triangulation of the overall documents. The regional newspaper tracked the local board meetings, which led me to them as the main source for the voices in the study. The blogs, press release, and editorials also provided insight and contextualization to understand the issues that would come up in the transcripts.

Five findings emerged from this document analysis; the first was *corruption*. In an article from the Washington Post (2006), these issues of the state were recounted, highlighting the greater financial problems that would come to impact the local school

district. The city was plagued with politicians who took liberties within their respective offices and could do so within a system that set precedence for corruption.

Understanding this, when reading the BOE transcripts and listening to the interviews, I had a good understanding of some foundational problems within the district.

Consequently, when conducting interviews, I was seen as a more valid researcher to the participants for having this foundational knowledge.

The issues with corruption in the data are issues that stem from the city's municipal level but are also tied to the issues of the local education system. This finding is consistent with many districts that have been taken over by their respective state (Viteritti, 2006). Additionally, until 2007, the school budget used for this study was inextricably tied to its city; it is only in 2007 that the BOE gained autonomous control. In this article looking at the state, we can see the longstanding issues of the area:

Observers of...politics say that part of the problem was that ethics rules went unenforced here for so long, allowing corrupt practices to become ingrained before large-scale prosecutions began in the 1980s and 1990s. Another problem is the state's network of political machines, which incubate Republican and Democratic hopefuls in systems in which friendship and favors rule.”

(Fahrenheit, 2006, p. 1).

This same article likens the district to New Orleans, again showing its connection to takeovers as a national issue – another district that has had its fair share of corruption and takeover activity.

The next finding is *priorities*. The district's priorities for children has been a public topic for several people. In a press release by a local advocacy organization, there are several people quoted who question the district's understanding of the needs of their students. This will be significant throughout all the data sources. Here is one of the voices speaking to this issue specifically, "Our children feel the effects of this neglect every day. How can the city continue to deny, delay and divert funding for school repairs?" (Onyemelukwe, 2007, p. 1).

The third finding is *city/school relationship*. As alluded to in the finding on corruption, the relationship between the city and the BOE has not been healthy. The voices found in the articles and other related literature show that the contention between the elected actors was fraught along party lines, loyalties, and power. These barriers, which are based on relationships, can be seen in the funding that was said to be available with the arrival of reform, as well as the openness to greater city funding going to the board – but only with reform. The superintendent in place before the takeover says, as he explains a large BOE budget mistake that partly occurred because of the poor relationship with the city, "All the above illustrate the manner in which the financial management of the BOE affairs are continuously handicapped in the performance of its duties" (Grimaldi, 2009, p. 1).

Fourth in the document analysis is *poor relations between BOE members*. This particular finding is a strong thread that runs throughout most of the documentation. It ultimately is the reason cited by the chairwoman of the board of education for the call for a takeover. One particular document I reviewed features the candidates who were

running for BOE office, in the election prior to the takeover (Lambeck, 2009) – those who would also become board members for that school year. In the reporter’s candidate descriptions there was an attempt to highlight each candidate’s frustration with both the district’s education administration and the district’s relationship with the city. This perspective of frustration, found in these first data sources, is levied against the stakeholder voices in data from the BOE transcripts. This gave the information proper context when I assigned codes. As indicated, their strife was not unrecognized and its impact swift. In fact, there was an attempt to address the issue, “After several months of discord and angry meetings, the school board holds a daylong retreat...Not all members attend” (Timeline: Bridgeport School Saga, 2012). Consequently, the takeover happened 21 months into a two-year term for a sitting board of nine – four for whom this was their first term.

Last, the fifth finding is *voices*. In urban centers across the nation, similar local actors are mentioned in takeover stories and represents the determination of the stakeholders. Elected municipal officials, board of education members, community advocates, parents, and the superintendent were reoccurring actors in these articles. All were noted by name and quoted. These actors were highly vocal and, as evidenced by the multiple references in these data sources; it is not unsurprising that these stakeholders’ voices came through. What is most helpful is that they were able to speak for themselves, hence, allowing me to represent them as the experts, in this study. These stakeholders were categorized as: community activists, parents, the mayor, the superintendent, and the board members. The category of community activists includes

the business community, members of the clergy, education advocates, and general taxpayers. Several specific roles identified were: Parent Action Committee president, Executive Director of a local non-profit, a pastor of a large local church, the chair of a business coalition, parent graduates of a local parent leadership training program, and self-identified community activists. This study is an opportunity to hear these voices “name their worlds” (Greene, 1993).

### **Knowing the Voices: BOE transcripts**

These data are board of education meeting transcripts from the school year 2010 to 2011 of one district taken over by the state. The data gives the essence of, and simultaneously, the exact words of the community during the BOE meetings. During these meetings is where many voices came to light; many were given with passionate context and emotional words, which makes using quotations important. In these findings, there is little commentary from me as to the weight of these words on the actual mechanisms; more in-depth analysis is in chapter five. I do however, present the findings based on their frequency of mention; this allows an organized understanding to the issues. This chapter also documents the thoughts the stakeholders have identified and introduce them to the lead up of the takeover – offering new considerations of which thoughts speak to the call for reform. These BOE meetings are open and, as a function, invite anyone to speak. This platform of the board of education meetings – an open forum – allows me to hear the voices.

The voices of the stakeholders are not presented as strictly separate nor together. I simultaneously provide the concerns and the voices of the stakeholders. Therefore, the

voices of the stakeholders, no matter their positionality, overlap. The sentiments on an issue as expressed by the mayor, may be similar to the expressions of a community activist. In my positionality of this study, I allow that all the voices give more understanding to the lead-up and impact of a study. There is no contention that one voice holds a truth and another does not. The stakeholders represent the community; hence, I have not delineated who is community and who is not. My inclusion and exclusion criteria established that a stakeholder is someone who worked (paid or unpaid) in the area of education in the district during the time period of 2009 to 2012. I chose my interview participants via a review of pre-existing data. Those chosen for interview in this study were not chosen because of who they are, distinctly – any person in the role of superintendent during the lead up to the takeover would have been a candidate for participation - but because of their role as a stakeholder. In representing their voice, I present the participants as the stakeholders. In this, their thoughts are presented through my voice, yet supported with direct quotations from the data – the actual voice of the stakeholders.

### **Themes**

Seven major themes emerged from the BOE transcript data. After three rounds of reviewing the data and finalizing codes, I grouped common codes into themes. These seven themes were *personnel thoughts*, *people connection thoughts*, *school policy thoughts*, *academic thoughts*, *safety thoughts*, *internal BOE thoughts*, and *financial thoughts* – Table 1. These seven themes represent the thoughts identified by the stakeholders during the public comment session of the board of education meetings.

Thoughts are defined as items entered into the discussion as problematic to the presenter. Notably, I do not evaluate the practicality or accuracy of the item at issue. In this study, the person presenting the thought is the expert. I do, however, present these themes in the aggregate, in keeping with establishing themes – they are the combination of several codes. As this is a qualitative study and not quantitative, if only one stakeholder mentions an issue, it will have bearing in the findings of the study. This methodology intersects both depth and breadth. This study inserts the voice of the community taken over by the state and demonstrates it through the collective voice of stakeholders.

**Table 1 Themes Found in BOE Transcript Data**

<b># Mentions</b>	<b>Themes</b>
29	Personnel
45	People Connection
42	School Policy
56	Academic
116	Safety
190	Internal BOE
353	Financial

*Note.* The themes show their respective number of mentions for illustrative purposes only – not to show hierarchy

*Personnel Thoughts*

In this first theme, *Personnel*, I grouped three of the forty codes that emerged from my analysis of the data. Subsumed within this theme were instances of the community and

board of education in discussion on thoughts related to *hiring, teaching staff, and unions* (Table 2).

**Table 2 Personnel**

# Mentions	Theme	# Mentions	Personnel
32	Personnel Thoughts		
		5	Hires
		18	Teaching Staff
		9	Union

*Hires* were the instances of comments regarding problems with BOE administrative position and falls within the theme Personnel. Considering this definition, it is an issue seen more at the central office level, and staffing at that level, and therefore was a board agenda matter more so than in public comment. *Hires* was not often directly mentioned, in and of itself, as shown, it was an issue with only five mentions. It may seem inconsequential, but this particular issue came from the board members and, even with few mentions, its discussion contributed to the (dy)functioning of the board, which was commented on numerously.

*Teaching staff*, the next under this theme, was discussed by the board members and the superintendent alike. When discussed, it was generally in regard to the protection of teachers or in consideration of the teaching staff. There were general and varied contexts: how the closing of a school would impact the staff, how to



accommodate teachers' needs, recruitment and retention, and staff's ability to represent the students they teach. This statement, "You don't even have the nurses and the people that are skilled to handle our children." (Bridgeport Board of Education, March 28, 2011, p. 12) came from a community member during public comment. From the superintendent, there was more a sense of practicality about the positions (and a need to close a school), regardless of the need for jobs:

No, it – well, what it means is that the school that these individuals – that these students are going to, they're going to schools that have principals and vice principals that are under capacity. The schools are under capacity. So now they'll have more students in their buildings as is appropriate. (Bridgeport Board of Education, June 13, 2011, p. 89).

*Union* issues showed some alignment with the codes *teaching staff*. The intention of the community in discussing this item was to preserve their workers' benefits and positions. What's more, *union* issues also aligned with the code *budget* because union personnel also came through in the voices as an advocate for increased dollars to meet the demands for the budget:

We've been going through some tough times here in [Water City] and we collectively, the union, and the members of the board parents and students, we've been at some – these board of ed meetings, and at most Finance Committee meetings. AFSCME has been at some very long and stressful – we've attended some long and stressful days over at the Capitol, as we've done before, and we've been there a lot this year trying to see if we can get some more funding for

[Water City] as we did last year. (Bridgeport Board of Education, May 9, 2011, p. 22)

Overall, while these personnel issues are the fewest mentioned of all seven theme/thought areas, they represent issues of human capital and demonstrate some depth. As the themes continue, they will show an interconnectedness.

#### *School Policy*

*School Policy* as a theme is comprised of thoughts mentioned that relate to board function. The board has the directive to address several categories of policy: "the board shall concern itself with issues matters and questions involving education policies and provide an effective framework to ensure ongoing monitoring" (Bylaws of the Board, 2012, p. 3). While personnel issues are a part of the wheelhouse for the BOE, it is important to remember that districts have large staffs who are managed outside of the BOE. It is a small portion of the BOE's scope. This discussion of findings will involve larger pieces of the BOE responsibilities related to policy.

**Table 3 School Policy**

<b># Mentions</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b># Mentions</b>	<b>School Policy</b>
<b>68</b>	School Policy Thoughts		
		18	Policies
		5	Transportation
		9	School Procedures
		14	Uniforms
		1	Discipline
		21	Nutrition

The thoughts specific to policy were the second lowest addressed issue during the meetings. To illuminate, specific board duties for this district include employing a superintendent, adopting policies for operation of the school system, communicating the education to the people, staying aware of the educational issues of the community, adopting a yearly budget, and acting on laws related to education. School policy, as a theme, is encompassed within two of these six areas. For this study, school policy had six sub-codes: *policies*, *transportation*, *school procedures*, *uniforms*, *discipline*, and *nutrition* (see Table 3).

The first sub-code, *policies* encompasses specific district policies. Within the BOE transcripts were data stating a disregard for supportive or nurturing policy to meet the needs of students and families:

Finally, it was brought to my attention that Dr. [Barack] told all the school principals that if any board member wants to visit a school, the principal has to call and ask for permission. If any employee violate [sic] this policy they will be disciplined. (Bridgeport Board of Education, 2010, p. 6).

In this example, the community member expresses concern for the way in which the district has enacted its care for students through its changing a policy three-decades old. However, this code is also expressed through board member comments in discussing a policy revision, "...[a new policy] that we will hopefully end up with very soon. Some items were included and we will be examining the latest version in the next few days. So that's policy." (Bridgeport Board of Education, May 9, 2011, p. 29) There were separate meetings on policy matters during committee meetings, which based on these data were not consistent.

The next sub-code is *transportation*, which appeared specifically when addressing policy that will allow better budget expenditures (and, at times, was triple coded as a *budget* and *financial* issue because the policy was used to reduce the budget line item through reducing financial costs). For example, a board member stated, "We would like to know – I would like to know – the specific reasons for overspending. If it's the transporting of students to homeless shelters, we would get that information." (Bridgeport Board of Education, March 28, 2011, p. 18). *School procedures* are next and included because the processes are related to both budget and education. In this excerpt, the superintendent is trying to relay the systemic reasons a process was not followed to the exact specifications of the board:

And – and , you know, I can sit here and articulate what the reasons are from my perspective that this system has a tendency to enfold upon – enfold on itself differently than, say, a state Department of Education, based on funding, personnel, I mean, I can go on and on. (Bridgeport Board of Education, February 14, 2011, p. 107).

While policy expectations may be expressed in one manner, the way in which they are operationalized may be a function of the dysfunction of the system in their district. Looking to thoughts on *uniforms* encompasses the district addressing the uniform policies for the day-to-day dress code to the uniforms worn by sport teams. In this excerpt, the students of a local high school are expressing their thoughts with their cheerleading uniform:

Another thing, our uniforms; they're – we have to wear this to a game. This is illegal, we're not supposed to have our stomachs showing at all. And the skirts that we have; a small on her is like down to here. These are our sweat suits and they're extra large [sic]. (Bridgeport Board of Education, September 27, 2010, p. 7).

However, again, the issue of uniforms was not significant compared to the more numerous mentions given other thoughts during this period. Yet, the issue of *discipline* occurs only once and is addressed by a grandparent in the community, “And the title of my topic today is in-school suspension is suspension from school.” (Bridgeport Board of Education, March 14, 2011, p. 13), who is concerned about in-school and out-of-school suspensions.

Many of the claims were aimed at the quality of the lunch and last within this theme is *nutrition*. This district, like most in urban centers, has a high rate of free and reduced eligible families, therefore allowing 100% of the district access to free breakfast and lunch. The parents, students, and a board member were openly frustrated with the quality of the food and their blame was aimed at the district – for this federal program: “Please help us have healthy choices. We would like salad for lunch every day and fresh fruit at breakfast.” (Bridgeport Board of Education, September 27, 2010, p. 3) This was the most prevalent of sub-codes. While not abundant, the rate of discussion was consistent over the year - the topic occurred in 11 of the 19 meetings for the school year.

**Table 4 Academic**

# Mentions	Themes	# Mentions	Academic
78	Academic Thoughts		
		16	Curriculum
		16	Poor Academics
		8	Academic Outcomes: Testing
		38	Academic Outcomes

*Academic Thoughts*

*Academics*, curiously, was the third least mentioned issue. Contained in this theme are *curriculum, poor academics, testing, and outcomes* based on their mentions from the voices. Looking at Table 4, one can see where the district stakeholders show

their concern. Of the four, to be fair, *poor academics* and *academic outcomes* carry the bulk of responsibility for this theme's weight. The thoughts, in context, show more concern with the students' possibilities in life after an education in the district. Supplemental to this is concern with how students are doing in school is how their grades are connected to the quality of the schools, "A – lot of problems in the school, and things are starting to go downhill. Something I see a lot is a lot of Fs on report cards." (Bridgeport Board of Education, May 9, 2011, p. 5); this is from a faculty at a local school. However, many more times the concern was with what may have been, or what can be, for students once they leave schools that have not prepared them to be successful, "Living on the East End of [Water City], I was bound to be just another statistic, be a teenage mother to drop out of school by now, to not even become a junior, and to never have my dreams come true." (Bridgeport Board of Education, April 11, May 9, 2011, p. 8). As with most of the codes, these also were crossed with other codes. *Testing* and *outcomes* were connected by several of the voices, as was curriculum, budget, staffing, and support programs. In this district, support programs are seen as a needed piece to addressing their issues:

Now we have failure, when it was extremely successful for six years. We have more suspensions in the school system than we've ever had. We had more failures in the school system than we've ever had. And a good portion of that at Crosstown High School especially is because of the fact that you meddle with things that work and you don't leave them alone to let them work and work their

magic. Nice job to the administrators, to the members of the board. (Bridgeport Board of Education, May 9, 2011, p. 10)

This excerpt is referring to a dismantled and reimagined support program - in fact this program accounted for most of the mentions regarding support programs. Last, testing received only a few mentions but was crossed with academic outcomes when it was mentioned.

*Curriculum* encompasses all academic needs and was applied generously. In one meeting, it was mentioned by the superintendent in conjunction with the budget and special education needs, “The third area was the special education tuition in deficit. And one of the problems is that the state reduces our funding for that in midyear with no notice whatsoever.” (Bridgeport Board of Education, March 28, 2011, P. 16). These were coded as curriculum because there were fewer dollars available than the number of students who needed to be educated with a curriculum specific to their needs in accordance with special education laws. At other times, the community felt the curriculum was not adequate to provide strong post-secondary skills, “English, math, science, reading, art, music [sic]. Recess, get them out there and run. Teach kids leadership, not this flimsy stuff. ‘Oh, reward them because they did good [sic] today.’” For one board member, curriculum was of interest to her when school trip approvals were up for discussion. She consistently asked how the teacher in charge of the trip was going to connect it to the student's academics and what type of academic product would result from the trip, “Will the children provide some kind of outcome report after attending this?” (Bridgeport Board of Education, March 28, 2011, p. 35).



For board members, *poor academics* was used to call out urgency of a process and policy; yet, community members, during public comment, often point out the sad fate of the district's students who had such poor academic experiences in the system. This excerpt exemplifies some of the urgency with which the community used:

When the few children who actually graduate have to struggle while the rest who drop out along the way become functionally illiterate. This includes those children who get a GED, which is nothing more than a worthless piece of paper. Who will employ a young person who can't read, can't follow instructions or do simple math? (Bridgeport Board of Education, April 11, 2011, p. 20).

One community member, mentioned in the local newspaper, referred to the school's academic experience as being like "the drop out factory" (Bridgeport Board of Education, April 11, 2011, p. 7). The comment was less so about her son's ability to do well in the district but the concern she has for others using a descriptor she borrowed from a local newspaper's account of the district's education system.

As with poor academics, the code *outcome* was more direct in its conveyance of fear that many children who matriculate through this district will have meager fates awaiting them because their real needs are misaligned with what the district provides academically. This can be seen in the discussion on saving the positions of math and library paraprofessionals in order to provide as much academic support as needed for students: "These positions are key, especially where we have failing schools, which can't catch up to the No Child Left Behind Act goals." (Bridgeport Board of Education, August 23, 2011, p. 26). When discussion of a school picked for closure surfaces, it

inspires increased discussion from the board on the need to improve outcomes: “I don’t recall seeing a plan of action to - to change the – what was happening in the school with respect to tests.” (Bridgeport Board of Education, June 13, 2011, p. 13-15).

The direct concern with *tests* came up several times. This is during the No Child Left Behind era and is a poorly performing district, according to the standards of the legislation. This adherence to imposed improvement plans was addressed by a central office staff in charge of the reports: “Just a reminder, the district entered into a partnership with the...state department of ed over three years ago to develop and implement a district education plan based on the criteria that they had developed” (Bridgeport Board of Education, February 14, 2011, p. 117).

During this report by the central office staff, a board member had issue with its contents. The superintendent explained that the contents did not reflect her desired expectations because the state required a specific report. However, the board member ignored his logic that suggested the report update was in response to their request for an update on the state report – hence, why the report update did not contain her needs but the state reporting requirements. This issue will also be addressed in a later theme.

**Table 5 People Connection**

# Mentions	Themes	# Mentions	People Connection
92	People Connection Thoughts		
		33	Invoking Community
		33	Parents: Invoking Parents
		1	Invoking Teachers Principals Staff
		14	Parents
		11	Race and Ethnicity

1

*People Connection Issues*

The *People Connection* theme involves mostly the way board members communicate. In this theme, as seen by the code labels in Table 5, the codes are speaking to how the board of education attempts to connect to the community they serve. This is manifested through board members who say the reason they are making a statement or insist on an action is that they have spoken to the community and/or are doing so for the community. Hence, I have coded several of the excerpts as Invoking parents, community, students, teachers, principals, and staff. Additionally, this theme also includes the code *race/ethnicity*. This fits with this theme because when the voices referred to race and/or ethnicity it was an attempt to discuss a disconnect with persons due to their race/ethnicity or a need to connect with a group because of their race/ethnicity. As noted earlier, most districts that experience a takeover are majority POC and this district is illustrative of that. Last in this theme is *parents*; simply, this is a

reference to parents but not speaking for parents but the role of parents. For example, a board member indicates there will be a parent meeting, “I just want to announce that there is a Parent committee meeting scheduled for Monday, May 16<sup>th</sup>, at 6:00 o’clock, in room 305” (Bridgeport Board of Education, May 9, 2011, p. 29). While this is not presented as an issue, in the sense that it is a problem, it speaks to the scope of work the board sees that it needs to address and is appropriate for this context because this study reveals the work the board addressed, and did not, in connection to the lead up to takeover. Parents are an integral component of education and addressing their needs aligns with the public expressing issue with the BOE’s lack of connection. Another example is shown when a board member mentions the desire of community (which includes parents) to have a seat at the table during the board's finance committee meeting:

The last topic was the proposal to have members of the community at the Finance Committee table, enable them to ask questions of those that are addressing us and assert certain positions that they might have with reference to what we have to do. This would be – the first that this would have been done, and perhaps the last, but we simply felt it would be valuable because the cuts of services are going to have to be so dramatic this year. (Bridgeport Board of Education, May 9, 2011 p. 28).

This theme of *People Connection* is, like all others, confounded with other codes. The few codes, 92, associated with this theme does not explain its full weight because I am being strict in my extraction of it from its co-occurrence with other codes. For example,

each code of parent is connected to another code; there are only five issue codes that did not have a co-occurrence. Additionally, my use of the word "connection" does not imply an assertion that the board is actually making a connection but that they are attempting to connect with people in their comment or those made by another community member. This is important in the context of looking for the issues that led to the takeover using stakeholder voice. Stakeholders said an issue they expressed is important because of its connection to a need by another member of the district; hence, I have found that community connection is an issue.

The code of *Invoking* needs illustration because it is not necessarily common. In an excerpt from a board member, "I know that the union participated in this, and that's great. I'm glad that you came to agreement. But an important factor is the parents." (Bridgeport Board of Education, February 14, 2011, p. 81), she asserts that the superintendent's consideration of teachers and students is too narrow and needs to incorporate the parents' feelings as well. She wants to have this information before she can move forward with a decision. This also demonstrates another way in which invoking is an issue. Throughout the thoughts labeled with the code *invoking* is a sense of hegemony, if you will. Carter and Larke (2003) explain hegemony as the use of power by a dominant group to maintain their leadership over a disempowered group. By invoking the community with claims to have their interest in mind and simultaneously pushing your own agenda may or may not be as generous as it seems. This will be addressed further in chapter six but needed context for its use as an issue in these findings.

The rare use of *race and ethnicity* in the data were at times claims made from the community that their needs were not addressed or that there was discrimination towards a racial group from the school staff, faculty, or administration in the district: “We have a lot of unqualified teachers, substitute teachers that have been calling our children out of their names, black kids, get their butts over here, they’re not going to do nothing. It’s very disturbing.” (Bridgeport Board of Education, April 25. 2011, p. 8). The student population of the district is approximately 49% Hispanic, 39% Black, 9% White, 3% Asian American, .6% American Indian, and .1% Pacific Islander.

**Table 6 Safety**

# Mentions	Themes	# Mentions	Safety
128	Safety Thoughts		
		72	Support Programs
		10	School Violence
		15	Drug Use
		9	General Community Violence
		17	General Community Safety
		5	School Safety Issues

*Safety*

*Safety* issues were the next most prevalent theme. *Support programs, school violence, drug use, general community violence, general community safety* and *school safety* fall within this theme area and, as can be seen in Table 6, were mentioned a total of 128 times by stakeholders. The community expressed these concerns with passionate

language. Despite this data coming from written documentation, the voices were clearly able to convey their emotions in connection to this theme.

*Support programs* was the most prevalent of comments and more specifically the bulk of the comments are regarding one particular program. This "Leadership" program is one that helps students who are self-disclosing drug use and want help. The comments were in support of keeping the program from changing its model; the school in which it was housed wanted to redevelop the model. From this data set, it was not clear why this program was changed, but there was a sense of urgency with the language asking for its return to original form. The staff person, from the high school, expressed his concern in this excerpt, "I'm really concerned. I mean, there's a lot of – a lot of problems in the school, and things are starting to go downhill. Something I see a lot is a lot of Fs on report cards...we need to do something for these kids because we're not in the right direction" (Bridgeport Board of Education, May 9, 2011, pp. 4-5).

Social workers and guidance counselors were also of concern for the voices. This particular issue within support programs resulted from the threat of cuts to these positions; therefore, this area is also a co-occurrence with budget and/or financial issues. This student stated during public comment, "As a child who suffered emotional, physical and sexual abuse, when I heard that you were going to cut back on social worker and guidance counselors it hurt. Those were the people who helped me get through." (Bridgeport Board of Education, June 13, 2011, p. 29). Again, the mentions of support programs related most often to the potential or real change happening with a program that the community deemed valuable: "I'm a TAG student in fourth grade, and I am

wondering why you're cutting the TAG program." (Bridgeport Board of Education, June 13, 2011, p. 65).

While I separated types and perspectives of violence, they all speak to the concern with violence in the district. At times, the violence is mentioned in conjunction with requests for use of a school building, where there will be a program that engages students in an activity, "To get them off the streets, to give them an alternative to avoid perhaps, you know getting in trouble with the law, you know, crime." (Bridgeport Board of Education, April 25, 2011, p. 6). Other times, the voices were concerned with unspecified violence, such as, "I've been hearing some very disturbing news, again, back at Harding High School. And they've been having a lot of major problems, which I guess is being swept under the rug or whatever, and people are fearing for their children's lives." (Bridgeport Board of Education, April 25, 2011, p. 7), but they also lack detail that help understand where the issue derives. In fact, this excerpt comes from one voice who was persistent in speaking to general issues of violence and safety in the community. Clearly, this was connected to education for her.

Last, drug use was mentioned more frequently than school violence but to be completely transparent most of the mentions were in relation to one specific program. The removal of this program was attributed to an acute increase in drug use. What should also be mentioned is that this program was not significant to most of the board members, when judged by their lack of comments. Nonetheless, there were impassioned pleas by several current students and former students, "Many of my friends were into narcotics, many of my friends used as well as sold narcotics. I had nothing to



do. I am one of seven I am the eldest in my family. My parents had other children to worry about” (Bridgeport Board of Education, March 14, 2011, p. 13). In addition, community members were also vocal about their concern with drug use as a result of the program's reorganization. It also notable, however, that no other mention of concern with active drug use was mentioned outside of this program's advocates.

**Table 7 Internal BOE**

# Mentions	Themes	# Mentions	Internal BOE
256	Internal BOE Thoughts		
		84	Board Process
		53	Board Member Conflict
		71	Chaos
		21	Board Membership
		27	Communication to Parents and Community

*Internal BOE*

The second highest theme with the most mentions is "Internal BOE". The number of mentions shown in Table 7 exactly doubles from the previous most mentioned theme. In this area, there are issues of *board process*, *board member conflict*, *chaos*, *board membership*, and *communication to parents and community*. My bias in this theme shows in that these are not issues the board members explicitly expressed; I have decided that based on the repeated occurrence and public comment that these thoughts

needed to be categorized, tracked, and coded. As with all the code groupings, my influence shows in placing these codes as one theme. My explanation follows for their connectedness.

Their relatedness centers on the relationships of the board members, including the superintendent and his office. Within these voices, we hear a board who is unsure of what it can and cannot do, in accordance with Robert's Rules of Order - the guiding protocol handbook for the board. We also hear board members, along with the superintendent and city attorney assigned to the board, who openly argue or use disrespectful words with each other. The repeated questioning, as if a death by a thousand cuts, and stretching of meetings until late in the evening has also been coded specific to this study as an issue. There was also a special incident of the opening of a seat for board membership, of which its appointment became an issue. Last, in these findings, are the call for or attempt to communicate with parents and community because within the BOE, this was not a straightforward action.

The code *Board Process* is the most prevalent of all the internal board thoughts. There are several manifestations of this code from the superintendent explaining to the board that the reason an issue has not moved forward is due to their indecision on logistics, “But now – like last year, this board did not establish any goals and objectives, and I guess the last meeting was cancelled by you, Dr. Barack [sic]” (Bridgeport Board of Education, February 14, 2011, p. 153), to a board member's refusal to address a proposal because it did not appear on the agenda, “No, I’m not accepting that proposal because that’s not what was on the – on our agenda.” (Bridgeport Board of Education,

February 14, 2011, p. 70). Again, as with many of the codes, this code crosses with one or more other codes. In fact, *board member process* intersects with *chaos* through several voices.

Board Member Conflict shows up loudly and clearly. There are several moments when the board's frustration came out as name-calling:

Board member 1: Can you repeat the motion?

Board member 2: Without permission form the chair –

Board member 3: No, no, no. You said you were not going to read it, so shut up. He's going to play it.

Board member 4: Have some respect.

Board member 2: Pardon me?

Board member 3: No, it's irritating.

Board member 4: Have some respect.

(Bridgeport Board of education, June 13, 2011, p. 152)

There are other moments of frustration when the board members refuse to participate in the process as a result: “Board member 1: Madam Chair. Could you ask him [sic] to read his motion into the record again, please. Board member 2: No, I'm not going to read the motion. It's exactly it [sic] was reflected in the record.” (Bridgeport Board of Education, June 13, 2011, p. 152). This conflict has not gone unnoticed by the community stakeholders who mention it during public comment, “Everybody's dealing with the same thing. The six board members, yous [sic] work for us. For us. Our kids are suffering and dying.” (Bridgeport Board of Education, September 27, 2010, p. 14) -

in this excerpt the board member calls out ""six"" board members, even though there are nine total board members. This is just one of several examples that also calls out their conflict. As well, this contributes to chaos.

There are times during the board meetings when the board members do not remember if they did or did not make a motion, voted on a motion, or amended a motion: "I thought I did ask all those in favor." (Bridgeport Board of Education, April 11, 2011, p. 57). They happen so frequently, they were labeled under the code of *chaos*. When the board has to follow-through on previous meetings, the materials needed are not available: "But we still have not received in our packet the minutes for that meeting, so I really don't know what was discussed." (Bridgeport Board of Education, March 28, 2011, p. 23). However, what is perceived as missing or not understood happens between two sides of the board. Yet, there are specific board members who often call out a missing piece or cannot recall an action, more so than another specific set of board members. This is the split at reference in several public comments as the "six" and the "three" (there are a total of nine board members).

**Table 8 Financial**

<b># Mentions</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b># Mentions</b>	<b>Financial</b>
379	Financial Thoughts		
		84	Budget
		84	Financial Issues
		36	Budget: Staffing
		51	Financial Issues: City portion
		5	Poor Conditions of the Schools
		35	Mismanagement
		6	Cronyism
		10	Closing
		33	Facilities
		21	Facilities: Fee Waiver
		14	Support Staff

*Financial*

Financial thoughts were plentiful. There are several codes but, as one can see in Table 8, corresponding to their codes, most often were issues related to the *budget* and general *financial* issues. In these excerpts you will hear some issues which were part of the general refrain: From the community there were concerns that budget funds were not allocated fairly, “Teachers have given up salary increase and will contribute more of their salaries for health care. Yet you saw fit to endow our superintendent and his wife with health benefits to age 64” (Bridgeport Board of Education, June 13, 2011, p. 53), concerns that the budget would directly hurt the children: “I found out a few days ago about the budget cut I was so concerned, so worried about her education” (Bridgeport

Board of Education, June 13, 2011, p. 60). This plea from a parent was during a highly attended meeting by the community.

There were a larger than normal amount of people who signed up for public comment. It is strongly possible that the people were encouraged to attend by several board members. There was also a good amount of media coverage of the impending budget trouble, indeed, it is often cited as one of the reasons for the call for the takeover. But what is here in the data shows several community members, all with a range of emotions, none too far from frustration, about the state of the budget. The concerns were thoughtful and connected to a deep care for their children, teachers/staff, and the community.

The superintendent was melancholy because part of his hurdle was his proposal to close a school:

So much so that this is what I will say to the board tonight. If your comfort level is such that you would rather not have this issue hanging out there, you know, making it appear that we're hoodwinking the community, making it appear that we're being disingenuous, if you'd rather not have it hanging out there, then what I would say to the board tonight is, pass the SIG grant without Dunbar in it. Just don't - don't leave it in there (Bridgeport Board of Education, June 13, 2011, p. 136).

As was his job, his tone was thoughtful but practical about the matter. Many in the audience from the community, and several board members, were tied to keeping the

school open. But there were also other community members who were fine with the school closing because they thought it was the best solution:

People say it's about the children. A vote against the plan to transition Dunbar is a vote that cares more about the level of noise in the room than the content of the comments that are being made. A vote against the plan for the transition for Dunbar is a vote against sending children to a stronger school and a better learning environment. (Bridgeport Board of Education, June 13, 2011, P. 62)

There were other issues around money that caused much frustration and excitement. Part of what is a matter of much disquiet during the meetings is the perception of chaos, of picking at issues that were relatively mundane. Here is a board member pressing about a distinction between what is a saving and what is a expense reduction: "I think the specific point here, Dr. [Barack], is we commingled - we commingled items which I consider are reduction in services with items that are in my judgment absolute savings" (Bridgeport Board of Education, June 13, 2011, p. 82).

These petty matters may be the reason the budget troubles were unable to move forward – by design or incompetence. In fact, the instances of these petty exchanges were too frequent. Even the superintendent had to address it, regarding a matter during Black History Month and his commitment to its programming. "...then we'll do it, but it's not because a black superintendent doesn't care" (Bridgeport Board of Education, February 14, 2011, p. 129).

Again, the community members were willing to not only attend board meetings to express their frustration, they wanted to be active in the process. This speaks to community voice and its importance, as well as its activism:

Do you feel one hundred percent confident that this is the best budget that you could put together with the least amount of harm to [Water City] students and one that fulfills all the mandates and meets all the requirements? Please do not approve this budget until you can answer yes. (Bridgeport Board of Education, June 13, 2011, p. 30).

And here a community member is clear they want to be directly involved, “There's a lot of us that are very interested in attending the Finance Committee meetings process hear what's going on and everything” (Bridgeport Board of Education, May 9, 2011, p. 3).

Another surprising finding was the amount of use the school received from the community. There were frequent requests from the community for the schools ranging from basketball programs, to church service, to youth development activities. One of the largest programs using the schools, ironically, is a non-BOE city-run after school program. District policy allowed any city employee or program to use the facility rental-free. The board however was starting to reevaluate the program in thinking about the loss of revenue. Here the board’s attorney speaks about the status of recovering the money from the city after school program, “Yes, I'm very confident that we're going to be pulling in the \$85,000 from the [after school] program” (Bridgeport Board of Education, April 25, 2011, p. 15).



### *Summary*

The findings from the transcripts were plentiful. The unseen mechanisms of seven themes: people connection, personnel, school policy, academics, safety, internal BOE, and financial are significant to understanding the seen mechanisms of financial mismanagement and test scores. The stakeholders had a lot to say about how their district arrived at and contributes to the poor performance of their education system. These seven themes have even more to say when the codes that produce them are examined for the frustrations and emotions that are often dismissed in reviewing takeovers.

### **Analysis of Findings**

My first research question is: How do stakeholders describe the socio-political development of a state takeover on one school district? Here, I am presenting my analysis of the findings based on the voices from the five stakeholders' roles (parent, community activist, superintendent, mayor, and BOE member). In the following analysis on the findings I present the stakeholders perspective on the reality of the mechanisms that led to the takeover. These thoughts may seem competing and contradictory; my voice will interject to explain the issue as I assess these matters.

The voices discovered from this study provide the major themes – safety, internal BOE functioning, and finances. These three major themes are the response to my first research question in that these are the causes that describe the socio-political development which led to the takeover. These are the mechanisms which happen at a local level. The unseen factors leading to a takeover are confounded and these major

themes are tied to the other subthemes of academics, personnel, school policy, and community connection. Within the literature the issues of academics and finances were the seen mechanisms that mattered most and told the story of takeovers. Yet, while these are what is required to be seen to justify a takeover, according to laws, these findings show academics and finances are confounded with more local issues. Additionally, subsumed in these major themes are details that provide the complexities needed to fully understand the empirical, knowable experience – the takeover. Local concerns regarding board function and issues of safety are many, in addition to the obvious concerns of finances and academics.

#### *Internal BOE Functions*

Internal BOE functions are matters that happen within and between the local board. In hearing the voices of the takeover, you hear issues specific to a district. In the process of a takeover, most often, external actors are brought in to address the two actual events that are seen – finance and test scores. Those are real (seen) issues but these findings demonstrate that poor communication between local actors, the ways and attempts to deliver information to the community, how board membership represents the community, and understanding the most effective way to run a meeting are also matters of concern. As the findings demonstrate, the community’s concerns were truly specific to their needs. These issues were often conflicting and contradicting, as we hear when the community asks for a stable budget yet reject efforts to discuss options that involve closing schools which perform poorly and are under-enrolled. Their voices on this concern are heard in the community’s comments to the board in several instances.

There are several glaring moments when internal board functioning is seen as dysfunctional. During instances where the board attempts to question the central office staff is where this concern gets highlighted. The superintendent's choice for staff, while questioned by the minority three on the board, were also highly competent. During the board meetings, he confidently had his staff on hand to respond to the intense questioning of board members. They could calm, or redirect, a board's concern with smart reasoning and efficient solutions. This can be seen in the issues with nutrition (under the subtheme of policy).

The community and a board member were highly dissatisfied with the quality of the food served. It was an issue where the blame was placed in the lap of the central office administration, as well as seen as further neglect of a hapless community. The director of food services was able to step in and calm the frustration by simply explaining that there is a process from the federal government to change the items on the school menus and she invites families to meetings where they can influence the choices. She was also able to explain in a way the audience understood; she explained that the district was not choosing unhealthy food but was given a restricted list of items from which they chose the menus. The board seemed to have no knowledge of these processes and procedures (excerpt). This show of central office competence was important for other reasons as well. On the one hand it gave the community a lesson on school policy (and this is education the community sorely needed) and, on the other hand, also helped interrupt the majority deficit narrative that was often repeated during the meetings.

## *Safety*

The stakeholders want the district's students safe. Parents, students, and community activists have used passionate, albeit deficit, language to explain their concern for safety and students. They see the support programs they back as violence prevention programs. If their children are not safe in school or after school, they will not attend; school is harmful for children who do not have access to programs that promote safety during school and after school. They also connect this concern directly to academic outcomes; if students are not in school, they cannot do well.

The voices tell us what can happen when education is not a safe space. These voices speak about violence in their community during public comments to the board of education. This is an issue that takeover reform does not address. The communities ask the board to understand the fear they have in regard to the district's, and the city's, inability to ensure safety for their children.

Support staff also are included in this mechanism. Parents and community activists mentioned a caring paraprofessional or mental health staff who made a difference for their children and/or themselves as a student. Again, this demonstrates the unseen mechanism that has a direct impact on the academic outcomes of students in urban centers

Last, the voices made clear they understand the value in a quality education for their children's future success. Without improvement in the education system of Water City, the hope for their children's future success was minimized. The stakeholders, no matter the strife exhibited between them, demonstrated their ideology

and/or actions were ultimately to improve the quality of education for young people in the district.

### *Finances*

Finances were the most mentioned concern in this district. Funding for schools is multifaceted but mostly coming from the state and local levels of government. In this district, the city, which is income strapped, did not give its portion of the school budget at the levels needed to meet the budget's minimum level of operation. But the city's contribution was not the only financial issue. Like the superintendent stated at one of the board meetings, "You pick up rocks and find snakes". This was a metaphorical reference to the layers of problems the board of education must wade through in its process to clean up the systems and have them run more efficiently. For the superintendent, his voice repeatedly pointed out how flat funding from the city hurt his ability to meet a budget that had increased expenses each year, especially with regard to personnel.

## CHAPTER V

### FINDINGS OF THE STUDY: INTERVIEWS

#### **Stakeholder's Stories**

In this study, stakeholders of a district taken over by the state tell their tales. In critical race theory this counter-storytelling is a tool for self-determination (Bell, 1992). Earlier, in the chapter three, I shared the preliminary stories of five stakeholders based on the document review of media data sources. In this chapter, again I present the voices of those same stakeholders, but based on interviews, as told six years later. They will tell their stories using a counter-story narrative – using direct quotations from the participant interviews. You will hear the voices of a community activist, the superintendent, the mayor, a board member, and a parent – where they will speak to you from their perspective; you will also hear my voice as the narrator. It is my positionality that there is truth from each voice that can be unique and intersecting. The story begins with the community activist as he tells his story, which had not been heard. Next, the story continues with a parent and is followed by the remaining participants from three stakeholder categories: board members, mayor, and superintendent.

This process of capturing these findings was multi-layered. First, I contacted the interview participants. Then, I conducted in-person interviews over the course of several days. I also used a transcription company for written documentation of the interviews. Then, I studied the interviews as I reviewed the transcript to check for mistakes. Finally, I summarized the transcripts.

“Language does not ‘reflect’ social reality but rather produces meaning and creates social reality” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 961)

*The Community Activist.*

Eddie Oldtimer, has been showing up to community meetings for decades. He is a self-proclaimed community activist with an obligation to education that he loves and hates. He even stopped attending the meetings because he thought maybe his agitation of the issues were causing some of the tension at the meetings, but was called to return by a community member. Being from Alabama, he has a different sense of community, which he has tried establishing in the north; although, Eddie would not go as far as to run for the board because it is, “one vote against the establishment”. I asked him about his experience with the takeover and he tells me this:

My experience with that takeover, these six years later, I recall that nothing was getting done. About 100% of the time there was a split vote happening - five to four. No, it was six to three. This split means we did not have a vote. The three was part of us and if they was always losing the vote, then we were losing. But, really, nothing was getting done. They were fighting all the time. Those people should have been creating a better education system but, “we didn’t have a voice, and regardless of what we said and what that voice said, there was nothing being done, and it was basically, there was a standstill”.

Even the superintendent didn’t have a voice. Here, he refers to both the superintendent in place right before the takeover and right after. Although he disagreed with the first superintendent, Dr. Laidback Barack, he admitted he was excellent.

Further, Eddie is clear on what he did and did not appreciate about the two superintendents. One tried, and the other just tried to bring in charter schools.

According to Eddie, the appointed board's superintendent, a national figure on reform, ushered charters into Water City. Eddie Oldtimer lauds that "many charter schools was coming into [Water City]." I did not think it was my place to tell him that as of 2017, the district has six charters and four were in place prior to the takeover, opening between 1997 and 2010. I do not want to interrupt his recollections.

Mr. Oldtimer speaks with a hush-toned intensity that gets you believing that there is an urgency to what he says. There is an immediacy to this, despite the decades he has poured into these matters, and to which there has been little change. All of his statements are not facts; although they are stated with the claim of fact. I give Mr. Oldtimer respect for the passion he has placed in his consistency to matters of education. He tried to let go, as he told me earlier, but something keeps holding him back. In fact, to illustrate his impact, there is an "Eddie Rule" at board meetings now; whereas, each person during public comment is only allowed two minutes and cannot give their minutes to another commenter.

Moving along, I ask Eddie more about the district issues. I wonder about the generous amount of talk at the meetings, in 2010-11, about a drug prevention and intervention program. "Mostly the talk was about how much we wanted the program to stay as is, that there was too much on the line with the kids who needed to stay away from drugs." When he was young he had a caring teacher, who had a wonderful way, who helped prevent him from doing drugs and that is the type of programming Water



City needs. But the program, the drug prevention program the community advocated for and wanted, was cut anyway. Six years later, “the program is gone”.

Other problems that Mr. Oldtimer recalls were about the conditions of the buildings. He and his fellow activists formed a team that went to schools to inspect them for physical problems. “There were schools with asbestos, lead paint, and mold”. He did this walk through with the mayor who was in place prior to the mayor who helped usher in the takeover. But for Eddie the timeline is hazy and since nothing has changed, the timeline doesn’t much matter to him. In fact, he says, “Different board, same result.” But he has a perspective that is broader than the local when he says, “The federal level of education means it’s the same everywhere - Chicago, Mississippi, Texas.” The burden of change is on the African American community.

Continuing in this vein, Eddie Oldtimer has a lot to say about the parenting in the community. He looks around and doesn’t understand why half of the families, of the twenty-three thousand children enrolled, do not attend board meetings regularly. He knows they do not because he is there. Attendance is a demand that should be made, from the board, to the parents. The district allows parents to get away with too much. In fact, there was a Black principal who was disciplined after being caught dragging a child, on video. The discipline shouldn’t be for the principal but the parents because it is unfortunate that teachers do not have control in schools. He illustrates with a tale of a mother, “that’s probably on crack, probably doing whatever she’s doing or drinking or don’t care and uneducated.” However, this mother, he acknowledges, “she went through the same system.” At times it is hard to follow Eddie and his assessment of who is to

blame. Here is how it seems to break down: the African American community, the suburbs, the local board and teachers – not to blame. Parents and the system – blame. I dovetail this with another statement made by Eddie; under the appointed board’s superintendent, there was no desire to hear from parents, which is why “parents really don’t go because when they go and they complain about things and nothing gets done.”

Slightly to his credit, Eddie Oldtimer wants to avoid children going to prison straight from school. His prevention plan includes more punishment for children in schools. For Eddie, discipline is certainly key but to a larger extent so is the examination of who is teaching students. While he doesn’t blame the teachers or the suburbs, he thinks it is nonsensical to have teachers in charge who do not know nor understand children who are from the city. He says, “they’re shipping them in from the suburban community and in to our community to teach our kids, but yet and still they know how to teach our kids, but we can’t, and my question to one of the board meetings, in the United States of American we have hundreds of thousands of African Americans finishing colleges with degrees, but they’re not qualified to come back to the community and educate the kids. What it would be that the kids, African Americans that finish college come back into the community.”

Moving forward, I ask Mr. Oldtimer about his solutions, he says he wants to start a school. In this school, basic skills will be taught – like driving. Currently, the district gets about a billion dollars every four years, he says. He can promise a better return on investment. For example, he will change the fact that boys do more poorly than girls (not sure if he wants to switch it or balance it); but he knows that things will not change

if we have the “same rules and regulations”. These schools must have afterschool programs “to help you”. While his plan for action can be seen as admirable, I am slightly shocked and ask him about the status of his school; it would essentially be a charter. Eddie assures me that it would not be a charter because charters are wrong. I let it slide and ask him about funding because therein lies the rub. He says he would create a board and raise money from private individuals (Oprah tops the list). And in this, we have a 360-degree solution presented without the least bit of irony.

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“We are only now becoming fully aware that it is only when persons are enabled to shape their own experiences in their own fashion, when they become critical of the mystifications that falsify so much, that they become able to name their worlds. At once, they may orient themselves to what they conceive as the good” (Greene, 1993, p. 219)

### *The Parent*

Activista Agitador, came into her activism in education as a direct result of the takeover. And for her, that’s a good thing, a very good thing. “It was a breath of fresh air to have the state takeover”, she says in her strong and matter of fact manner. She is a married mother of one son whom she adores. He was in second grade and reading below grade level when she started in this advocacy work and now he is in the eighth grade and “an honor roll student”. It is for him and children in Major City that she has taken on the roles of “community leader, parent leader, and contributor to the community”. She sits in the room of her father because she is one of a small team of two taking care of him as

he is living with an illness. She makes time for him and her advocacy. Like her determination, the takeover was just an attempt to find a solution to something that was not working – a system in disrepair.

The dysfunction of the board led up to the takeover. There were constant fights and in the end they decided they could not work together. For her, this was reasonable. The new board, with which her advocacy came in like a lion, was focused and not political. “There was no personal agendas”, and a good mix of roles: there was a parent, a professor, a CEO, and local people “who [could] add solutions to the table”. To be fair, the district had some financial problems for a while, as far as she knows, and that may have contributed to the takeover. But even that was about how they “mismanage” themselves, she muses. How can you manage a budget, failing schools, and a financial crisis? Proof for her? Even today, after the reversal of the takeover, the board is still bringing in personal issues and there are still mismanagement issues.

Mrs. Agitador then gets to a personally candid moment in admitting that there was scandal in the being “two sides”, “fighting for the takeover and supporting it, whether they fought for it, but they did stand up and support it, and then I did hear the other side where they felt as though it was scandalous”. It is here that she critically discusses the side she supports. It is here that she honors her self-proclaimed title of leader and acknowledges the problems of her side of the takeover. “People’s names were mentioned, the money behind it, privatization of schools, and this person and that person and that organization. I believe there was...truth to some of the scandal. This is, I mean me being me, and I am me. I don’t allow people to speak for me. I don’t allow

people to think for me. I like to see things for myself”. What Activista gets to is that there were times when the “takeover side” was not being honest, even with her. “I did believe in our superintendent at the time and our mayor. I will say that that without a shadow of a doubt”. She also admits some of those people (the leaders) “had a lot to benefit from”. I ask her about the benefits and she very directly says, “Position, power, money.”

Nevertheless, she supports their efforts. The district was a long way off from being privatized. Legally, she did not see a clear path and knows it would require changing of laws; although, she says, “I’m not sure it is not that difficult. It can happen, possibly overnight, possibly months. I’m not sure”. She is sure that she was not involved in privatization. But when it comes to the money: “...you’re not gonna get money from poor people. So, if you’re gonna get the money from rich people, take it”. She distinguishes between donations for power and donations to “donate”. The former is not good. Activista is extremely affable, if not cavalier about the idea about privatization. In her mind, people are too awake because they have been educated and will not stand for something to be taken away from them.

The attempted charter revision, which would have given mayoral control of the school board seats, lost at the polls. Mrs. Agitador voted for the revision but understands completely why others did not. They were given information, from the other side that said, “Your people died for your right to vote” – voting for the charter was seen as a removal of voting rights. She knows this is true and does not want that minimized but she goes on to say that, “less than one percent actually voted for the BOE,

and a lot of people voted for our mayor, so it's like holding one person accountable versus nine".

The issues with education and how to fix them are not straightforward. She's a self-admitted conspiracy theorist. To her, "everything is scandal; everything is question [sic] – I'm a conspiracy theorist to the fullest". But, here is where the complications come, "you see people like me and you, people of color who are on these boards, who have tons of money, who are supporting you wholeheartedly". Someone like Howard Fuller has a story that complicates a normally straightforward story for her. He is someone who experienced racism and he touched her heart. He supports charter schools and it is hard for her to believe his support of charter schools means he is selling himself and his people out.

The district received a lot of money at the time of the takeover because of the appointed board's connections. A former education expert for the city during the time after the takeover, was able to get some money to come into the district but some BOE members questioned it and wanted to know where it was coming from. Activista cannot understand why, if there is no strings attached, there is a need to know where the money is coming from. Her response to a board member decrying the KKK as a possible source, "I doubt that the KKK is gonna give to [Water City] children, let alone an inner city at all. So, I don't care where – some people wanna save the whales, some people wanna save the animals, and some people wanna save babies, and some people wanna save the education system and our future. So, if I'm a philanthropist or of I'm a giver, why would I want to – I mean, I'm giving with nothing expectant [sic] in return".

In part two of our talk, we got into more of her thoughts on the impact of the takeover. Activista has a take on it like no other; the appointed board's superintendent and the mayor who wanted reform, "I will say that those two individuals, they stuck their neck out for our children". As she sees it, the mayor has no stake in education other than the minimum budget requirement from his office. But to get involved in education, in this district, meant he had to stick his neck out and it helped that his children were enrolled in the district's school too (she knows he has since placed his children in private school). In fact, both the mayor and superintendent thought of parents as partners. They were "open" and "transparent". Actually, she says they were "open and transparent to a fault". Prior to the many efforts to hear parents from the mayor, superintendent, and appointed board, Activista felt, "Because to me, I never mattered. To me, you never mattered, I could [sic] care less – it's all rigged, you know. These people are all crooks. I don't care if I vote. Really, is my voice gonna matter because it's gonna be set up anyway?" The takeover's impact changed her mind.

It was genuine that the superintendent and the mayor were tearful when the takeover was reversed. They had helped make some change. She was a member of a parent engagement problem-solving group at the beginning of her advocacy. Nine parents from across the district worked for 11 months for over several hundred hours to rewrite the parent engagement policy for the district. As of August 2012, she felt they were genuine in what they wanted to do for children in the district. They both helped her believe in "people versus politics more than anything".

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“Critical race counter-stories can serve several pedagogical functions: ... they can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society’s center” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 156)

### *The Board Member*

Starting on the board of education as a Republican but currently serving as a representative of the Working Families Party does not matter for Afrocentria Jones. What matters, no difference the party, is the work for Africa American children and families. Afrocentria knows that parents want more for their children (regarding reform), “But it’s constantly getting information out because as a parent, people want more. ‘I want my child to have this. I’m frustrated. I went to [Water City] public schools. It didn’t work out for me. I need something different.’ But they don’t understand the long-term ramifications”. Her job in the community was to forestall those ramifications and she does so with pride. In fact, our first contact was on the phone and, when she heard about the topic, she was quick to tell me that the takeover was no longer in effect. That told me something that would come to light later during our interview; she was proud of the work she had done to stop opposing forces in Water City.

A mother of five and advocate from the start, she has been a board member since 2005 – of course, with an interruption during the eight-month takeover. She has had a community group behind her and children in front of her that have needed her advocacy. Her perspective is Afrocentric, and from this perspective, what happened in the districts



destroyed public education. “Education was the way for African Americans to move into the middle class”. The post office and education were the means of mobility in class. As a result of privatization and “Teach for America – that’s not happening for our people anymore ...they’re running these young White students through our schools” - they come and go too often. As a result, Black middle class is “dying”. Sauda explains how she sees teaching by Black teachers as a positive motivation for Black students. This lack of teachers is part of what is not happening now with education. The positions that moved a lot of African Americans up to middle class status are gone and she’s worried about that.

We first dive into the topic of the lead up to the takeover. She does not start from the dysfunction but speaks directly about the private interests who were in on the takeover from the start, as is her firm belief. She lists the hedge fund broker, the mayor, governor, and state board of education as the co-conspirators, if you will. She is frank that her former board members were “weak”. They were “weak people” – the five who voted for the takeover. There were board members, of this set of weaklings, who only attended meetings during a major vote. This point is tracked in the data – however, what is indicated in this collected information shows that the absences were more frequent with the minority three board members during the school year 2010-11. Nonetheless, for Afrocentria, weakness comes from a lack of thoughtfulness regarding the interests of children and families. With these weak minds, those conspiring found footing and on a holiday weekend sent the notice of an intention to vote for dissolution to board members. As was planned, the time to stop this vote did not exist. What could be done was to

begin a counter strategy to correct the action. A team was gathered to counter the “privatization movement” that was headed to Water City. She had seen it done in Chicago, Philadelphia, and New Orleans. This was a movement to create charter schools; Afrocentria says Water City has “the most charters in the state” (Water City has six and there are two cities with more charters). As she recalls, the takeover was over a year (it was eight months) and therefore, was not brief in her estimation. However, I am asking these questions six years later and to a person who has seen a lot in her more than ten years on the board. It can be hard to manage; *you miss a day, you miss a lot* could be the motto. Nevertheless, the minority group organized themselves to get their positions back and “reinstate public control”, she knows this is what voting is all about.

Ultimately, they chose the “legal route”, as a result of their strategizing. A local judge was key to their planning; she helped with the legal team and framing of the issues. The state Supreme Court gave the ultimate ruling in the “minority” group’s favor but it took time for them to be brought back due to processes and protocols.

Prior to her return as a board member, damage was done. She saw this especially in the “forced resign” of Black women in administrative positions. For example, she demoted the Black woman who is now the current superintendent to vice principal; she was once the principal at a high school (hired by the superintendent who left shortly after the takeover). Another Black woman, who is now the superintendent of Rhode Island schools, was also demoted by the appointed superintendent. Finally, a third Black woman left and is now superintendent of another school district. In their stead, the appointed superintendent brought in a lot of incompetent people to lead at the high

school level. She mentions another principal at a high school, but I remind her that this women left before the takeover (during the time an EMO was hired to manage a turnaround school; she actually went to work for them and is now working at the central office level for another district). Nonetheless, unfazed, Ms. Jones is clear that these “high-powered” ladies were “kicked...to the curb”. To this, I do not dispute. Further, this had the effect of pulling resources: have too little to work with and then claim incompetence. The point would be to then point out how bad the schools were “operating”. They actually create the poor environment and then claim the problem rests elsewhere. To sum, she says the new superintendent was “hired to destroy”. All he needed was money and to tell him what to do.

I want further clarity on the reasons for the takeover and ask her about the “D” word – dysfunction on the board. She is adamant that, although, the reason they gave for the dissolution was the dysfunction of the board, she is clear that is not the reason. She likens this belief to, “...it was like Donald Trump saying Barack Obama tapped his telephone”. For Afrocentria, the board was not dysfunctional, but it is what the media kept saying. They were simply a group of people who were not going to let someone dictate what was in the best interest of the children (the three minority opinions on the board). As to the financial issues rumored to have been tantamount to the dysfunction for the district, she says they put in writing that the 15-million-dollar deficit was the cause but she says that was not the cause. The superintendent asked for more than the district needed, in hopes of getting the correct amount because the city would give less. Therefore, there was not a deficit. Ultimately, for Afrocentria, the budget was 240

million plus, and that it is a lot of money to have but not use on the education of children. She said cronyism was part of the agenda, and racketeering too. These same forces will shortchange the social-emotional needs of the children.

As to other reasons, the superintendent was “caught up”. He wasn’t comfortable with the direction of the “minority” three’s agenda, which was in the best interest of children. The superintendent chose to side with the other group (the majority group of six) in the hopes they would “maintain him”. Her proof that he made the wrong decision? “They kicked him to the curb”. The private funding persons are still “pushing forward” looking to open charters and they can expect a big fight from the current BOE. Going back to charters, I understand that the charter aspect of privatization is a large piece of the fight. So, I settle in to hear more of this facet. It seems the mayor was pro-charter, as evidenced by the inclusion of money to pay rent for a charter in the city’s budget. The mayor was looking for hedge fund support and was vocal with his support – as were other politicians in the city. There is a lot of money in schools; the schools are where the money is because the “economy is drying up”. What is worse is that the public isn’t getting enough information but when they (people like herself) give them the facts, the people agree that charters should not succeed.

They wanted to get the education discussion to the parents, as often as possible. The district Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) was very active. They were, once, a very good group of people who were interactive and worked hard to get out information and do trainings. They are now a non-existing entity; the district-wide PAC is no longer in existence but the school-level PAC still exist. None of this truly has anything to do

with the takeover; the district-wide PAC dissolved themselves – a result of internal discord. Afrocentria is almost blasé about its future. What did occur as a result of the takeover, however, was the appointed superintendent removed two positions from the district’s Parent Center; but the reconstituted board brought them back. Unfortunately, it seems the parent center is not enough; there is a lot of voter-apathy in Water City. She has knocked on many doors; the parents do not know the BOE members and don’t attend meetings. Sure there are other organizations to help parents but there was an “infiltration by [a] private [organization]...had parents that were trying to get in [to the district PAC] ...and they hire folk, and they get them in, and then they cause havoc in that meeting and the organization [district PAC].” This occurred after they “got rid of him” – the appointed superintendent. She says, “There was all kinds of crazy stuff going on.”

On the one hand, Afrocentria can see the crazy in the district PAC but not on the other hand. Meetings in 2010, where journalists reported the presence of placards calling for resignations and calls for calm after outbursts were demonstrations of concern and care for children and families. It is not for me to say here that this was hypocritical but to report an experience that exists alongside another experience. For Ms. Jones, the real chaos came after the takeover. There are several more points of impact: special education, staffing, the merger of city police to replace school resource officers (SROs), an attempt at mayoral control, the refusal of the city to fully fund their portion of the MBR in cash, and, let us not forget, the ever-encroaching charters. A synopsis tells us: the budget for special education was slashed by a third, which led to a sanction on the

district for its inadequate funding; the removal of key interventionist staff, which effected each school in the district; removing officers trained specifically as SROs removed the essence of the program so that SROs were not incorporating prevention practices; a charter revision that called for mayoral control but was defeated once the people learned the truth about removing their democracy, this also led to the mayor losing his next election bid; in 30 years the city has not fully funded their contribution to local education, the MBR requires a cash input, the city offered in-kind services as their contribution, it works at the state level because they see the city as “poor [Water City]”; and charters need more mention.

With the city underfunding the district and an infusion of charters (albeit predicted infusion), there are financial ramifications. “The money doesn’t follow the child”, and for Afrocentria, this is deliberate; Water City loses that money for every child that leaves. The district still must pay transportation for all students and any students on an IEP. But the district must also pay the special education costs of students at charter schools. However, those who get paid to do the services are not staff of BOE, even though the BOE pays for that person. Testing time comes and students who do not do well on the tests are sent back to BOE-controlled schools. The children are often devastated because of this. All of this supports that every charter is a drain on their budget. “If 100 kids leave the district, that doesn’t mean – it’s not a savings to us because we still have the buildings to run. We still have teachers to pay. We still have the services to offer”. Furthermore, Water City has an increase of enrollment, which is one of the few in the state seeing this increase. Yet, no more money is coming in with

this increase. In fact, to start the nail on the coffin and close out this diatribe, Afrocentria notes that, charter schools aren't doing any better, "so the parents aren't getting anything different". She also mentions that another charter is on probation and goes on to cite the conflict with a charter figure-head and parents as an example of problematic charters. And for the final nail, and with this she was finished with charters; if Water City had the resources that the charters received then they could provide more to the students – to which I critically think, but not from private funders.

Her final thoughts are not unlike the thoughts of others; it was an experience that was "emotionally disturbing".

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"Conversation is not an enterprise designed to yield an extrinsic profit, a contest where a winner gets a prize, not is it an activity of exegesis; it is an unrehearsed intellectual adventure. It is with conversation as with gambling, its significance lies neither in winning nor in losing, but in wagering. Properly speaking, it is impossible in the absence of a diversity of voices: in it different universes of discourse meet, acknowledge each other and enjoy an oblique relationship which neither requires nor forecasts their being assimilated to one another." (Oakeshott, 1962, p. 198)

#### *The Board Member*

Calmo Padres started as the district-wide PAC leader. He soon entered the thick of battle where he gained a new paradigm and dare say it, a new appreciation for politics. He sits back cool and even-keeled but as he tells his story there are moments of stress and disquiet. Interestingly, his story underscores his manner - a natural lean

towards balance. A member of the community for 14 years and a parent who saw a responsibility to his child; he became a PAC member at his daughter's school. He then became president and eventually the two-term district-PAC chair, in place right before the takeover. He will tell us more about his next role, board of education member.

Having two perspectives of the district, he gives off a wise air. His term was ending as district-wide PAC president. He was ineligible for another run because his daughter was on to high school in the next school year. He was strongly recommended by several community members when a seat became vacant on the board. The process allowed an appointment to the open seat, chosen by the remaining board members. He was not chosen. When the appointed board came in after the takeover, he put his name in the hat; again, he was not chosen. Subsequently, on a community tour, the chairperson of the newly appointed board heard Calmo's name so often and with such favor, he was asked to be on the board and finally became a member.

What Mr. Padres experienced on this new board was unlike his viewer-situated perspective as PAC president. These new board members had specific skillsets that covered the expertise needed on the board. Calmo says, in an almost nostalgic manner, "But right now, the way it is, anybody can run for the board of ed [sic]". He is referring to the elected board that currently sits; the appointed board was removed when the takeover was overturned. In Calmo's view, the district has people who run for the wrong reasons and this accounts for where the district is today – in a troubled place. Considering the board members are elected, I ask his opinion about the voting in the district. He states what is generally known, there is usually low voter turnout, unless



there is a more popular election aligned with the board elections. So, in light of few people voting and thereby reduced input from the community, I wonder aloud to him how the board would capture voice. He, giving generous balance to the issue, says, “There’s always two sides to everything”. “Some board members do actually talk to the community and seek input. There’s some that don’t”. In fact, he was a board member that went to schools and spoke to parents. He is careful to say, however, that he went to the schools before he went to the superintendent, which enabled him to know the issue from their first-person perspective.

Having established how he came to be a board member and the type of board member he was, and in noticing that he is not one for small talk, I ask him directly about the reasons for the takeover. He unequivocally states, “Dysfunction”. “All the fighting, the insults, everything else on that Board. It was very toxic”. Indeed, he recalls a board member throwing a pen across the room (this is before the takeover, before his membership on the board) and the fighting and “ridiculing” the superintendent. Then, he dips back into his role of parent and states he used to be vocal in that he voted for nine – not six, not three. This is an allusion to the notorious 6-3 vote that occurred most often on the pre-takeover board. Although, it was part of the reason for the dysfunction, for Calmo, there was no malicious intent from any of the board members. “They were very, very passionate and I respect it believe it or not”. He even goes as far as saying the minority three, raised good concerns, from the community perspective. Yet, with the keen perspective of a thoughtful man, he then says, “Now, being then I had the opportunity after the takeover was dissolved and I had to run for special election, I

happened to serve with those three members. So now I can speak to a little bit of that. Like I said before, I agree with all of that. It's the way they go about it that makes it very toxic and kind of disrespectful in a way. That's just being honest. That's not trying to put down anyone. But it's the way you go about your disagreements and it's the way you go about things". He goes on to say the dysfunction on the board had nothing to do with finances and it was "personalities".

So, we have arrived at a point where Mr. Padres can make differently informed reflections. He is in the thick of it with the elected board back together after the reversal of the takeover. Then, an unexpected insight comes from him; "As much as I believe that Robert's Rules is important, Robert's Rules could also be used as a weapon". This is interesting. "Some folks are very up in Robert's Rules. They will use it as a weapon to stop progress or to – because, you know for whatever reason". Thinking to myself, I do find this statement insightful; it is Calmo's first clear indication of how the dysfunction manifested. And this insight is quickly followed by another, "It's just the fighting. Just the infighting. See, some Board members, they use the community to attack others on the Board. That was very obvious". I admire his ability to find the thread that seems to indicate that no matter how bad the board seemed, "We want what's best for children". He is unwavering on this point.

Now, we have established how the dysfunction manifested. Why? Why were there such problems? Mr. Padres answers me in the negative; it was definitely not for power, "Some people say power, but there is no power." Yet, it was political. He said, "Well, it was very political". "I've always said, and it's funny because when I was

running, I'd say, 'I'm not a politician. I don't like politics.' But one thing I learned about being on the Board, you may not like it, but you have to play. Because if you don't play, you're not going to be able to do your job". "It's called the adversary. But it's politics." As I look at him, Calmo sits in his seat opposite me in a laidback manner, which does not belie his personality. This is a logical place to think about the city and its role.

Going back to the lead-up to the takeover, he says it happened because there was no budget passed. The board refused to pass a budget. He says another problem is the lack of trust between the city and the board: "The city don't trust us. We don't trust the city". He thinks the city should have better faith in the board – this is not the only ironic statements made during my interviews but this inability to avoid these ironic statements make these issues of mechanisms complex. In regard to the budget, the city was persistent in offering its share, partly, with in-kind services; yet, some on the board disagreed. For some board members only, the full cash amount would do. Calmo agreed, at the time, and wanted the full amount in cash too but also thinks of the backlash. The city could then charge the board for their services, such as trash collection – "Are we going to be able to afford our own garbage collection?"

We continue with the interview but the weight of his time on the board is starting to show in Calmo Padres. His passion for doing the right thing comes through clearly because he thinks that should over-ride any other motivation. In fact, he likes the way the appointed board handled issues of discontent; "One thing he [the newly appointed board chair] did realize is listen, if there's something that we don't agree on or there's a

lot of disagreement on, I don't bring it forward until we work it out. That was his belief. Some may disagree on that particular take, but I'm not going to air dirty laundry out in public. It just doesn't make us look good. If we can bring it forward, otherwise, if he knew that we didn't have a consensus on it. It's done everywhere. It's done in Washington. If there's no consensus, they don't bring it forward".

Mr. Padres' recollection of the mistakes from the appointed superintendent and board were a few. To start, the trouble that occurred with the special education funding is notable. To understand this, Calmo tells me I have to understand that the appointed superintendent had his strengths; academics and finance were not. Cleverly though, the appointed board brought in others who were experts to fill these voids. This is extremely reasonable to Calmo. Where it became challenging is that the CFO was allowed to make finance decisions that were also programming decisions; however she was not qualified to do. The appointed superintendent allowed this because he wasn't qualified either. Decisions were made "based on numbers but not needs" and the district has a lot of needs. This led to the problems with parents and "into trouble with the special ed [sic]". The CFO was good, "But you know when you're too good?" Calmo supported the idea of what the district would get with the new superintendent; he supported him changing the district with success like he did Philadelphia, Chicago, and New Orleans. But the district needed a "bridge builder" and he was not; the community was more "split" as a result. He couldn't see that in the beginning. I observe this as a genuine moment of vulnerability for Mr. Padres.

Closing out our conversation, I query about the role of privatization, to which Calmo says some members think there is was a conspiracy. Their mentality about an issue could be embedded and then there was no changing their minds. Despite their beliefs, he doesn't believe there was an effort as a part of the takeover to privatize schools. One conspiracy he addresses is the belief that the mayor at that time of the takeover had a plan to bring in a specific superintendent from another district, who is a "big charter guy." But the appointed board had an opportunity to meet him and did not like him for the district, so he didn't come. In thinking to myself, I know the superintendent who was appointed had an even more national reputation for charter proliferation in districts. However, he was explicitly told by the seven new appointed board members that he could not come to the district and "promote his charters". He debunks any myth that may exist that the mayor and governor really were the ones who brought in the appointed superintendent. The candidate was introduced to the appointed board and it was agreed by the appointed board that he was a good choice but with support. "Like I said, we didn't feel he could do it by himself". Even the appointed superintendent's lack of certification did not bother him; he looked at it as a practical matter. He could be certified in other larger districts but Connecticut says no, "Because it protects its own". It was political in his mind and the reasoning not fair. All in all, they knew what they were getting and not getting with him.

"Unfortunately, our education system has no accountability. It's a free for all". But when teachers and staff hear him talk about accountability they think he's talking about personnel issues and taking jobs. For him it's not about hiring and firing, it's

about creating a system that works based on evaluation. “Dr. Ramos was here five years and I thought he was a great person, but he never made a single administration change in the five years that he was here. Where’s the accountability”? He leaves our meeting with a sardonic look tinged with a hopeful remark about misfortune in the district; this ying and yang in keeping with his balanced personality.

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“Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.” (Robert F. Kennedy,

1966)

*The Mayor*

The former mayor John F. Conservation starts off like a strike of lightening. He talks like a politician, with declarative statements and many sentences that start with the word, “Look”. He has an assuredness of a man who is confident in everything he will claim to remember from six years prior. He jokes easily but also prides himself on his intelligence. We start the interview and I only have to just barely say, “Go” and he’s off.

He is most proud of his role as a father and a mayor. He says he is the only mayor to send his children to their local public school. He almost seems as if he wants to be rewarded, pausing almost imperceptibly after he tells me. He weaves in his knowledge of race and community of Water City as he tells me about the city going from majority White to diverse to then a “monoculture”. In explaining this he is

complaining about the city no longer being as well-balanced with three races: White, Black, and Latino. He says, “My kids, when they were in magnet schools, it was one-third/one-third/one-third. I endorsed that”.

He also believes in social engineering to achieve this balance. He recalls a time the local African American community organized to change the magnet school make-up, so that more African American students had slots because African American application numbers were larger. Since, Whites were a smaller percentage applying, their allowance of one-third of the seats meant more Whites, by representation, had more seats. He finds a way to weave in Thurgood Marshall when he tells me the quotation, “separate but equal is inherently unequal”. He feels you must “racially engineer so that you had balance...”. However, he recently pulled his children out of the city’s public school. His children (who are White) ended up being the smaller percentage because Bridgeport is a monoculture.

At some point, I get the impression that I am being dazzled by his knowledge of racial issues in education. He continues to explain that a Black child in Bridgeport does not have a chance to get taught by a Black teacher. Furthermore, these children get put in special education all the time because people don’t know how to handle them. “These kids aren’t all special ed [sic] kids. It’s just that the people...don’t know how to handle them because they think some of them – I acted out as a kid. I had nuns. They didn’t look like me.” I soon realize, he is telling me all of this to as a lead up to a discussion of his time as mayor.

He starts with his charter revision proposal that would have given him mayoral control of the schools. It was defeated. To this, he explains, “it didn’t resonate”. There was a “whisper campaign” on the day of the election and he says it was brilliant. “They went to African American voters that were voting for Obama. They said your vote might not count if you vote for No. 7, or whatever it was. It was brilliant”. This was the same year as Obama running for his second term. In hearing this “whisper” people did the rational thing and voted against the charter revision; they didn’t take a chance that their vote would not count for Obama. He is not bitter, but he is not happy. I get the sense that he had high hopes that he would be the one to create the change Water City needs. You can hear this when he says that in people not voting for the charter revision they were voting to “throw our children’s future out.” Then out of the blue he makes this statement, “The problem is really the teacher’s union.”

For him, the union is not public. The teacher’s union had an attitude of “entitlement”. He thought from his position as mayor and as a parent, he could do something that others could not do. He felt he was obligated to do something with education to “save the next generation”. So much of education is connected to race for this ex-mayor, so much so that he says education is the next biggest issue - next to race.

It is clear that he does not like teacher’s unions. In fact, he goes on for a while explaining why he does not like them. He does not say he does not like unions; he seems to have a particularly nasty taste in his mouth for teacher’s unions. More so than the problems that come with collective bargaining, unions will not



allow reforms and schools need a lot of reforms. Ah, here is the big problem that connects to why we're talking in the first place. For example, he says class size is "holding us back". Class sizes should range and depend on the child. Children should not have to fit into a certain ratio or sit in seats or advance at the same time. He actually goes on for a bit about other classic school structures that he finds problematic. He has a lot of energy and he has a lot to say. It's as if he were waiting for the microphone.

It is his opportunity to let it all out about public education. In fact, he echoes the parents during public comment when he discusses what can happen to young Black and Puerto Ricans (calling Latinos Puerto Rican is a regional thing) who are not given a good education. No one is really doing well when you compare the U.S. to other countries; but the "majority" culture is doing well in education compared to students of color in impoverished neighborhoods and this makes the majority feel they are fine. So, for him, he likes that he can shut down a poorly performing school and this (curiously enough) gets him talking about how different cities fund education and local control. "If you don't split it [city budget allocations] right, which you never do because you never give schools enough money, you have to starve police, fire, sanitation in order to feed the education beast."

He continues on about, you guessed correctly, teacher's unions and the problems with them from a mayoral perspective. And he ends this part of the interview with another thought that had become obvious during the interview, he misses being a mayor. There was so much left for him to finish and he hints at a

belief that were it not for his tangles with the school board, he would be mayor currently. The school board was:

Over politicized. I would maintain they were not working on what they should have been working on, which was trying to provide a quality learning experience for every child regardless of what school they were from, and they were following their own petty personal political agendas, and I thought depoliticizing a school board...because nobody that I know...was familiar with how to run a school system.

He has many thoughts regarding the school board but ultimately gets to accountability. Accountability is a direct demand to the staff and teacher's unions. In his role as mayor, he wanted to negotiate and leveraged the union's call to educate (or so he thought was their call). The unions would be accountable to negotiate to help close the budget "shortfall". That did not happen, and he connects what happened when he asked for concessions to bigotry and classism because those who refused were not the lower-salaried staff but those making fifty-thousand and more – much more. I notice that we are back to unions, but he is a politician; he connected the dots back to his talking points.

I redirected the conversation to the district's budget. He acquiesced and explained that the city had no money to add to the school's budget. "Where does the money come from? It comes from people who own a house that's worth one third of the value on one side of Park Avenue to the other. [The adjacent town's] grand list is like 16 billion, 18 billion. Ours is ten, okay? We have 150,000 people, they have 35,000." That this is frustrating for the ex-mayor is clear. In good old politician fashion, he

spends the next part of the interview discussing the economics of the region and how it unfairly represses the city at question of this study. But, he also is speaking to larger national systemic issues, which is a strength he brings to his story. He has more to say about these systems and structures nationally, “I mean they’ve proven that they [board of education] shouldn’t be there. You should have more wise, more stable people, and let me point out that those discussions that we have in [Water City] never occur in Hartford, New York, New Haven, Chicago, Washington.”

Ex-mayor John F. Conservation sticks to his talking points and is adamant that it’s structural changes to the economic changes that need to happen because these are the systems which created the reasons for the issues found in the district taken over by the state. And that this state takeover was a solution that would address these issues in the long-run. He was not interested in tales of local conflict and finances because those are just symptoms, naturally occurring from the larger issues. He did not waiver in this belief. Hence, for him the impact was null because those larger issues were not addressed and after the takeover was reversed, the district slid back to its usual troubles.

“We hope that our work adds to those whose efforts continue to expand this social dialogue to recognize the ways in which our struggles for social justice are limited by discourses that omit and thereby silence the multiple experiences of people of color” (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002, p. 166)

### *The Superintendent*

Dr. Laidback Barack was raised in Water City and shows a personal affection for the district. He gave six and a half years of his prime professional life to the district and left

emotionally drained. It is not regret at all but the full weariness of a person who has done all they can. He provided oversight to the over twenty-thousand students with a budget of \$250 million. He was accountable to the management of the system, guided by the policies, and an advocate for children as well.

As he starts, so begins a complex story. He started in the district and worked with a board that had a naysayer to his administration's work. Then, one became two and the chairperson of the board of education, who minimized the conflict well, did not seek another term. The new board, while he respected the new chairperson highly, did not have the ability to facilitate the majority and minority groups in a way that moved the agenda forward. Instead the majority got frustrated with the minority, who were loud and overwhelming. They were confronted with placards from the public who "just always kept something going".

This behavior was also facilitated by the minority members and it was not their only tactic. One board member would launch her own investigations of the district and use central office administration to fill her investigative requests. This took time from the day-to-day work of the central office staff that was already whittled for budget reasons. Amazingly, this board member would then call out the superintendent for not completing the tasks requested from the full board, such as hiring a replacement finance director. Dr. Barack could not wrap his head around the frenetic behavior. You can still feel his perplexed disbelief with this.

He then changes the direction to start with the near end. In a spoiler to the denouement, he talks about running into the then commissioner of education who

informed him that he could request a state takeover. The commissioner knew of the troubles of the district – everyone knew of the troubles of the district. Laidback Barack took this information to the majority board members, who were frustrated and overwhelmed. His board, in turn, wanted to get the mayor's thoughts on this idea of a takeover because the city was an active player in education that could not be ignored.

The mayor, as is no spoiler at this point, was interested and his rationale was that he could not “get the board under control”. He had no direct control over the board, only a financial obligation. The mayor had a plan for the city's development that could not materialize with the state of education in the district as it was. He was a relatively new mayor and he wanted to move forward as quickly as possible. However, the state also had a newly elected Governor who wanted to do the opposite. He wanted to wait before he made a major move.

Keep in mind, this is all being considered while the superintendent had to reduce the expenses of the budget once again. As of his sixth year, Barack had cut about 50 million dollars “out of the schools in either real or proposed programs”. There was a local business coalition charged with looking for savings and ways to increase efficiencies, “but where we were going was a disaster. We're talking about a district that's 90 percent children of color, 95 percent free and reduced lunch. We're talking about more needs, not less, and yet we're getting ready to cut guidance, social work because there's nowhere to go”. As former Deputy Commissioner of the state for education, he knows the city is required to give the MBR, based on their previous year's contribution but Water City did not. Other communities gave more, not less because

“it’s their kids”. But this was not the case for two cities in the state and Water City was one of the two. With needs that were overwhelming in this the year of the requested takeover, they had to find another eight million to cut.

Here is how it went down. There was a finance committee meeting the day before the full board meeting to discuss the budget proposal. They agreed to recommend an “adopted” budget. This included laying off paraprofessionals. However, this was undermined. The mayor, without telling the BOE, negotiated with the union, who represented some BOE staff positions, no layoffs for two years. This meant the savings of three of the eight million were off the table for the BOE. Hang in there, because the now superintendent needed to go back and find a replacement three million to cut when he still did not have enough cuts for the needed eight million. What does Barack do? He “lays it all out without getting into things about the city”. He does not tell the board there is three million in cuts in his proposal that are really not cuts at all. He thinks he can manage this. Then, a board member asks him about the paraprofessionals and the city.

That was “the death notice”. Barack says, “I recommended that we contact the governor and tell him that we cannot equitably educate our children with this money. The board agreed to this move in an 8 – 1 vote. At this time, he pauses and interjects fervently that one cannot separate the takeover idea hanging in the background (desired by the mayor) and these budget issues. So, getting back to the plan, there was consideration of the provision on training for a dysfunctional BOE. They had contacted

the state department's BOE for training but they wondered if it was "up to snuff" with the law's requirements.

The superintendent was confident in his work and abilities and the acting Education Commissioner was as well. Dr. Barack had started progressive initiatives with the National Urban Alliance but still felt held back because he was constantly "chasing dollars". The city would "dance around the MBR" and charge a percentage off the grants to keep for themselves. "They would do whatever they could to keep the dime out of our pocket and put it in theirs because they were strapped too". "Enmity" is what it felt like at the time for the superintendent. But as he looks at it retrospectively, it was about the city not having money either. He was told from the start, at the beginning of his superintendency, that the city could not contribute any more money to the BOE. And the city did not.

Getting back to right before the takeover, there was progress. "The noise", however, interfered with this progress, so it looked like "fits and stops". What the takeover was supposed to do was provide movement. Yet, it became an opportunity – with a newly hired Commissioner, a newly appointed board, and a governor who could engage with the private sector – to bring in charters. He was not going to advocate for charters but said he would not get in their way; he did ask them to think about the other students who would not benefit from a charter. Consequently, the district got Seymour Reform as the new superintendent because Barack "was not an advocate of charters".

As a response to his query, he was given a million dollars. A "mere pittance" to the district. What happened next was the newly appointed board chair discussed

Laidback Barack in a meeting with the new commissioner and decided he was not the right man for their plan. This was after Barack tried to “push them this way, but there were a whole lot of other forces bringing them that way”. He knew it was time.

Meanwhile, the old minority board members were in litigation. Lawyers commenting on their chances had the general sentiment of “I don’t know”. At this point, Dr. Barack saw that the appointed board may be dissolved and thought it was time to retire. He tells the appointed board’s chair about his retirement. It is at this time he realizes that it is not the entire appointed board who is in on the scheme – because by now he realizes it is a scheme – but some of them are. Those who are not in on the scheme expressed to him that the takeover did not mean he had to retire. He retired of his own will but there was a clause that got in the way of this being the official narrative.

In order for Dr. Barack to get paid for his contract he had to be “discontinued”. After back and forth negotiations to make both the pay out and the retirement happen, it could not be done. The newly appointed board could not justify the payment given the financial issues. The only mistake Laidback Barack made, “was not holding out”. He could have had the full contract amount because that is how much that wanted him out. As soon as he was out, Seymour Reform came in and so did the money from foundations.

The local paper reported his leaving as a termination. This had “damaging” effects on his career. There were people within the district who tried to send him off as a well-regarded employee who left on good terms but the damage was done and the sincerity from people who said they would look out for him if he ever left his position,



did not come through. The stumbling in a career and getting back up is something that White colleagues can do but it is much harder for a person of color to get that same support.

I appreciate the reflections that come next for Dr. Barack. When the takeover was overturned, the money left the district. The district is back to the same issues and he surmises, “All I managed to do was kick the can down the road”. Like today, there was a “combination of distrust” within a board who did not have a “stellar” past. The “nitpicking and just kind of keeping stuff going” that plagued him plagues the interim superintendent after Seymour Reform left. The same board member with the “harassing nature” where everything was “fair game” for her attack, still has a seat on the board. The “contingent” of the minority three are still out in the community. A local judge and her husband were “kind of feeding the frenzy” and still are at board meetings, perhaps still with signs calling for removing the board chairperson. The board members are still worn out. Even back before the takeover, “They couldn’t take it”, the chairperson of the elected board was “a very kind soul”.

I ask him to follow up on a few issues that came up in the data findings of the board transcripts. The Peer-to-Peer program that accounted for much of the discussion on student drug use was not a drug issue. It was an issue of the program’s poor organization. Students were “unaccounted for” so there was a proposal to do the program in a better way. He had conversations with students and families about the program. He also trusted his assistant superintendent to run the district yet he was still accountable for the districts happenings. The next issue is on race. “Do you think for

one second that if that system was 90 percent White kids that it would be allowed to exist the way it...subsist the way it does”? In the sense that there are majority (Whites) having issues with the minority (POC), that was not the issue for Dr. Barack. It was “personalities and relationships”. Even though here were some who said he was not “Black enough” it was really about people not liking his “position on things”, such as expressed by an elderly community activist. Yet, he could not do what they wanted in totality.

One of these items was the closing of a neighborhood school. The community activists did not want it to close and become administrative offices. Despite their desires, he did not see it as smart. There was another newer school a few blocks away; it became an issue “because people couldn’t get past the history of it”. Some tied these issues to race. However, he mentions that it was not about race in one way but it was about Black and Brown kids being “disposable” – this is about the funding. Some can do fine if you can negotiate the system. But wisely he understands, you also have to be able to do well outside of schools too – to be able to walk the streets safely.

### **Summary**

The individual stories of these stakeholders are meaningful narratives. These stories are told from people who cared, and still care, about the lives of those in this district. Despite their perceptions about each other, they each tell a story that makes clear the unseen mechanisms that contributed to the takeover and the impact the takeover had on the district. In all, the process was emotionally draining and alternately hopeful and disappointing.

## Analysis

My second research question: How do the experiences of stakeholders (a former mayor, one former superintendent, a parent, two board members, and a community activist) describe the socio-political impact of a state takeover on their community? In this section the voices of the stakeholders describe the impact the takeover on their district. Using their words and the theoretical framework of CR, and understanding the aim of counter-storytelling, I analyzed the words of the stakeholders in response to the research question. Based on the findings, the impact of the takeover includes:

1. Kicking the can down the road
2. Editing the budget: hurt programming and quality personnel
3. Parents were strengthened and weakened
4. Academics and testing did not change

The takeover was in place for eight months. In that time, there were several changes and initiatives: reduction and new central office staff, a new superintendent, an attempt at mayoral control, new appointed board members, amended rules to the BOE meetings, and shifting district parent leadership and rules. These were significant to the stakeholders but must be placed in the context of the swift reversal of the takeover. In this analysis we will consider that the impact has been different for different stakeholders. For example, there are two board members who tell their stories but their conclusion as the impact do not feel the same nor do they share the same perspective of responsibility. However, these same two board members also share the same underlying

belief that all the stakeholders hold: what they did and said was for better education for the children of the district.

*Kicking the Can Down the Road*

This is starting from the end. The mayor and the superintendent, both of whom are no longer in the district, feel most that there has been a significant return to, what they classify as, dysfunction. The board members continue to argue publicly and have trouble moving policy and advancing quality. From those who stayed with the district, they have little hope that the district will improve significantly. The only impact that indicates hope is from the minority board member who successfully fought for the reversal of the takeover. There is some belief that the community members of the district won a victory in the takeover's reversal. The community activist and the parent see that there was potential for change because of several of the initiatives that started; the charter revision was hopeful for the parent. The other area of hope but reverted back to poor performance is the board.

The board of education's internal communication is the most glaring example of impact. Prior to the takeover, all but one board member, described the interactions as contentious and dysfunctional. All but one voice described the time of the takeover as a more peaceful time or just as significant, did not mention dysfunction at all. After the takeover, the voices discuss the poor communication and dysfunctional behavior of the reconstituted board members. In this, it seems they are back to the beginning and any positive impact of the takeover, lasted only during the eight-month period.

### *Budget and Personnel*

Budget and personnel was directly addressed after the takeover. Budget was seen in the decisions made to cut spending on special education. Two board members spoke about this specifically and both agreed that the decision to use special education as a cost saving was a poor decision. It brought about sanctions and compromised quality. Yet, additionally, the takeover brought in new funding. This new funding came from private funders and was seen as a great boon to the district or an attempt to control the district. Either way, as one voice mentioned, the money was gone as soon as all hope to retain external control was gone – after the state Supreme Court reversed the state board of education’s decision on the takeover. None of the stakeholders mentioned any overall improvement in finances in the district. In fact, they still struggle with the city to receive the MBR. This may be surprising considering the personnel changes and reductions that were made.

The district could hire the new superintendent. The exiting superintendent was not given the financial package he should have, were he terminated, and the new superintendent was said to be paid with private funds. One board member’s voice says that did not happen. This same board members says there were key African American women “forced resigned” from their roles. She is the only one to mention this as a factor of impact. For her it was part of a plan to show incompetence by removing competence. The incompetence happened after the takeover, not before. And to this, the elected superintendent says the district was heading to great strength, prior to the takeover. He was hoping the takeover would remove obstacles to this improvement.

### *Parents Strengthened and Weakened.*

As with all other perspectives of these voices, this finding was divided. The parent voice was very clear that the takeover was a process that give her voice. She recalls the education she received from local agencies helped her understand and be active. However, for board members the role of parents after the takeover was a mixed bag. For the community activist, the role of parents is never enough yet and still, the charter revision process did a lot to try and take parent voice, in his mind. Overall, these voices indicate there was movement that created energy within all parents as a result of the takeover.

Regarding the charter revision, it allowed the district to think about the role of the mayor. It even allowed the mayor to think about his role. For all the voices, they know the voting levels of the district are low and reflects inadequate participation. It is symptomatic of a larger problem. The board members and the parents all say they made efforts to engage parents in the process. There is still frustration and the community activist expressed that frustration the most. He sees little improvement in a district that does not garner significant parent involvement.

### *Academics and Testing Did Not Change*

This area aligns with the literature in that there was no evidence of improved test scores. If we look at the first finding in this section, kicking the can down the road, there is no expectation that testing would improve. The findings essentially show that there was no appreciable difference in the district as a result of the takeover. The most significant change that can be discussed is the issue of charters.

As seen in the first research question, the issue of charters before the takeover (as a cause leading to the takeover) was almost non-existent. However, the issues of charters become significant after the takeover for several reasons. As the elected superintendent quickly understood, and what seems public knowledge to all the voices, is that the takeover was aligned with an effort to bring in charters. The superintendent said he essentially the “death notice” was his dispassionate response to charters. While one board member said that he and his fellow appointed board members were clear there would be no charter agenda, the elected board member insists there was – and they succeeded with this agenda. The community activists insist there was a successful movement for charters in the district because of the takeover. It remains a fact that only two charters more have entered the district since the takeover, and one four years after.

## CHAPTER VI

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Missing in the understanding of state takeovers of local school districts is community voice. This study revealed the voices of stakeholders of one local urban district in order to give their voice meaning and weight to a persistent phenomenon. Using a framework incorporating critical realism and critical race theory, the study examined the voices for their understanding of takeovers and revealed their stories. This study's qualitative methodology captures the depth of moments leading up to the takeover and the reflections of its impact six years later. Although, the frames of CR and CRT along with the use of content analysis, constant comparative analysis, and IPA allow for greater breadth when using a mixed methods approach; this study is limited to the scope of specific voices. In this study, the depth of voices for question one come from five roles stakeholders inhabit: parent, community activist, mayor, superintendent, and BOE member. Subsequently, six participants are engaged in semi-structured interviews to respond to question two of this study. In this chapter, I review my interpretation of the findings and recommendations of this study and make suggestions for capturing greater stakeholder voice.

This study was guided by two research questions:

1. How do stakeholders describe the socio-political development of a state takeover on one school district?



2. How do the experiences of stakeholders (a former mayor, one former superintendent, a parent, two board members, and a community activist) describe the socio-political impact of a state takeover on their community?

The major findings, which explain the unseen mechanisms of a takeover, and respond to these questions are specific and profound. Mechanisms are what cannot be seen but are real. In response to the first research question, the mechanisms point to three major areas of concern that led up to the takeover of the school district: (1) finances, (2) internal BOE concerns, and (3) safety. The subthemes of: (a) academics, (b) school policy, (c) people connections, and (d) personnel were also present in the concern of the voices prior to the takeover. The voices also tell us that, in response to research question two of this study, the impact of the takeover had four findings; the takeover: (1) had no impact, (2) attempted privatization, (3) excluded some parents and excluded other parents, and (4) exposed the relationship between the city and the district.

In this study, findings from the first data review of newspapers and media are the *actual events* that can be seen and are easily attributed to the reasons for the takeover – academics and finances. These events are factual and are part of the story, but just a part. The complete story is told by the stakeholders. Using content analysis and IPA, I found the mechanisms – the unseen truth; these were found in the findings of BOE transcripts and semi-structured interviews. Through a spiral process of diving in and out of my data (constant comparative analysis) as I returned to my, and field notes, I was able to garner codes. These codes were grouped into thematic understandings, with the use of coding software, to help shape the voices of the stakeholders. And, as promised

by CR, the reality of a phenomenon as told by the voices of a district was complex and not easily understood.

My initial review of the extant literature reviewing takeovers directly, is that there was not much to tell. I examined fifteen policy reports, six case studies, four funded reports, four empirical studies, and the remaining twelve were classified as analytical studies. What is clear is that the initial literature review findings of financial mismanagement and academics were not enough. Policy briefs were looking at the issue from as a point of law (Bulkey & Mindell, 2004; Gold, Cucchiara, Simon & Riffer, 2005; Ramirez, 2007; Rhim 2005; Smith, 2009; Useem, Offenber, Farley, 2007).

Using case study as an approach in the literature provided merely a document analysis of the seen acts, which led up to a takeover (Burns, 2003; Dolan, 1992; Fry, 1992; Rettig, 1992; Weiner, 2001). The funded reports showed clear bias towards the funder, which were not an unbiased collection of local stakeholders (Hall, 1998; Hassel, Hassel, Arkin, Keval, & Steiner, 2006; Ramirez, 2007; Smith, 2012). The empirical studies by Wong and Shen (2001, 2002, 2003, 2007) offered some useful information on the quantitative impact on districts, students, and schools. However, at most use analytically, Arsen and Mason (2013); Lipman (2013); and Useem, Christman and Boyd, (2006) were critical of the acts that lead to takeovers, which add some depth to the narrative of takeovers.

While this study cannot lay the claim that by understanding the voices of stakeholders reform will be more effective; it does show that the voices of stakeholders offer a thicker more complex understanding of the reasons for reform.

## Summary

The current research doesn't consider the unseen and that makes it ineffective for understanding the phenomenon. It disables our ability to truly understand the depth of takeovers and by extension, reform. The findings from this study respond to the guiding questions that ask for the community's voice regarding the lead up to and the impact of a local takeover. These unseen mechanisms and counter-stories go beyond the more surface understanding of takeovers, which do not consider the awareness of historical factors and emotions that influence the takeover phenomenon. The concerns of finances, safety, and internal BOE functions were grounded in subthemes of policy, personnel, academics, and people connection. Furthermore, the stories of the takeover's impact brought forth depth dripping with emotion and meaning, personal to many in the district.

### *Meaningful Narratives*

The individual stories of these stakeholders are meaningful narratives. As demonstrated in the voices of the stakeholders, they hold local insight into: the needs of the students in their district; the hostile environments students encounter; culturally incompetent policies and curriculum; external forces that pull on the students; the people with whom local youth connect; how specific policies affect their ability to be fully engaged in academics; and identifying the support programs that meet the needs of local youth. These voices provide thick descriptions of experiences, which demonstrate the care and safety they hold for students in the district.

Another area where voices provide depth are test scores. Local voices decry their desire for a great local educational system. They do not decry a need to focus on

test scores. When referencing standardized assessments, it was only to benchmark the student's inability to read at grade level. The desire for high test scores was not mentioned nor seen as a benchmark to success. In listening to the voices, the findings demonstrate that if the unseen mechanisms such as safety or internal board issues were addressed the schools would be more academically fertile places for children. The voices were metaphorically saying, "If you build it, they will come". Test scores was not a mechanism that directly impacted this district's known experiences with the takeover.

This call to examine the connection of safety and academics was ignored. The state demonstrated its disregard for voices in hiring a nationally recognized figure on reform as the new superintendent. He came with a predetermined set of reforms and was backed by supporters who did not consider the local community experts. The voices were not calling for schools to close or new schools to be built. In fact, they wanted their local schools improved. This was to a large extent their discussion on academics. Even schools that have greatly reduced enrollment and low test scores were supported by the voices.

#### *Significant Alternatives Narratives*

These stories tell a significant alternative to the stories told through the extant literature. In some of the literature there is some mention of parents and community but those report of the lead up to the takeover present a straightforward trajectory: "A" leads to "B", which leads to "C". The community and parents in this study are not so straightforward. In this study, when we hear the same voice express a staunch rejection

of charters but then propose a solution that essential calls for a charter the response should not be this person is a hypocrite; the response should direct one to dissect his statement in order to understand its complexity. In Eddie's own statement he says, "I have to prove that this is going to work for the community". His vision means a privately funded school that is community driven, incorporates life skills, and prepares local youth to be fully educated and financially self-determined. It may parallel the model of a corporate charter school but offers a fundamental distinction in its aims, which have a more local purpose in that he is explicitly looking for community sanction.

Finances are also seen as a cut and dry understanding of incompetence but there was more to tell. Again, as a part of the mechanisms that lead to the actual issues of financial mismanagement and board dysfunction is poor communication to parents and community, as well as the concerns of the internal functioning of the BOE - all provided much fodder to the poor functioning of a school district. Put differently, the voices are telling us increased communication between the board and superintendent and from the board and superintendent to parents and community would enable a greater focus on the issues that directly impact student performance and finances.

In the literature, the answer to the finance problems come in the form of better, external, financial management. Taking control out of the hands of local actors may help because elected board members and the superintendent no longer have to the constraints of dueling personalities but in the long run an issue of a weak economy cannot be ignored. This reverts to my beginning premise. The weakening of urban centers through structurally racist and classist policies cannot be excluded when looking

at issues of the local school system. The superintendent of this study tried to get at a more complex understanding of the financial issues; ushering in canned reforms that ultimately disallow empowerment is not what stakeholders are advocating. This can also be said for reforms that directly impact teachers' personnel standings.

Despite the literature that ties teacher performance to takeovers, these narratives do not support it. There is no evidence in the voices of local stakeholders that teachers are of significant concern. In fact, many community voices cite teachers as caring and key to their child's success despite the issues of the district. This is one rare area where the stakeholders generally agree. However, when the issue of poorly performing school districts only looks at the actual seen event, test scores, without incorporating the voice of stakeholders, we see the implementation of reforms that address teacher performance. This study is not saying that teacher performance should be tossed as a consideration, but like all the other analyses, it suggests greater input from stakeholders offers richer more contextualized deliberations to the conversation on how to address reform. The other area where teachers appear is in advocating for positions and benefits. This district is in a state with a union; this should be a consideration as well. There is definite critique to the costs of union benefits but it is not an active conversation for local stakeholders. However, to be fair, there is critique of teachers within the voices but only in regard to racial representation, which does not make a dent in the literature review. Again, as both board members suggested more education on the issues are important for all stakeholders. Yet, they are clear the awareness of this does not mean the reform agenda should be the education.

The voices of the stakeholders are stating that teachers and staff with whom students can relate is important to positive academic engagement. The discussion on Black History Month exemplifies a desire for curriculum and staff to honor the races and ethnicities found in the schools. When there are comments about the possible cause for poorly performing schools a solution offered is that teachers cannot relate to the students or the teachers if they are not properly prepared to work with the population. A very minor portion of the voices say the district should be careful of teachers who are overt with their disdain for children of color. These issues of race and ethnicity are again brought up in two of the interviews and strongly suggested in a third. These are ignored as direct causes in the mechanisms of financial mismanagement and test scores.

#### *The People Care*

These stories are told from people who cared, and still care, about the lives of those in the district. From the parent's voice, it can be understood that attending a long and contentious board meeting, which is inherently about student academic success, to discuss your child's physical and emotional safety is a circuitous way to say that academic success cannot happen without addressing these needs. This is also a powerful way to show the amount of care the community has for education. What makes the paternalistic and hegemonic practices of takeovers ineffective is that these reform efforts assume parents' voice hold no knowledge and do not show up. Yet, this study's findings show that community have extensive knowledge and they show up; but when you only understand the issues from, what CR calls *the real*, you have a simple understanding of the district.

Many local stakeholders may not realize the power they hold when they show up. But, their intensity to show up and stick with the district, through disagreement, is powerful. Within the board of education there are competing sets of ideology. As well, each board member has the ability to vote. The board holds the power to decide the ideology of the school district and to put forth policy that reflects an ideology. In this district, there was a board member with a distinct ideology of Afrocentrism. This board member used her voting power and any attempts by her to block the processes was a declaration that “we were...a group of people who were not going to let you dictate what was in the best interest of our children”. This is strategy that local actors are able to access and while it may seem counterproductive, it is actual strategy that yields some power. When outside forces intervene, this strategy is wrongly looked at as incompetence. As you hear in the voices, both board members, both with distinct ideologies, refute the accusation that the minority three on the board was an attempt at chaos. Both described their strategy coming from a place of care.

Another way to look at this power is in the process of removing the superintendent. In this district, the appointed board told the superintendent, “You know there can be good people in positions but sometimes they’re not the right people...” For the outside actors to fully realize their pre-packaged reforms, they had to have the power of implementation. With that superintendent in place this could not have been done. As the superintendent says in his interview, “We had gone through that strategic planning process there and we had brought in the National Urban Alliance to do some work there...we were moving but for the fact that every time you turned around, I’m chasing



dollars. I'm not saying this is for me. I'm saying we were moving and we had some good people in place". This demonstrates a dedicated stakeholder to the needs of the district, even if it was seen as harmful by others in the district who held the same claim of addressing local needs.

### **Conclusions**

There are several things to consider with this study. Some of the considerations involve the participants' contradictions, some with the time lapse, and for others the scope of issues. That these considerations need to be made are further proof that there are complexities missing from the conversations around reform. We cannot be satisfied with a one-size-fits-all when it comes to reform; furthermore, we cannot be rigid in equating reform to neoliberalism. There must be room for discussion about change to poorly performing school districts that does not render a district helpless to the evil of privatization or stuck with schools that are condemned to the inevitability of poverty's pathology. For community stakeholders, the current conversations about reform are doing little to address their love and concern for their children and students.

### *Time Lapse*

The participants in the interviews are remembering six years later. Their interviews are a follow-up to their voices (among others) six years prior. Some of their recollections included additional information learned after the takeover; their stories are not as unadulterated as they recall. This makes the transcripts of the BOE meetings key; it allowed me to verify the information. The emphases they may place on one experience over another as they tell their story six years later adds to the understanding

of the overall knowledge of unseen mechanisms – for at least one of the participants this is the first time discussing his experience.

Another significant consideration is that this data captures a moment in time. In looking at the issues presented through the stakeholders, they were relevant to those who presented the issue and to the events of that year or perhaps that month. Nonetheless, some of the issues were said to have been grounded in years of disrepair. Even so, these issues contribute to a narrative more illustrative of the actual complexities experienced by a community than the disempowering narratives of poverty or disempowering neo-liberalism.

#### *Contradictions*

The voices clearly had competing views on the issues and from where the issues originated. Their views were often not just divided across the aisle, so to speak, but within the actual stakeholder. This study allows for those seeming contradictions to exist and still be situated as truth. As was heard from one community activist, who wanted to see a change within the way the district regarded the students and allocated money, charters may as well come in if the district could not respect the community's needs. At this same time, this stakeholder was unsupportive of the district actually growing its charter numbers.

#### *Scope of Issues*

The number of parents attending the meeting were relatively few. A connected consideration is that stakeholders, although many voices, were numerically few in comparison to the number of potential parents. The scope of issues offered may have

suffered as a result. The parent participant states that she is born and raised in the district but when asked about the history of the woes of schools she did not know much before she became involved. The community activist participant indicated his pessimism with parents, in general, and the parent participant revealed her lack of involvement at one point. She almost seemed a different person once she became involved. For those who repeatedly show up to BOE meetings, are they different from those who do not? Do those who show up have more knowledge and if so what is that impact, and more importantly, what can they tell us? All of this further strengthens the need to know stakeholder voice in order to understand the issues that render a district eligible for takeover.

#### *What Is the Story?*

In this study, what is known in the lead up and the impact of a takeover is important. The simple explanation of financial mismanagement and persistent under-performance as causal factors in takeovers are inadequate by themselves – even board dysfunction. These are the seen mechanisms. However, they are inadequate as an understanding of reforms and inadequate in its portrayal of a district. There are unseen mechanisms that led to the seen mechanisms mentioned. An additional unseen mechanism that had an impact, found in the supplementary document review, is that the state, as a result of the reversed takeover, hesitates to intervene to help the persistent issues of the district.

The community stakeholders who worked to get the takeover overturned demonstrated that community voice matters, even if the reversal was based on a

technical matter. The stakeholders demonstrated that the unseen mechanism of people connection issues enabled the reversal to happen. The minority board members and several community activists did not accept the takeover and believed it disrespectful. This provoked the litigation. For the state to hesitate in supporting the district as a result of the reversal means they did not understand the unseen mechanisms, as is the point of this study. Had they understood the complex issues from the perspective of the stakeholders, when asked for support, they would understand they were asking for a partner to provide resources for local actors to create reform. They were not asking for a disregard of stakeholders' voice and a preset program on reform.

#### *What We Can Know?*

A complexity is needed to understand the issues of causal factors for communities seeking reform (née change). We can no longer accept a dichotomous discourse that says either privatization via neo-liberal policies will be inevitable or charters are the solution to the problems of public education. The voices of stakeholders provide a deeper and more complex understanding of the causes of a district's poor functioning financially and/or academically. If we are truly looking for solutions that are effective, we must have as much information about the cause as possible. Anything less than these specific community-based understandings means takeovers are not interested in reform that empowers the community.

A disempowered community does not make decisions. Along these lines, because reform efforts are typically implemented by outside actors, as we saw with the superintendent, if you do not go along with the plan, you can become immaterial. There

is valuable knowledge within the experiences of the stakeholders. To throw the baby out with the bath water, so to speak is inconsiderate. In this study, we see all the stakeholders held a level of care and concern for the district – when told from their perspective. Other stakeholders were honest in their assessment that even those with whom they disagreed had positive contributions. However, when the external actors come in with a narrow and shallow understanding they apply less meaningful reform coming from a predetermined plan. Local actors should not be punished for going against this reform playbook.

Further, there is not much evidence that takeovers are effective. This takeover was cut short, lasting only eight months, and it is naïve that real change would be seen. Yet, despite a solid appointed board with several who continued after the reversal, there is not much change. The returning board members who had to work with the new board members did not get any support. The state was hands off when their reform plan could no longer continue. The unseen mechanisms revealed that they did need help but not a playbook that excluded local actors who have been dedicated to change for years. Ultimately, as the superintendent said, this district just managed to “kick the can down the road” by initiating a takeover.

As you see in my findings and analysis, there are several points from which the extant literature deviates. There may be some gold in listening to the stakeholders tell a more complex tale of the issues that plague a district in trouble, before imposing well-intentioned but hegemonic practices on a district that wrestles with how to work

together. This discord is not a call for parental forces coming from the state but support to help the district that is inextricably tied to its great municipal issues.

In this regard, hegemony is a significant feature of takeovers. The reforms facilitate a tale that seems generous and considerate of a district that is in crisis. The state comes in and offers support, this support is not responsive to the unseen mechanisms of the district, the district is not grateful, so the state says they tried but the district is too dysfunctional to know what is best for them – our reform. The irony is that these forces will not offer help unless their methods are adopted. When this line of belief is reinforced, the community itself mimics its narrative. When the community stakeholders mimic the majority voice they reinforce the deficit beliefs of the community, which is disempowering. To believe that the community in which you live is riddled with inescapable violence and disrepair – caused by the residents, to which asking for outside help is the solution, your own ability to create change is neutralized.

My ultimate consideration is not that neo-liberalism in and of itself is harming communities. It is that any solution to the issues of the district that does not deeply investigate the stakeholders' solutions, is hegemonic. As seen in this study, doing so is messy and filled with competing messages but they can be sorted through and made clear. To do anything less is to strategically disable districts and hold the power so that communities of color cannot access resources for use in their own developmental needs.

#### *Who Gets to Tell the Story?*

We need to be flexible in who we decide are stakeholders. A community stakeholder is not just persons who do not hold elected positions and conversely elected

persons are not excluded from stakeholder voice. As seen in this study, local actors have different personal stake in local schools. To have a personal investment indicates a desire for some control on the well-being of the district. For stakeholders to claim their legitimacy over others (through denouncing another's right to have a say) is to compete instead of cooperate. This disables effective communication and focus.

One participant stated that as soon as she found out about the agenda item regarding the dissolution of the board, she called her colleagues. These colleagues were not the total of her fellow board members; they were a few board members and community activists. This shows a divided agenda. What can possibly exist on multiple agendas when the premise exists for all involved, at least in this study, that the work is about what is best for children? For this study, looking at takeovers, this is concerning because when the focus is narrowed to the seen mechanisms of financial mismanagement and test scores (and even simple board dysfunction) the opportunity to understand the unseen mechanisms is missed. Missing these mechanisms means the efforts introduced to reform will be inadequate.

### **Recommendations**

There is much to be gained in listening to the voices of a community. What stands to be gained is a new narrative on the issues related to poorly performing districts and who must be engaged in that narrative. Not only did the reform efforts found in the literature, on the balance, not account for unseen mechanisms, many of the researched accounts did not either. This serves as a wake-up call for the needed depth in

understanding to a complex issue. This also begs for the understanding that the issues is complex. It is not a simple case of incompetence, poverty, and inadequate resources.

In this study, my long-term objective is to conduct a mixed-method study, but one where the quantitative data and analysis is used to support the interpretation of the qualitative data. The design would be exploratory sequential methodology, where this qualitative data collection and analysis is the guiding method used to ground a quantitative data collection instrument (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). This design requires a methodological triangulation of interviews, surveys, and documentation analysis.

This study, despite the depth it has exposed in stakeholder voices, only captured the voices of a handful of stakeholders. In order to truly know the voices of the stakeholders, greater breadth needs attention. This can be done with a survey that is grounded in the findings of this study and asks community members their response to the findings. Again, this allows a greater understanding of the mechanisms of the unseen and bring out a new narrative.



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APPENDIX

**Interview Protocol**

*Protocol: Superintendent, Mayor, BOE member*

Project Title: The Voices of Five Stakeholders of One Local School District Taken Over  
By a State

Stakeholder Interview Protocol

Stakeholder Role: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee (Title and Name): \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview Components:

\_\_\_\_\_ A: Warm-up

\_\_\_\_\_ B: Background

\_\_\_\_\_ C: Substance

\_\_\_\_\_ F: Demographics (no specific questions)

Other Topics Discussed: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Documents Obtained: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Post Interview Comments or Leads:

My research project as a whole focuses on community empowerment, with particular interest in understanding how community can impact education policy. This research does not aim to evaluate you or judge your experiences. Rather, we are trying to learn more about how community voice can aid in more effective education policy.

### *Introduction*

Hello. As you know, I am conducting research for my dissertation. I am hoping to answer two basic questions through my data, my research questions are simply about the lead-up to the takeover of 2010, in Bridgeport, and the impact of the takeover.

Ultimately, I would like to assess the voices of the stakeholders of the school district for their experiences on the takeover. I have identified you as a key person who can help lead me to these understandings and have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about the takeover.

To facilitate our note-taking, we would like to audio tape our conversations today. Please sign the release form. For your information, only researchers on the project will be privy to the tapes, which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. In addition, essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Thank you for your agreeing to participate.

We have planned this interview to last no longer than two hours. During this time, I have

several questions to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning.

(For: Superintendent, Mayor, BOE member: 3/5 participants)

#### Warm-up

- Hello; how are you?
- I am going to ask you directly about the lead-up (the development) of the takeover because I know our time is limited.
- With that said, would you be okay with me contacting you for follow-up questions after I have time to review this?

#### Background

- Would you consider yourself a community member of the district?
- How long were you in your role of (Superintendent, BOE member, Mayor)?
- I have identified you as a stakeholder in education in the district during this time period between 2000 to 2013, how do you feel about this and what do you say about that designation?
- Next, we will go to, ‘what is a takeover?’ - I do not have a right or wrong in mind. I want to know how you understand it.

#### Substance

- What was your role, with regard to education in the district, during the 2010 time period?

- What did the takeover mean for you, as a stakeholder in education, in the district?

- Do you recall any striking (stand out) thoughts you had at the time?

- What do you recall as the reason the takeover happened?

- Did you have any standout memories that triggers your understanding of why the takeover happened?

- What real structures were in place (what was happening) that influenced the need for the takeover?

- What happened (and/or who was instrumental) that allowed a takeover to take place in the first instance?

- How do you feel about the allowance of a takeover for the school district?

- There are laws that allow for a takeover, do you feel the laws give adequate reasons for a takeover?

- What do you feel was the impact of the takeover on the district?

Post Interview Comments and/or Observations

*Interview Protocol: Parent and Community Activist*

Project Title: The Voices of Five Stakeholders of One Local School District Taken Over

By a State

Stakeholder Interview Protocol

Stakeholder Role: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee (Title and Name): \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview Components:

\_\_\_\_\_ A: Warm-up

\_\_\_\_\_ B: Background

\_\_\_\_\_ C: Substance

\_\_\_\_\_ F: Demographics (no specific questions)

Other Topics Discussed: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Documents Obtained: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Post Interview Comments or Leads:

Project Title: The Voices of Five Stakeholders of One Local School District Taken Over  
By a State

My research project as a whole focuses on community empowerment, with particular interest in understanding how community can impact education policy. This research does not aim to evaluate you or judge your experiences. Rather, we are trying to learn more about how community voice can aid in more effective education policy.

### *Introduction*

Hello. As you know, I am conducting research for my dissertation (The final assignment I have to complete before my degree). I am hoping to answer two basic questions through my data (collection of information), my research questions (what I am investigating) are simply about the lead-up to the takeover of 2010, in Bridgeport, and the impact of the takeover. Ultimately, I would like to assess (measure) the voices of the stakeholders of the school district for their experiences on the takeover. I have identified you as a key person who can help lead me to these understandings and have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about the takeover.

To facilitate our note-taking, we would like to audio tape our conversations today. Please sign the release form. For your information, only researchers on the project will be privy to the tapes, which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. In addition, essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2)

your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Thank you for your agreeing to participate.

We have planned this interview to last no longer than two hours. During this time, I have several questions to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning.

(For: Parent and Community Activist: 2/5 participants)

#### Warm-up

- Hello; how are you?
- I am going to ask you directly about the lead-up (the development) of the takeover because I know our time is limited.
- With that said, would you be okay with me contacting you for follow-up questions after I have time to review this?

#### Background

- Would you consider yourself a community member of the district?
- How long have you been a member of the community?
- I have identified you as a stakeholder in education in the district during this time period between 2000 to 2013, how do you feel about this and what do you say about me identifying you as a stakeholder in education?
- Next, we will go to, '*what is a takeover?*' - I do not have a right or wrong in mind. I want to know how you understand it.

- Can you recall when the takeover happened in the district?

#### Substance

- What was your role, with regard to education in the district, during the 2010 time period - the time right before the takeover?
- What did the takeover mean for you, as a stakeholder in education, in the district?
- Do you recall any striking (stand out) thoughts you had at the time?
- What do you recall as the reason the takeover happened?
- Did you have any standout memories that triggers your understanding of why the takeover happened?
- What real structures were in place (what was happening) that influenced the need for the takeover?
- What happened (and/or who was instrumental) that allowed a takeover to take place in the first instance?
- How do you feel about the allowance of a takeover for the school district?
- There are laws that allow for a takeover, do you feel the laws give adequate reasons for a takeover?
- What do you feel was the impact of the takeover on the district?

#### Post Interview Comments and/or Observations

#### *Recruitment Script*

#### **Recruiting Script - Takeovers**

Hello, my name is Vanessa Liles and I am a graduate student at Texas A&M University in the College of Education and Human Development. I am conducting research on



school takeovers and community voice and focusing on using the Bridgeport takeover as a model, and I am inviting you to participate because of your stakeholder status during the takeover.

Participation in this research includes an interview about your experiences with the takeover of the Bridgeport School District, which will take approximately two hours. If you agree to participate, and there is a need for it, I may need a follow-up interview to clarify statements made in the initial interview. It will take no more than another two hours. If you participate in both interviews, your total time commitment will be between two to four hours.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in the research, I can be reached at *203.247.1631* or *vanessaliles@tamu.edu*.

## Code Definitions

<b>Issue</b> <i>a point of contention for the speaker that identifies a problem or challenge that prevents excellence in the district (Code)</i>		<b>Definition</b>
1	Academic Outcomes	Any issue brought up in public comment or during the board agenda that addresses (directly or indirectly) student outcomes.
2	Academic Outcomes: Testing	Any issue brought up in public comment or during the board agenda that addresses student testing directly.
3	Board Member Conflict	Issues between board members that occur during the meetings.
4	Board Membership	Involves who will be on the board and how they regard their role as members.
5	Board Process	How the board goes about the logistics and procedures of the board functions.
6	Budget	Any issue related to budget that comes from public comment or the board agenda.
7	Budget: Staffing	Issue of the budget only as it relates to a staffing decisions and/or considerations.
8	Chaos	When the process of the board meeting and decision-making is interrupted by another board member - delaying or stopping forward movement.
9	Communication to Parents and Community	Any attempt made, discussed, or in-process to communicate to the public.
10	Cronyism	Any reference to positions filled or contracts awarded based on personal associations and deals.
11	Curriculum	Any reference from public comment or during the board agenda that directly or indirectly addresses the district's curriculum.
12	Drug Use	Any reference from public comment or during the board agenda that references drug use for district students as an issue.
13	Facilities	Any reference from public comment or during the board agenda that references the acquisition of new facilities and/or use of the current facilities.

14	Facilities: Fee Waiver	Any reference from public comment or during the board agenda that references requests for the reduction or waiver of facility costs.
15	Financial Issues	Any reference from public comment or during the board agenda that references finances as an issue - in any capacity but not necessarily just a budget issue.
16	Financial Issues: City of Bridgeport Part	Any reference from public comment or during the board agenda that references a financial issue that is directly related to the city's contribution.
17	Hires (negative)	Any instance related to hiring where, through public comment, or the members of the board have an issue with the process or the person.
18	Invoking Community	When a board member cites the community as the reason they are making an argument.
19	Invoking Teachers Principals Staff	When a board member cites school staff or faculty as the reason they are making an argument.
20	Mismanagement	When the issue through public comment or during the board is discussion is regarding mismanagement in the running of day-to-day operations.
21	Nutrition	When the issue that is addressed in the public comment or by the board relates to the school nutrition program.
22	Parents	When an issue brought up through public comment or board agenda pertains to parents directly.
23	Parents: Invoking Parents	When a board member cites parents as the reason they are making an argument - or referencing to their own status as a parent to support their argument.
24	Pick Up Rocks and Finds Snakes	When the Superintendent tells the board that in looking at one issue, it has revealed several other issues that need to be addressed.
25	Discipline	Any issue brought up through public comment or board agenda that includes the disciplinary procedures of the district.
26	Poor Academics	Any issue brought up in public comment or during the board agenda that addresses the poor state of academics in the district.
27	Poor Conditions of the Schools	Any issue brought up in public comment or during the board agenda that addresses the poor physical conditions of the academic buildings in the district.

28	Race and Ethnicity	Any issue brought up in public comment or during the board agenda that cites race or ethnicity as a part of the issue.
29	School Procedures	Any issue brought up in public comment or during the board agenda that cites the procedures within schools as contributing to the issue or part of the issue.
30	Policies	Any issue brought up in public comment or during the board agenda that questions the policies of the district or cites a policy as a contributing factor.
31	School Safety Issues	Any issue brought up in public comment or during the board agenda that cites instances of school safety or the threat to school safety.
32	School Safety Issues: General Community Safety	Any issue brought up in public comment or during the board agenda that cites instances of community safety or the threat to community safety.
33	School Violence	Any issue brought up in public comment or during the board agenda that cites instances of school violence or the threat of school violence.
34	School Violence: General Community Violence	Any issue brought up in public comment or during the board agenda that cites instances of community violence or the threat of community violence.
35	Support Programs	Any issue brought up in public comment or during the board agenda that addresses a program that supports the academic health of the school and/or students.
36	Support Staff	Any issue brought up in public comment or during the board agenda that addresses the role of support staff.
37	Teaching Staff	Any issue brought up in public comment or during the board agenda that addresses a the role of teaching staff
38	Transportation	Any issue brought up in public comment or during the board agenda that addresses school transportation.
39	Uniform	Any issue brought up in public comment or during the board agenda that addresses any aspect of student uniforms - sports or day-to-day.
40	Union Issues	Any issue brought up in public comment or during the board agenda that addresses unions.

## **Informed Consent**

Project Title: The Voices of Five Stakeholders of One Local School District Taken Over By a State

**You are invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Vanessa Liles, a researcher from Texas A&M University. The information in this form is provided to help you decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. If you decide you do not want to participate, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits you normally would have. You may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. NOTE: If you are employed then it is your responsibility to work with your employer regarding work leave for participation in this study if during work hours.**

**Email: [Vanessaliles@tamu.edu](mailto:Vanessaliles@tamu.edu)**

**Phone: 203.247.1631**

### **Why Is This Study Being Done?**

The purpose of this study is to analyze the stakeholders' experiences of one city's state takeover of their school district.

### **Why Am I Being Asked To Be In This Study?**

You are being asked to be in this study because you lived or worked within the greater city area where the takeover took place. There is no regard to gender, income or education level but because you have worked, served, or lived within the district during the years 2000 to 2013 in a capacity that allowed you to interact with the education system of the district. The greater your interaction the more qualified you are for the interview.

### **How Many People Will Be Asked To Be In This Study?**

Seventeen people (participants) will be invited to participate in this study locally. Overall, a total of seven people will be invited.

### **What Are the Alternatives to being in this study?**

The alternative to being in the study is not to participate.

### **What Will I Be Asked To Do In This Study?**

You will be asked to answer several questions in detail that describe your experiences and beliefs on the lead-up and impact of the takeover of the Bridgeport school system in 2011.

Your participation in this study will last up to two hours over the course of no more than two sessions and includes no more than two visits.

Visit 1 (Week March 27, 2017)

This visit will last about up to two hours. During this visit I will ask you several questions and audio-record your responses.

Visit 2 (*if needed*, Week April 10, 2017)

### **Will Photos, Video or Audio Recordings Be Made Of Me during the Study?**

The researchers will make an audio recording during the study so that I can use the transcription to capture your complete thoughts. If you do not give permission for the audio recording to be obtained, you cannot participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I give my permission for audio recordings to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

### **Are There Any Risks To Me?**

The things that you will be doing are no more/greater than risks than you would come across in everyday life.

Although the researchers have tried to avoid risks, you may feel that some questions/procedures that are asked of you will be stressful or upsetting. You do not have to answer anything you do not want to.

### **Will There Be Any Costs To Me?**

Aside from your time, there are no costs for taking part in the study.

### **Will I Be Paid To Be In This Study?**

You will not be paid for being in this study.

### **Will Information From This Study Be Kept Private?**

The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and besides the regulatory agencies listed below, only the study's Principal Investigator, Dr. Norvella Carter, research study personnel, and the transcription company will have access to the records. Recordings will be transcribed immediately after the interview by GMR transcription. Video/Audio files will be destroyed three years from the completion of the study.

Information about you will be stored in locked file cabinet; computer files protected with a password. This consent form will be filed securely in an official area.

People who have access to your information include the Principal Investigator and research study personnel. Representatives of regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) and entities such as the Texas A&M University Human Research Protection Program may access your records to make sure the study is being run correctly and that information is collected properly.

Information about you and related to this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law.

**Who may I Contact for More Information?**

You may also contact the Principal Investigator, Norvella Carter, PhD., to tell her about a concern or complaint about this research at 281-788-4388 or [ncarter@tamu.edu](mailto:ncarter@tamu.edu). My role is the Protocol Director, and you may contact me anytime for questions or concerns – my information is provided above.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, to provide input regarding research, or if you have questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, you may call the Texas A&M University Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) by phone at 1-979-458-4067, toll free at 1-855-795-8636, or by email at [irb@tamu.edu](mailto:irb@tamu.edu). The informed consent form and all study materials should include the IRB number, approval date, and expiration date. Please contact the HRPP if they do not.

**What if I Change My Mind About Participating?**

Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you have the choice whether or not to be in this research study. You may decide to not begin or to stop participating at any time. If you choose not to be in this study or stop being in the study, there will be no effect on you. Any new information discovered about the research will be provided to you. This information could affect your willingness to continue your participation.

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

**I agree to be in this study and know that I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. The procedures, risks, and benefits have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered. I know that new information about this research study will be provided to me as it becomes available and that the researcher will tell me if I must be removed from the study. I can ask more questions if I want. A copy of this entire consent form will be given to me.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name Date

**INVESTIGATOR'S AFFIDAVIT:**

Either I have or my agent has carefully explained to the participant the nature of the above project. I hereby certify that to the best of my knowledge the person who signed this consent form was informed of the nature, demands, benefits, and risks involved in his/her participation.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Presenter Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name Date