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Perceptions of School Reform in a Post-NCLB World: A Cathartic Recovery of the  
Purpose and a 'Shining-Through' of the Spirit of Education

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A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Timothy A. Price

June 2015

Advisor: P. Bruce Uhrmacher

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Title: Perceptions of School Reform in a Post-NCLB World: A Cathartic Recovery of the Purpose and a 'Shining-Through' of the Spirit of Education

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### **Abstract**

This study used a Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology to understand the varying perceptions held by different stakeholding groups (state legislators, superintendents, building administrators, teachers, and parents) about No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and other related reform efforts such as the Common Core. 12 participants from these five stakeholding groups were purposefully chosen, all from the state of Idaho, and in-depth interviews were performed, parsed out into three phases to inductively invite themes and categories for inquiry. Following each interview, a socio-semiotic analysis was performed using participant language in an integrated effort to identify deeply held beliefs and perceptions of school reform, both past and present. Through the first two phases of interviewing, participant language strongly suggested that any reform effort, past or present, would not succeed unless stakeholding groups effectively 'buy-in' to it, and especially if it is perceived to come from the 'top-down'. Using this language, participants had trouble transcending deeply-seated perceptions of reform based on power and fear. However, by the third and final phase of interviewing, a more potent genus of language was uncovered, one that not only transcended this dominantly regressive and progressive language, but one that *all* stakeholding groups seemed to agree upon; what's more is that once interviewees were able to break through the rhetoric of reform in its past and present forms, a more purposeful, if not spiritual,

language based on holistic principles of joy, love, care, honesty, openness, and connection ‘shined through’. It was with this ‘shining-through’ language, that interviewees spoke without fear or concern for power, and a deeply held purpose emerged, helping them to transcend their individual stakeholding roles and perceptions, and thus recover the true ‘core’ of their beliefs as educational stakeholders. Therefore, this study presents a Grounded Theory within which state and local reformers can more responsibly create and implement reform, one that promotes a holistic language of reform that does not come from the ‘top-down’, or even the ‘bottom-up’, but, rather, from the ‘inside-out’. Similarly, it suggests that in order to successfully implement any reform, the true ‘core’ of teaching and learning must be honored – the joy, love, connection, and purpose in education that ‘shined through’ once interviewees were given authentic opportunity to share it.

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## Chapter One: Introduction and Rationale

“Consider the wave by which a new study is introduced into the curriculum. Someone feels that the school system of his town is falling behind the times. There are rumors of great progress in education making elsewhere. Something new and important has been introduced; education is being revolutionized by it; the school superintendent, or members of the board of education, become somewhat uneasy; the matter is taken up by individuals and clubs; pressure is brought to bear on the managers of the school system; letters are written to the newspapers...editorials appear; finally the school board ordains that on and after a certain date the particular new branch [of curriculum] should be taught in the public schools. The victory is won, and everybody – unless it be some already overburdened and distracted teacher – congratulates everybody else that such advanced steps are taking place” (Dewey, 1902).

As early as 1902, John Dewey noticed a trend – one that the American educational system has yet to move past. He saw a system run by an elusive “someone”, by “rumors”, and by the media. He found that most so-called curricular ‘reform’ did little but to make students, parents, school boards, and superintendents “uneasy”, and teachers further “overburdened and distracted”. Moreover, he discovered that while few of these “advanced steps” towards reform ever truly “won” anything for anyone, nevertheless a mysterious and feverish “someone”, somewhere would always claim “victory”. What’s worse, is that Dewey knew this cycle would re-invent itself in another school district, in a different state, and with some other “edict” in tow.

Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, educational reform in America has steadily followed this Sisyphean trend. Dewey’s world is now our own, yet today’s schools are seen as more regressive than progressive – since Dewey’s Progressive age, public and official opinion has shifted from trust in public schooling to distrust, if not a loathing, for it. As

Tyack and Cuban (1995) suggested, “Notions of progress and regress in education are, of course, highly debatable” today, and moreover that “progress is always relative – now compared to then, one group compared with others”. In particular, it has been these different “groups” that have created a competitive dynamic wherein one group seeks to “undermine the comparative advantage of another group”. Instead of unifying behind democratic notions of progress, these ideological sects have entered into a warlike state of affairs. These culture wars in schooling, one that began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as Dewey experienced, certainly persists today as more and more groups of American educators “hoist their ideological flag” (Eisner, 2002), thereby ‘staking’ their claim on one ‘standard’ or another. However, these efforts in reform have yet to do much but ‘entrench’ these groups within their own rhetoric of educational reform.

And it is the language itself that has become so especially difficult to navigate when considering educational reform in America. Consider my diction in the aforesaid words of ‘stake’, ‘entrench’, ‘standard’, and ‘flag’; all of these carry with them potent connotations, creating images and metaphors associated with war, violence, and turmoil. Likewise, all are militaristic in nature; in fact, the etymology of the word ‘standard’ finds its original use on the battlefield where the ‘standard’ was the literal marker identifying the front line of battle – the place where the war is won or lost, and where most casualties happen. The result? Just ask a teacher, who would likely liken their experience in the classroom to being ‘in the trenches’ with their students, ‘under fire’ from administration, and caustically ‘burnt out’ and short in ‘fuse’. One can only wonder, then - who or what is the *‘enemy’*?



This simple, yet potent, connection between much of the terminology used regarding school reform and its militaristic past certainly makes historical sense, given that after *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954, the politics of progress in schools became notably contentious. As Tyack and Cuban (1995) pointed out in their essay “Progress or Regress”, it was after *Brown vs. Board* that schools “erupted in conflict between contending groups”, the “media played up student unrest, violence, drugs and overcrowded schools” with “images of blackboard jungles [that] became [and have since become] etched in the public’s consciousness”. During the next fifty years, and still seen today, “strikes, collective bargaining, [and] racial disputes” began to change public perception of education and of teachers, from one of peace, democracy and progress, to that of a war, autocracy and regress. By the mid-1970’s, and particularly during the 1980’s, the public largely perceived schools as warring grounds where classrooms were the ‘front lines’, and wherein teachers and students found themselves ‘in the trenches’. These became potent metaphors not only for the public to understand schools, but also for educators and students to understand their new roles within them. As unfortunate as it was during this time in the early 1980’s, teachers and students began to finally take an identity. They began to realize that they were, in fact, ‘under fire’, being blamed as the cause of “*A Nation at Risk*” (1983).

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence and Education essentially did declare ‘war’ on American schools with its the publication of “*A Nation at Risk*” – in fact, it saw the “mediocre educational performance” of American schools as “an act of war”. With its publication and widespread readership, *A Nation at Risk* quickly became one of the most important documents in the history of American schooling, and to this

day is commonly referenced by reformers in almost every stake-holding group, from politician to parent to teacher. With its controversial findings, which were then and still are “decried” for its “lack of scientific rigor”, this document created a legacy of regression for schools in America, “spurring a new wave of reform in U.S. schools” based on the widespread “push for standards” (*The Jossey-Bass Reader on School Reform*, 2001). With its focus on the standardization of education, it also pushed a rhetoric of ‘Accountability’ on new teachers in particular, arguing for performance-based evaluation systems, wherein “poor” teachers would be “either improved or terminated” (United States. National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Likewise, it built upon a rhetoric of what it identified as “excellence” with which schools, teacher and students would be judged – a term ideologically borrowed from the corporate world. In many ways, “A Nation at Risk” became a manifesto for anyone, anywhere, to discipline schools in any way they liked – as long as schools weren’t living up to the militaristic or corporate standards demanded of them, then they were, in effect, ‘failing’, and moreover considered a “threat” to the “very future” of the “Nation and [its] people” (1983).

This trend in thinking about schools certainly persists today. Educational historian, Joel Spring (2005) noted that it was this “conservative political agenda”, begun in the 1970’s and further prompted through *A Nation at Risk*, that began this race, of sorts, to get “control [of our schools and a global economy] through standardized testing and school ‘choice’”, designed to use “testing requirements conformed to the goal of produc[ing] workers to compete in a global economy” (p. 461). He went on to say argue that, as a result, a “nationalized school system” had developed (for the first time in our educational history), that, for the first time, mandated testing and promoted a “singular

culture” of schooling, thus allowing only limited choice for states and localities in how they will run their schools (p. 462). This soon became known as ‘accountability’, a term ubiquitous in today’s educational lexicon, further reinforcing a dynamic wherein schools, themselves, had to ‘account’ for their successes and failures to a federal entity not familiar with the variations and nuances of individual states and their localities. Consequently, schools are still being blamed for economic distress, and teachers’ unions have become the new target for reform. The ‘war’ has moved from one aimed at the poor and their families, to the schools that serve them. What’s more, is that not only can this be seen within the media, but also within public policy and the public’s response to it.

For instance, in his 2005 article that worked to explain NCLB and its relationship to the “legacy of federal aid to education”, Lee Anderson argued that it “both builds on and departs from” a long history of the federal government “aid” (or, rather, interference) in how states and localities educate their children (p. 15). While there has been plenty of historical evidence that the federal government has, in fact, had a long history of regulating schools at the local and state level, Anderson also pointed out that NCLB marked the first time that the federal government put itself at the “center of” schooling, yet not the first time ‘accountability’ and ‘standardization’ was promoted by the federal government (eg. the National Defense Education Act of 1958, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and the Education for All Handicapped Children Education Act of 1975). This points to the complexity of NCLB and its role in the legacy of reform – while ‘accountability’ and ‘standardization’ have been part of the lexicon of educational reform for some time now, making it much less “new” than we had thought

in 2002, NCLB did fundamentally change the relationship between the public, their schools, and the federal government. What's more, is that Anderson also argued that, at least in 2005 in its earliest years, NCLB forever changed a time-honored and long-standing belief that the federal government should *not* overtly impose itself on schools (or, at least, too much), replacing it with a newly conservative presumption (at least amongst legislators) that given its past financial investments in public education, the federal government must exercise fiscal responsibility, and thus 'hold' schools 'accountable'. In essence, in their view, NCLB became a way for Congress to feel better about the way it has spent its money, and that they used NCLB as a way to justify it to the public (Anderson, 2005, p. 18). His argument, therefore, points to the overall importance and legacy of NCLB, and why it must be further studied – that while the federal government had always helped schools, NCLB had created a historically complicated dynamic between the public, their schools and their government, as well as between states/localities and the federal government.

Until 2002, the relationship between the federal government and state/local control of schools had yet to reach this level of imposition (one that, even, Conservatives have supported despite their historical opposition to 'big' government). As Anderson (2005) also poignantly asserted, what we think was 'new' in NCLB then, as well as what we may think is 'new' today in the Race-to-the-Top and the Common Core, may not be as 'new' as we may have thought. This tension between the federal government and schools has always existed, and will continue to whether or not NCLB is official in its weight or not; however, what Anderson (2005) also recognized was that NCLB did create a 'new' dynamic between schools and their government/s that was incredibly influential

at the highest levels of governance. It created a dramatic ideological shift, one powerful enough that the staunch Conservative right had willingly ditched its “nostalgic preference for limited federal involvement” in schools, adopting a “newer conservative principle” that the government must make sure that taxpayers feel they are getting “their money’s worth” (p. 18). All of a sudden, the political ‘rules of engagement’ no longer applied to public education, the largest of public enterprises. In essence, it complicated how and why schools do what they do, and how and why they are seen, felt and heard.

This complex ideological relationship still exists today, even though NCLB doesn’t officially ‘exist’ anymore (at least in its name). The historical tension between governmental interference and school autonomy has come to a head once again in a post-recession economy where schools have, more than ever, been questioned for whether or not they are ‘worth’ the attention. Therefore, it is the contention of this study that NCLB and its legacy on the perceptions of stakeholders from the top-down, must continue to be studied on the level of perception. Perception moves on, even when legislation and policy does not, and especially when it seems to be so pervasively negative. This, therefore, also suggests that current test-based reform efforts (such as the Common Core) must also be carefully, and philosophically, looked at in lieu of our reform past, and in relation to NCLB as the beginning of this new and pervasive movement in education. If we are to continue doing what we are doing, then we should know ‘why’ we are doing it on a philosophical level. Without that understanding, we risk Dewey’s grim reality for schooling.

However, it should also be noted that this is not at all just coincidence, nor is NCLB wholly responsible for the regressive opinion of public schooling seen and felt

today. As Anderson's study showed, the politics of it are complicated. What's more, throughout its decade-plus tenure, NCLB and its related policies and mandates *had* created some positive change in schools on a programmatic, operational, and, even, curricular level. It had also prompted the charter school movement, one that many families and communities benefit from – choice, few could argue, is a bad thing. However, as Anderson pointed out, and as the history of educational reform in America shows, the discussion must penetrate policy, and even the pragmatics of it. Rather, it is the opinion of this study that a true understanding of how reform has worked (and not worked), and how important perceptions of reform efforts are in developing that understanding, must be pointed towards the *language* that has unconsciously infiltrated the public's "consensus consciousness" (Miller, 1992) since the ratification of NCLB in 2001, and as seen even today as it has been renamed and re-envisioned within the Race-to-the-Top program, or even as shown in the so-called 'consortium' of the Common Core, wherein a 'high-stakes' language of 'standardization' and 'accountability' persists.

This, however, begs the question: where did this language come from, if not these policy itself, and why does that matter? What's more, is where are we going on with using them, even and especially when No Child Left Behind has been all but 'left behind'? As "A Nation at Risk" had shown thirty years ago, the language that we use to talk about our schools, and especially the language we use *in* and *around* our schools, can certainly be etymologically and structurally linked to the military and industrial sectors of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, but, still, how did they become so official in their power? The problem with identifying how language affects our thought is that it is fundamentally infinite in its meaning. While the language of educational reform can certainly be linked

to the structures of the past, they have been adopted and adapted by so many ideological camps both within and outside of public education, that their meaning and subsequent effect on schooling can only be theorized. Many have attempted to do just this, including the Critical Theorists of the 1960 and 70's, the Reconceptualists of the 1980's, and the Holists of the 1990's. While each of these curricular camps have 'entrenched' themselves in their own rhetoric of reform, the ratification of NCLB changed the landscape of curricular and school reform, limiting the amount of healthy change that groups like these have prompted. Curriculum and funding determine much of what a school can do, and with NCLB's federally-mandated focus on 'standardization', 'testing' and 'accountability', the ability to create change, as well as to even experiment with new curriculums and pedagogies, was lost in this rhetoric. What's more, is that it was lost within the very real, tangible affects that NCLB has had on schooling, particularly felt in urban and 'at-risk' schools. Many of these schools are still feeling the affects of this mandate, and while it has been all but replaced by today's Race-to-the-Top rhetoric of reform, and in a rising number of states with the Common Core, the legacy of 'standardization, 'testing' and 'accountability' persists. What's scary is that NCLB can be easily dismissed within the rhetoric of these current reform efforts as an anomaly of the past – something that has come and gone. However, the language of it - a 'high-stakes' language of 'accountability' and 'standardization' – has persisted in these post-NCLB reform movements. How we talk about our schools, and how that language reflects our perceptions, and thus our support of those schools, matters. It can tell us a lot about both our hopes and limitations for schooling, and can be a source of both oppression and liberation.

That being said, however, it also must be realized that when it comes to language and the complexities of it, “there *are* limits [to] these infinities” (Otte, 2011). According to Otte (2011), “any word, or “sign” no matter how ubiquitously used it may be, “has to function as a sign within a universe of discourse and action” (Otte, 2011). Today, at least, this “universe” *can* be tangibly found within our public schools, and particularly since the Bush Administration reauthorized the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* in 2002, aptly naming it No Child Left Behind. While the name itself suggested something that all stakeholders could get ‘behind’, its outcomes have been widely contested. However, its rhetoric has remained intact. This has created a deeply felt tension in schooling today, and the language of the legislation, and how we have internalized it since its inception, reflects that tension. In essence, this legislation took much of what *A Nation at Risk* had propagated in 1983, and mandated it very every public school in America. What’s more is that NCLB had taken much of the same contentious language of the 1983 study, forcing every stakeholding group in education to adopt it, yet in a problematically diverse set of ways. Consequently, in its ten-plus years of existence, NCLB led not only to controversy, but even anger, resentment, guilt, discontent, within and between stakeholding groups, and to this day, there remains a disconnection within and between these essential groups as to what schools are for and how schooling could and should be done.

Therefore, the reason why NCLB still matters, and must be further looked at despite its re-naming in the current Race-to-the-Top program, and even in lieu of the Common Core’s recent support, is because we still don’t know the extent to which it had changed the way we educate, why we educate, and, moreover, how we *think* and *feel*



about schools today. And while teachers' belief systems have been studied in relation to the success or failure of test-based reform efforts (yet, still with little consensus after a decade-plus of this research), other groups with a 'stake' in schooling haven't been focused on with much detail or success. Thus, their perceptions of NCLB must be consciously considered in order to consider the ontological reality of NCLB past and present; what's more, is that as we move deeper into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and as reform 'pendulum' continues to 'shift', these must be considered in relation to that of the teachers themselves. As Eisner (1988) suggested, schools have an "ecology" to them, one that cannot be reduced to the efforts and feelings of one singular group or another, and that must account for not only the multiple "dimensions" of schooling, but also the simple reality that our schools inherently suffer from a "structurally-fragmented character" (p. 24). That being said, how can this reality, one that is based on not only the structure of schooling, but also as a matter of *perception*, be adequately studied and moreover, understood across stakeholding groups, as well as in consideration of local and social nuances? The language they use to describe their experiences with NCLB, and now with other reform efforts such as the Common Core, can point us in the right direction; not only has much of the language of NCLB been maintained through these current reform efforts. In fact, it is the premise of this study that it is the language itself, as a logical system of signs and symbols, which can lead us to an understanding of NCLB's legacy, and how perception has or has not changed as a result of it. What's more is that it may lead us to understanding how and why (or if) its legacy will positively or negatively affect the success or failure of future reform efforts (especially those, like

the Common Core, that use not only mandated accountability testing, but that use similar language in the promotion, administration, and implementation of them).

The sense is that NCLB and its language remains potent despite the illusion that we have progressively moved beyond it. In its time, it had prompted some, (albeit, again, only a few) studies that had attempted to identify how NCLB has been subtly understood by teachers and administrators, not only in an effort to somehow determine why NCLB has been so ill-received by these two groups, but how related reform efforts can be more successfully implemented on a systemic level. We have been trying to learn from it, whether it was a mistake or not – again, the ‘jury is still out’ on that one. What’s more, is that these (few) studies have begun a very essential conversation, one that could easily be lost now that NCLB has taken on a new name and political identity within the Race-to-the-Top initiative prompted by the current presidential administration, as well as the recent popularity of the Common Core ‘consortium’. The ontological reality that these studies have begun to uncover is that while NCLB may no longer officially exist, its legacy is nevertheless a lasting one in regards to school reform - one that can either be progressively learned from, or regressively ignored as a remnant of the past. Again, however, only a few studies have at least begun this essential conversation, or at least in seeing it beyond its existence as a concrete ‘thing’, especially one of the past.

NCLB, *both* as a text *and* a socially-constructed phenomena, must certainly be understood as something more than a “concrete thing” (Otte, 2011), if anything because its language cannot be fully understood without an understanding of the thought processes that have lead to the many disparate perceptions of it. Again, its potent effect on so many people today suggests that it something quite more than a simple “token”

(Otte, 2011) of one Presidential administration or another. Likewise, because so many people have interpreted and thus internalized it as a different ‘thing’, then it suggests that it is only through seeing it “in terms of likeness, analogy, or metaphor” (Otte, 2011) can one understand it as some-*thing* different altogether. As a result of its many revisions and re-ratifications, as well as its social and historical evolution, NCLB must be understood *both* as part of the meta-narrative of educational history, as well as a phenomena that does not ascribe itself to any one said structure or another. As previously stated, and as Dewey too recognized, while much of its rhetoric can be attributed to trends and reforms of the past, it has dynamically changed through social discourse, thus leaving it in a state and with a meaning quite unlike (albeit related to) its beginnings. In essence, I want to understand how different people perceive NCLB, and where these perceptions come from so that potent metaphors can be found, and thus a more constructive language of reform theorized.

With this in mind, the questions asked in this study embrace the social dynamics that NCLB has endured since its inception in an effort to uncover these metaphors, and particularly those related to the current trend (and rhetoric) of ‘standardization’ and ‘accountability’ as dictated by NCLB at the state, district, school, and classroom levels. The following research questions attempted to do just that, ultimately drawing from different stakeholders’ perceptions of NCLB as communicated through their experiences, as well as the language they use to describe them:

- 1.) *How do state legislators, superintendents, building administrators, teachers, and parents perceive NCLB?*
- 2.) *What experiences inform these perceptions?*

*3.) How do these perceptions reflect attitudes (emotional, cognitive and behavioral) towards schooling in a post-NCLB environment, and how do these point towards its legacy?*

*4.) What implications might this have on both current and future educational reform efforts (i.e. the Common Core)?*

With these questions in tow, it was the focus of this study to philosophically understand NCLB through how it has been perceived by different stakeholding groups, and, moreover, how these perceptions reflect on the different ideologies that have preceded them; what's more, is that through a semiotic coding of these perceptions, similar problems with current and future reform might be theorized, and thus potentially mediated. With such information, then it is also possible that gaps can be bridged, resistance to reform more explicitly grasped, and reform itself better theorized within a more authentically 'progressive', if not holistic, way of talking about, and thus perceiving, and ultimately experiencing, educational reform.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Since its 2001 ratification and subsequent adoption in all fifty states (the first educational policy/mandate to have this kind of temporal and geographical scope), the discontent and disconnection surrounding NCLB has naturally led to a fairly significant body of scholarly research regarding its educational efficacy. This, however, pales in comparison to how the amount of attention NCLB has received within the popular media, who has capitalized and profited on this discontent and disconnection. And while the public has been part of its debate from the beginning, and while the academic sector has responded to the controversies felt through and voiced within the public sector and its media, there was surprisingly little scholarly research that really looked at the efficacy, validity and reliability of the tests themselves, or of the pragmatic effects of the mandate of NCLB on instruction, assessment and school culture (that is, at least until it's negative consequences had begun to become irrevocably and tangibly felt towards the latter part of the decade).

Despite the confusion and controversy surrounding it, particularly for those 'on the ground' and 'in the trenches', NCLB *has* been studied by curriculum theorists and philosophers, educational historians, school leadership experts, and educational 'think-tanks'. What should be noted, though, is that it has been mostly criticized, as shown in the work of Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas (2000), McNeil (2000), Vogler (2002, 2005, 2008), in fact, many began to wonder, as McNeil (2000) did, whether or not its "cost" on

education in America was worth it, creating a dialogue that even politicians couldn't totally ignore, for as they say, 'money-talks' (as cited in Neuman, 2013). Critical studies such as these have provided some lasting and relevant work in relation to the current and future effects of standardization, accountability and high-stakes testing on our schools, and on our teachers in particular. Consequently, then, it made sense to also study how NCLB had affected the practices of administrators, showing that it has had profound effects on how they lead and interact with their teachers, as shown in the work of Dever & Carlston (2009), Faulkner & Cook (2006), Mabry & Margolis (2006), and Musoleno & White (2010) for example. Others, then, began to look at whether it had a different effect on rural versus suburban versus urban schools, leading to difficult questions regarding its efficacy within different geographical settings and demographic groups; see Powell, Higgins, Aram & Freed (2009) and Hess and Petrilli (2009). As a result, and likely prompted by poor test scores and a rising number of 'failing' schools in urban areas, many studies singularly focused on urban schooling, where minority populations (African American, Latino/a, students with learning disabilities/differences, etc.) have suffered the most as a result of high-stakes testing and accountability. With this realization, specific school districts were also targeted and the so-called 'Achievement Gap' identified as the culprit for what was perceived to be a dramatic rise in 'underperforming' schools; see Stillman (2009), Donnor & Shockley, (2010) Braun, Chapman & Vezzu (2010) for a summary of this kind of work. As the effects of NCLB began to seep into the very lives of these children, some studies pointed themselves at critiquing NCLB's effects on the personal and social development of children, such as Paone & Lepkowski's 2007 study, *No Childhood Left Behind: Advocating for the Personal and Social Development of*

*Children.* These types of studies lended to a rising speculation as to whether or not NCLB-based reforms in schools have helped or hindered in creating safe, healthy learning environments for kids. This kind of work really gets to the ‘heart-of-the-matter’ – if children are the focus of any educational culture, and if any one policy, test, or curriculum threatens their natural rights to learn in a safe, healthy environment, then it must be continually critiqued, considered and reconsidered.

As these important questions were being asked on an institutional level, and as the effects of NCLB began to become more and more noticeable, others studies such as done by Darling-Hammond (2004), Diamond (2007), Louis, Febey, & Schroder (2005), and Swanson & Stevenson (2002), looked at whether or not these changes were even needed, if not desirable, in our schools in the first place, particularly as interpreted by those experiencing them who, like anyone would, just want their schools to improve and their students to have a quality educational experience. Following suit, some studies have tried to identify how teachers had changed the way that they behave in the classroom given the pressures of testing and accountability, as seen in Stillman (2011) and Ikeler’s (2010) work. As NCLB became a more systemic effort, it became clear that there had been a systemic response, from student to teacher, to administration, to district leadership, on up to the state capitol, and finally, Washington D.C.

Therefore, in lieu of these many studies, and after a decade of research on it, it can be assumed that NCLB *seems* to have *not* worked, that is despite its rhetoric and the efforts of millions of Americans over ten years. But why? The intentions were seemingly good from the ‘top-down’, and, likewise, can be assumed for the teachers that wake up every morning to go to school to see their students. This makes it even more

confounding, then, as to why NCLB had so utterly failed our schools, and why our schools have, as some may argue, failed it? If intentions are good, then certainly the outcome will eventually work itself out, right? Then again, this is only what ‘seems’ to be; it *seems* to be a matter of perception more than anything.

Even as late as 2013, in its final years of its life, and even in Texas the state where one might argue this legislation began, the ‘jury is still out’ on this one. For instance, in Jacob Neumann’s 2013 two-and-a-half-year long narrative case study of one social studies teacher in Texas, it was suggested that while NCLB, and accountability testing in particular, have been largely responded to with negativity amongst educators, it is very unclear as to whether or not the pressures of testing is really to blame for this discontent. Rather, his study suggested that teachers’ personal beliefs about their subject and personal goals for students are just as important, if not more so, as determinates of what and how to teach. Similarly, Neuman (2013) noted that since its ratification, the negative effects of NCLB and accountability testing on schools has been widely contested, with some studies suggesting that it is the teachers’ views themselves, as well as local contexts of schooling, that matter most in the success or failure of any given test or testing-related reform effort. Neuman also points us towards Cimbricz (2003), Firestone et al. (2002), Grant (2001), and Jones, Jones & Hargrove (2003) to understand how local dynamics can largely influence the success of any policy or test-based reform. That being said, what must be also noted is that these studies all point toward something that we can and should learn from no matter where they landed in the debate: that when schools and local communities are being mandated to a test, whether it be NCLB-based or not, that there are implications that run deep. Furthermore, how belief systems and perception affect the



success or failure of test-related reform efforts must also be investigated post-NCLB. Again, given that we are *still* testing, mandating, standardizing, and, moreover, arguing today about the efficacy of testing and its related reform efforts, then we must, once again, ask these questions, even and especially if it seems like we already have ‘been there, done that’.

As previously mentioned, the NCLB document does not have meaning in and of itself, not at least on a pragmatic level; it does not become meaningful until it has become the “object of discourse and inquiry” (Lemke, 1994) over time, and through the perceptions of its many stakeholders. In citing Foucault's Post-Structuralism, Lemke (1994) suggested that all ‘texts’, like NCLB, only become meaningful when seen as a “phenomena”, and only after they have been made subject to public and academic discourse. Therefore, NCLB is not just a product of political history as it was initially experienced in 2001-2002 upon its adoption and ratification, but rather a phenomenon that exists on a continuum of experience, and subject to dramatic change over time. To further exemplify this, Lemke (1994) also cited Deconstructionist Jacques Derrida (1976), who had “disrupted” the idea of the Structuralist grand-narrative, arguing that any interpretation of any text is inherently “imperfect”, especially after having been made subject to public discourse as the NCLB has over and over again. This Postmodern fall-out has had ramifications on NCLB’s use in our schools, but also on our understanding of its impact on educational reform in general. Likewise, this looseness of interpretation affects all of educational inquiry given the inherent paradox that all educational researchers face today in bringing theory to practice. In the case of NCLB, and other

reform effort such as the Common Core today, this becomes quite problematic in uncovering their different perceived meanings to different stakeholding groups.

However, Shank (1994) and Lemke (1994) specifically point towards semiotics (and Social Semiotics, in particular) as an important analytical framework in addressing this dilemma, arguing that any ‘text’ must be treated triadically if it is to be understood within this metaphysical process: how it concretely shows up within its language (the “sign), what form this has taken for its audience (the “signifier”), and how it has been perceptively understood (the “signified”). Ferdinand de Saussure, saw any “sign” (any object, word, image, sound, etc.) as having two essential parts: the “signifier” (the form the sign takes) and the “signified” (the concepts the sign represents) (as cited in Wilson, 1997). Therefore, he argued that in order to derive meaning from any sign or object, the relationship between the signified and signifier must be established. It becomes a simple algebraic equation of finding the missing variable.

On the other hand, Social Semiotics adds another essential variable to Saussure's equation. It assumes that any individual’s perception of any object creates a subsequent thought, which effectively defines the object in the individual’s mind; what’s more is that is only when he or she *acts* upon that thought within a social construct that it becomes truly meaningful. In this sense, Social Semiotics draws from a variety of other, but related, disciplines important in understanding school culture and how policy affects it; as Hodge and Kness (1988) contest, it allows flexibility to see language in a more social context, and allows the researcher to adopt other lenses of analysis, such as Pragmatism, Socio-linguistics, Cultural Studies and Critical Discourse Analysis. In essence, it

provides more utility for researchers in other arenas outside of just Linguistics, such as those in the field of Education.

What's more is that Social Semiotics opens up the possibilities of how studying language in a social context can better inform us as to how meaning is created by the individuals within it. It presupposes that once the interpreter engages in this social discourse, and the sign encounters outside thoughts and perceptions, a new construct of meaning is created for it. However, as this happens the interpreter him or herself *also* becomes a sign, further complicating the original sign's meaning, but also providing an actual starting place in understanding it in action. While this may be seen as an irreparable and untraceable process by any conventional means of analysis, Social Semiotics argues that such meaning *can* be filtered out through these individual experiences, as long as the right metaphor is found through the experiences and perceptions of those that have adopted it. This study will, therefore, use Social Semiotics as the conceptual framework for data analysis, in order to not only identify the signifiers that have ideologically caused different groups to adopt the language differently, but how these reflect upon the various meanings of NCLB, and as shown in the interviewees' responses to questions relating to their experiences to NCLB (as well as the Common Core reform movement, in which all of the 12 interviewees naturally and inductively spoke of alongside the experiences with NCLB).

Particularly in a postmodern world, a logical, yet also social, system of meaning such as this must be employed to understand perception of educational reform, and even more so in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where educational reform in America is no longer just about keeping the status-quo in a manufacturing, post-war culture. Instead, educational reform

has become a global issue, asking schools to address the needs of an ever-changing social and cultural dynamic in response to rapid globalization. That being said, what this looks like at a state and local level becomes even more problematic, and when meaning is created through an ever-changing rhetoric around it on a local, state, national and global level, then it becomes even more difficult to assign any particular meaning to the language used by differing stakeholding groups. However, Social Semiotics helps to make sense of phenomena like this, situating this meaning-making process within logical and calculable “systems of semiotic resources”, which can subsequently be “deployed in those practices in the domain of social [and] the cultural” (Lemke, 1994). In essence, the social and cultural construction of NCLB, as it has been adopted and practiced in a globalized America, demands that it be seen within the domains of *both* the individual *and* the social. As Lemke (1994) also suggested, the Social Semiotician might be able to understand this perceptual process as a matter of social and cultural discourse, because in a postmodern world, traditional and accepted cognitive theories can only say so much about human reasoning and perception. Lemke (1994) even questioned accepted Constructivist theory in its ability to fully navigate these postmodern complexities, pointing towards Social Semiotics as the most promising way that one could arrive at a precise and economical meaning for a ‘text’ and its many divergent signs. Following this logic, NCLB cannot be seen as something that has simply ‘come-and-gone’ – a remnant of a past that we would prefer to progressively move past – but rather as a living, breathing ‘thing’ that effects education today, particularly on the ontological and epistemological level of perception. What’s more is that while there have been many studies that have looked at the efficacy of NCLB, as well as its effect on teaching and

learning, on pedagogical practices, on curriculum, and on diverse populations, little has been done addressing the legacy of NCLB, of its use and abuse of language, and of the subsequent effects it has had on deeply-seeded perceptions of schooling since – what’s more is that only one was found that uses semiotics as a way to negotiate these ontological complexities. What’s even more striking is that none were found that look at how current reform efforts and policies (i.e. RTT, the Common Core) have been affected by the ontological fall-out of NCLB, and what that may mean for future reform.

That being said, a few have attempted to identify how perception had/has played a role in how NCLB had been received, and whether or not these perceptions can be at all understood in the success or failure of any school reform, NCLB notwithstanding. For instance, in Townsend, Acker-Hocebar, Ballenger and Place’s 2013 study entitled *Voices From the Field: What Have We Learned About Instructional Leadership?*, the perceptions of superintendents and principals working under NCLB were documented through small focus groups, showing that they felt too much “pressure”, yet benefitted from little “support”, as leaders in their schools; moreover, while they wanted to support their teachers by helping them to better deal with the pressures of high-stakes testing through opportunities for training and professional development, the federal mandate of NCLB had been “taken out of the hands” of school leadership, creating a “pervasively negative environment” for these leaders to work within (pp. 21-32). The conclusions of this study indicated that the “costs of complying with NCLB” on a state and local level, has, in effect, forced school leaders to either adopt a more community-based, dialogue-driven leadership style, otherwise at risk of losing the support of the teachers, creating a deep rift between the two groups. According to this study, the future of leadership under

the “pressure” of a NCLB-mandated curriculum, demands what they called “leadership for learning”, a style that does not look at all like the top-down model that most school leaders have been trained and educated with - one that “focuses on the leader as the main architect of school success” (p. 35). In essence, school leaders must fundamentally change the way they perceive, and behave within, their roles as leaders in order for schools to invite change, particularly under any mandated curricular reform effort like NCLB, or any other ‘top-down’ approach for that matter, and certainly notwithstanding the Common Core as seen today.

Following this logic, other studies have been performed that particularly look at how and why teachers - those ‘in the trenches’ and ‘under fire’ - have such negative perceptions of NCLB, which could explain how and why any form of standardized testing and teacher/student accountability measures have been met with such resistance in the classroom. For instance, in Craig Mertlers 2011 study, entitled *Teachers’ Perceptions of the Influence of NCLB on Classroom Practices*, he surveyed 1,534 teachers in an effort to determine how their perceptions of NCLB had “influenced their instructional and assessment practices” (p. 1). He found that not only did “teachers *not* have favorable perceptions of NCLB” given their experiences with it and how they described them, but that they believe it had a “negative impact on both instructional and curricular practices of teachers”, making their job difficult, if not impossible, to do effectively under both their own expectations and that of the mandate itself (p. 25). In fact, he recognized that his study supported the work of Abrams et al. (2003) and McMillan et al. (1999), showing that NCLB had created a “substantial increase in stress and pressure” for teachers, thus leading them to change their assessment practices, and

thus, effectively, putting more stress and pressure of students to perform ‘to the test’.

This had not only created a rift between many teachers and their students, a relationship must be wholly positive if it is to work well, but points to the need to further study this rift that is still felt today, five years since NCLB’s seemingly convincing closure.

Mertler’s findings suggested that teachers had employed assessment practices that they believed defied their very own ethics of teaching, pointing out one of the more damaging, albeit unintentional, effects of NCLB on schools, and teachers in particular.

Yet, the question remains whether or not these still being felt today, that is at least on a deeper level than what a study on its pragmatic effects could (like Mertler’s) reasonably identify? When teachers are behaving in ways that they not only agree with, but that compromise their purpose and identity as teachers, school leaders and reformers must pay ongoing attention to perceptions of any newly conceived reform, and particularly one that comes from the ‘top-down’ as a mandate at the federal or state level as NCLB had, and that many of today’s reforms continue to do. In essence, perception must be continued to be studied quite carefully, particularly given NCLB’s legacy, and moreover if any top-down reform effort is to succeed, and especially if these are to create real and progressive opportunities for success.

It should be mentioned, however, that one other study titled *Teacher and Administrator Responses to Standards-Based Reform*, performed by Laura Desimone in 2013, *did* try and differentiate between what she called “standards-based reform” and “test-based reform”, the latter being what she found is/was the real source of discontent in relation to NCLB. In fact, she found that it wasn’t the ‘standards’, or the ‘accountability’, or NCLB itself and what it represented, but rather the increased focus on

testing, and the ‘high-stakes’ nature of it, that they had responded negatively to. This is important because it prompts much needed conversation about how and why policies do or do not succeed in their implementation in the classroom, pointing to the possibility that it is not only about the policy itself or the pragmatics of it, but also a matter of perception. In fact, she found that when asked across five states, teachers and administrators, for the most part, identified positively with NCLB-related reform policies in their schools, yet *only* when these changes were “closely aligned with the [original] theoretical vision of standards-based reform”, and *not* with the “later manifestations” of NCLB that focused wholly on testing (p. 2). In fact, when they *felt* that any policy or reform: 1.) compromised local control of schools, 2.) provided motivation from “rewards and sanctions rather than authority’ (buy in)”, and/or, 3.) moved from a focus on standards and curriculum to that of test scores, then they *felt* that they could not support it. All of these three exceptions came up in all 12 interviews of this study, and not only in the way interviewees spoke of NCLB, but also the Common Core.

What’s more, is that there were consequences described by Desimone’s participants that went well beyond the stated goals of the original framers of NCLB and “standards-based-reform”; it had changed the very pedagogies of teachers, mostly because of the demands of the mandated tests. Sometimes, teachers agreed, this was beneficial because it held them “accountable for results”, and demanded that they teach in ways that “promoted better instruction” and student learning. On the other hand, though, they noted a “tension”, particularly between “procedural and conceptual learning” - between teaching for understanding and a ‘drilling’ of basic concepts (p. 37). So, while Desimone’s study did suggest that while NCLB had been positively received in its early



form, once it became focused on a test score it began to lose its support. This, again, was shown in some of the latter discussed interviews in **Chapter Four**, most of which indicated that those who had first experienced it in 2002 originally liked the idea of NCLB, but not the implementation of it at the state and local levels in the decade that followed. Many also showed concern that this will, too, be the case with the Common Core - that the intentions and the outcomes of it will be more of the same.

Again, it must be recognized that it is not the document or policy of NCLB itself that has created these rifts and deeply-seeded paradoxes in educational reform today. Rather, what matters is what the NCLB has *become* for those that have been affected by it on an ontological level, and for not only teachers and administrators, but for the many other stakeholders of our schools on a state and local level. While much of its language certainly falls into the educational and social lexicon that had become so popularized in *A Nation at Risk*, its meaning has exponentially evolved over the last decade. It can no longer be singularly understood as it was intended in 2002, and even after its ratification by all 50 states two years later. It has been subjected to so much interpretation, that even when it directly cited, its meaning cannot be fully understood or generalized. This interpretative process has pushed the legislation and its language well past its denoted meaning, and onto an infinite number of relationships and semantic associations. What's more, is that as each (often competing) stakeholding group has adopted and adapted the language of NCLB for their own ideological means, NCLB has become something more than it ever was when it was ratified; it has become the source of how power is distributed, why it shifts (or doesn't, for that matter), and how schools are seen, heard, and felt. It has shaped education reform today, continually redefining what we consider

to be positively progressive or negatively regressive. In essence, it all comes down to how a reform is “understand, perceived, embraced or rejected” by not only teachers, but also all other stakeholding groups involved (Spielman and Radnofsky, 1997, p. 2).

This ontological, if not uniquely postmodern, problem demands that if one is to truly derive meaning in NCLB (as it has been interpreted and re-interpreted by millions of politicians, teachers, students, parents, and administrators), then how these different groups have perceived NCLB must be understood in order to ‘progress’ forward with any new reform; we must be able to understand NCLB in relation to stakeholder perception in order to see how its legacy may or may not be affecting other reform efforts today, such as the Common Core. Otherwise, we risk continued regression, even in those policies and reform efforts that we are assured must be – have to be – ‘progressive’.

However, it should be noted that only one study was found that begins to address how *language itself*, as a semiotic reflection of deeply ingrained perception, has affected the success or failure of school reform efforts in an age of accountability, standardization and high-stakes testing. And while, like Mertler’s study, there have been some descriptive and empirical studies that do focus on how NCLB has negatively impacted instructional and assessment practices for teachers, only one was found that used a semiotic model to address the language that other stakeholding groups use in reflecting their *perceptions* of systematic school reforms in general: Spielman and Radnofsky’s 1997 study entitled, *Power Structures, Change, and the Illusion of Democracy: A Semiotic Study of Leadership and Policy-Making*.

This particular study does begin to address the systems of signs that underscore the values and perceptions of teachers and administrators in relation to school reform.

The problem with it, though, is that this was done before NCLB's ratification, yet after the testing and accountability 'buzz' had begun in 1983. In it, Spielman and Radnofsky (1997) used a Grounded Theory methodology, to uncover the "concept of power as it applies to school reform" in one school district undergoing active reform; they used the "formal-logical structure" of Ethno-semiotics to "consider, systematically, all the possibilities created by relationships of contrariety and contradiction" within the concept of power, and as perceived by teachers and administrators in the particular culture of one local school district (p. 2). Data collection was done primarily through field observation and a "listening" of how teachers talked about new policies and district-wide reforms; additionally, "semi-structured interviews" were used, along with focus groups and document analysis (p. 2). These were done until "enough examples or descriptions of a certain phenomenon [were] given", and so when the researchers felt they had reached a "saturation" of possibilities within the language used by the teachers that were interviewed and observed. Coding and analysis of this data (much of it having taken the natural form of narrative) was done using a traditional semiotic model, in an effort to determine how any reform policy is understood by "the coexisting cultures in a given school community" (p. 2).

What they found through their small, yet dynamic, sample of schooling on a local level, is that that understanding the undercurrent of perception was essential to do before even beginning to "investigate what it [the reform] did", and especially before attempting to argue the "soundness or appropriateness" of it, and certainly before holding anyone punitively 'accountable' for it. In essence, their findings suggested that before any policy could be considered for its success or failure, the *perceptions* of teachers, in particular,

need to be heard and understood, and subsequently analyzed within the “formal-logical structure” that semiotics could provide (p. 3). Only then could the real success or failure of any reform be measured, for it is wholly dependent on the context of the “prevalent teacher culture”, and whether or not they will accept it (p. 3). In fact, they found that in this context “misinformation was rampant”, and that “teachers did not know exactly what were the conditions” of these policies for them, thus setting them and these policies up for failure (p. 15). In essence, these contradictions in how the language the policy was given to the teachers and how the teachers responded to it, led to feelings of being mistrusted as professionals, which would, in any setting, guarantee failure for a policy before it even begins. Furthermore, they argued the “necessity that educators that conceive and implement reform - even when (and perhaps essentially when) it is site-based - pay particular attention to understanding the coexisting cultures *in* a given school community” (p. 3). This, however, should also include those “coexisting cultures” that have a ‘stake’ in education *outside* of the school, including parents and state legislators.

Spielman and Radnofsky’s findings are important for the framers of any new school policy and reform, because, if anything, as their findings also suggested, “reform framers have proceeded upon false assumptions”, particularly in how they had assumed *power* is perceived in and around schools. They suggested that in order to create reforms that succeed, the producers of such ‘texts’ (all language in any form can be considered a ‘text’ when looked at semiotically) must concentrate on the “changing of the prevalent teacher culture” in particular, in order to flush out the paradoxes of how power is perceived. What’s more is that they suggested that this must be carefully done if a school’s leadership would ever hope move the perceptions within that teacher culture

away from one that would be “unfavorable to the professional ethic”, and towards one that would support “the establishment of truly democratic structures”. In essence, the success of any reform comes down to semantics of it, and how that affects teacher perception, and vice-versa. Otherwise, it is sure to fail, sometimes before it even gets a chance to succeed.

However, Spielman and Radnofsky’s study focused on only one school district. It did so using the example of only one site-based reform effort, and affected only one dynamic of the teacher/subjects’ professional lives (that of how they were to evaluate students). And while their use of Ethno-semiotics began to suggest a framework for understanding how the language of reform affects perception, and thus the success of that reform, they did so within just *one* specific school culture, effectively falling short of identifying how language affects perception and thus reform efforts on a more systematic level, across school cultures, or in the school ‘society’ as a whole. Similarly, it focused on just the perceptions of teachers, with little focus on how other stakeholding groups may or may not have shared the teachers’ perceptions, thus providing a more generalizable result. What’s more, is that while their study was done during an era where high-stakes testing and accountability were certainly ‘in the air’, it was nevertheless done before NCLB’s ratification.

Therefore, upon further review of the literature related to semiotics and perceptions of NCLB, it can be understood that little has been done to understand how NCLB has affected the perceptions of other stakeholding groups outside of teachers and administrators. What’s more is that since NCLB has been re-named by the Obama Administration as Race-to-the-Top, and since then, threatened by the Common Core

consortium looking to replace it, NCLB's legacy on perception of these new, more 'progressive' reform efforts has yet to be investigated. If Dewey was right in the opening quote – that one trend in education will just be replaced by another with little lasting, nevertheless progressive, change - then any reform attempted in post-NCLB era must be understood within the context of how this decade-long power struggle has affected the perceptions of *all* stakeholding groups. Therefore, this study attempts to address these varying perceptions of school reform across stakeholding groups by employing a more encompassing conceptual framework than Ethno-semiotics, within that of Social Semiotics.

While Spielman and Radnofsky's study used a more traditional semiotic model, their findings indicate that traditional semiotics only begins to recognize how the culture of the school district studied might be used to understand how this may look in the context of a larger school culture, nevertheless within an even larger American society. And while it begins to address the social nature of how language and meaning change as a result of the relationships between teachers and the reformers themselves, drawing from a concept of 'power' within the "formal-logical structure" of Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics, it does not account for how these perceptions have evolved within a social context and over time. This is where Social Semiotics helps to bridge this gap; it offers a more postmodern modality to account for what Hodge and Kress (1988) called the "ideological complexes" that affect the language used, and perceptions of, not only the teachers themselves, but other stakeholding groups involved in schooling; it provides the flexibility to include other important stakeholding groups, in addition to teachers, as part of the success or failure of any reform, past or present. With this kind of data, then

policy-makers could better understand how both they and others perceive a particular reform, and therefore make more democratically responsible and truly progressive decisions - ones that could be more appropriate to both the needs of the individual and that of the collective. If anything, it could start a more honest, open dialogue between stakeholding groups, who often fall into the ideological and rhetorical war of ‘standards’ and ‘accountability’ felt today.

So, in order to further this conversation, and to account for at least some of these important perceptions and their change over time, this study draws its data from a small sample from five of public education’s major stakeholding groups (parents, teachers, administrators, superintendents, and state legislators), while employing an even more encompassing semiotic model within Social Semiotics, to capture the variety of perceptions as shown within participants’ language *across* schools and district cultures. This study’s singular focus on the state of Idaho, a rapidly changing yet also hesitant state in regards to school reform, while limited in its ability to provide generalization, does provide a unique glimpse into how NCLB has profoundly affected perception as shown within the language used by its stakeholders over its ten-plus years of existence, and how this has already begun to affect newer reforms in a Post-NCLB era, such as the Common Core. Idaho, as a state struggling with education and reform, could serve as a model for other states to use in reconsidering reform in their own schools, and while it is a unique state in this regard, Idaho is not terminally unique. As this study’s findings also suggest, and that Social Semiotics allows for, the ideologies that inform our American schools do not begin or end with Idaho and its specific culture at a state or local level; rather, as the

language, and thus perception, of its educational stakeholders suggested, it is quite the opposite.

Like 45 other states thus far (at least at the time of this study), Idaho ratified Common Core two years ago and recently piloted in Idaho's schools for the first time. Its success in this state, however, is quite speculative (as some worried interviewees conveyed), and will, as Spielman and Radnofsky began to suggest in their 1997 study, depends on the perceptions of not only teachers, but also the administrators, superintendents, state legislators, and parents involved in those schools. As a result of misinformation and miscommunication between and within these groups, many other rural states have backed out on their initial push towards Common Core, almost as suddenly as they adopted it. Similarly, Idaho is also a 'work-in-progress' in this way. It is evolving quite quickly, yet given the dominant ideologies that inform its people, quite naturally *away* from reform. The state, while politically conservative in its voting identity, has uniformly fought any and all reform, from NCLB and its state testing model to the Common Core as seen today in the state as many, from a variety of stakeholding groups, are currently fighting to overturn the state legislature's decision to adopt it. Idaho is in flux, and given its history in rejecting reform, it could provide a phenomenologically-unique perspective into how and why major reforms tend to fail in America's schools over the long-term.

Likewise, then, in order to address the rate and nature of this internal change, this study will use a Grounded Theory methodology, focusing on that change with in-depth interviewing of a small sample of each stakeholding group. In particular, a Constructivist Grounded Theory, coined by Kathy Charmaz (2006), was employed as the primary



methodology with the intent of uncovering the experiences, and thus language and related perceptions, of the interviewees in regard to NCLB over the last decade (and, today, in relation to the adoption of the Common Core in their state). These storied experiences, and the language used by the participants therein, thus became the primary source of data. Finally, these narrative ‘texts’, all of which have evolved from the ethos and influence of NCLB, were coded using a Socio-semiotic framework of analysis in an effort to point towards how the language used by the interviewees reflect upon the dominant ideologies of their respective school cultures, and the society of schooling in Idaho as a whole. Finally, this analysis resulted in a substantive theory for how Idaho, or, potentially, any state or locality, might better create and implement successful and progressive reform.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

As previously discussed, given that the literature on NCLB and related reform focuses primarily on teachers, with only a few that highlight administrators and fewer that look at superintendent perceptions of NCLB, the sample groups for this study looked to add further understanding to not only these three essential stakeholding groups, but also that of parents and state legislators. These two groups help to create a more ecological understanding of how NCLB and other related reform efforts have been perceived, and thus received, by the states and localities that harbor our schools. Therefore, a total of 12 one hour interviewees were chosen in order to represent these four different, but interrelated, stakeholding groups. As further discussed in **Chapter Four**, these interviewees were chosen primarily through a ‘snowball’ sampling strategy, but as data began to inductively present itself, the Constructivist methods of Purposeful, Discriminant, and Theoretical sampling were used (Charmaz, 2006); these specific sampling strategies helped to identify specific interviewees that could inductively allow for both new data to present itself, and to confirm connections and make comparisons in the language used and perceptions held by each stakeholding group. In essence, interviewees were chosen given a combination of their stakeholding role in education, their location (urban, rural, suburban and rural-resort), their other, yet related, roles as educational stakeholders (for example, teachers who also think, feel and speak as parents of school-aged children), and their overall accessibility. Each interview lasted one hour,

and was performed at a location of the interviewees' choice. Most interviews were recorded and transcribed, with two of the twelve failing to record because of technological problems. *Figure 1*, below, shows who was interviewed (each chose a pseudonym to be called by), what stakeholding group/s they represented (including relevant demographic information), and what other stakeholding interests that the interviewees spoke of, all of which ultimately had bearing on the language used and their perceptions of educational reform since NCLB:

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Major Stakeholding Group (Demographic)</b>	<b>Other Stakeholding Interests</b>
Caroline	<b>Parent</b> (rural-resort)	Former PT organization president, current school board member
Christine	<b>Parent</b> (urban)	Non-profit/community-based educator in experiential education
Leigh	<b>HS Teacher</b> (urban)	Parent
Heidi	<b>HS Teacher</b> (rural-resort)	Parent
Sasha	<b>ES Teacher</b> (rural)	Recent Teacher-Education program graduate
Sarah	<b>HS Teacher</b> (suburban)	Parent
George	Former <b>ES Administrator</b> (suburban, rural)	Parent, former teacher and professional development director
Charlie	<b>ES Administrator</b> (rural)	Athletic coach, former MS and college administrator
Jack	<b>Superintendent</b> (rural)	Former ES teacher and administrator
Sophie	<b>Superintendent</b> (rural)	Teacher-educator
Jackie	Former <b>State Legislator</b> (Dem. - rural)	Parent
Sam	Current <b>State Legislator</b> (Rep. - rural)	Parent

*Figure 1. Sample (n) matrix*

Once interviews were done and data collected using a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach, and as new ‘texts’ were drawn from that process, then a Social Semiotic analysis was performed to uncover for the ideological patterns, word associations, and metaphors. Again, this method of analysis was one based on the idea that the language used and metaphors adopted by these stakeholders can point towards their individual and collective experiences as educators in a post-NCLB era, as well as provide a theoretical and Constructive understanding as to how these connections and comparisons might help reformers to better understand why and how reforms work, or not for that matter. This would provide useful information as we look towards new reform efforts, such as the Common Core.

However, in order to make this move from the original policy of NCLB to that of it as perceived and experienced over the last ten years, a comprehensive framework for data collection had to be used, one that honored how reform policy has changed (or not, for that matter) and how different groups perceive this historical reform movement. Therefore, while Social Semiotics provided the conceptual framework for analyzing the language used by these groups, Kathy Charmaz’s (2006) Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) provided an equally as reflexive and reflective model for data collection.

### **A Constructivist Grounded Theory Approach to Data Collection**

One of the fundamental principles of Social Semiotics is that “meaning *is* possible because not all possible combinations of things, events [and] contexts are equally likely” (Lemke, 1994), suggesting that whatever the interviewees have said matters, and ultimately contributes to a very “possible meaning”. What’s more, as Lemke (1994) also suggested, they very well could lead to not only the “most general”, but the “most

powerful”, analysis of “how we deploy our cultural resources for making sense of the world”, and in this case within the “language, depiction [and] action” of NCLB as it is actively heard, seen and felt today. Even then, and especially when a Social Semiotic relationship is built between a text and its audience, it is still admittedly very abstract and difficult to generalize particularly towards the perceptions and attitudes of those affected by it. This is why the methodology used in the initial data collection phase of this study *must be flexible* enough to allow for these relationships to inductively if not, also, abductively<sup>1</sup>, mature and develop throughout that process - one that a Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006) provided.

Given that the new ‘texts’ uncovered through interviewees draw from “diverse local worlds, multiple realities, and the complexities of particular worlds, views and actions” (Creswell, 2007), then a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach best allowed for the abductive flexibility to draw out the many complexities of NCLB, and related perceptions of it, and particularly in relation to current reforms such as Common Core. In his guide to qualitative theory and methodology, Creswell cited Kathy Charmaz’s Constructivist variation of Grounded Theory as a method with a unique degree of flexibility, noting that within it a more “interpretative approach of qualitative research” can be employed, and within which there are “flexible guidelines” that allow for “learning about the experience within embedded, hidden networks, situations, and relationships”. He also explained that it is that with this flexibility comes the ability to

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<sup>1</sup> Kathy Charmaz (2006) defined “abduction” as “a type of reasoning that begins by examining data and after scrutiny of [it], entertains all possible explanations for the observed data”, after which the researcher can *then* form a hypothesis (p. 187); she went on to explain that it is this kind of reasoning that allows for the “most plausible interpretation” of the observed data to present itself. In many ways, this kind of reasoning provides an extension of induction, wherein empiricism and rationalism meet, and where one can uncover the ‘things’ that logic/reason and experience/emotion cannot singularly describe.

“make visible hierarchies of power, communication, and opportunity” (65). Certainly, this kind of methodological flexibility was needed in trying to navigate the many perceptions of NCLB that have evolved within and between stakeholding groups over the last decade, even in one state (Idaho), and especially in relation to current reform efforts on a national scale. Likewise, given the political, and thus also ideological, tensions leading to (and in many instances resulting from) the creation of NCLB in 2002, a method was needed that places an appropriate emphasis on power.

Again, while Spielman and Radnofsky’s 1997 study on reform efforts in one school district did also recognize that power as a theme and a cultural dynamic, breaking it down into having four distinct, yet interrelated parts (thus accounting for how it differed in its perception between teachers and their administrators and school leaders), it did so with a traditional semiotic matrix of contradiction and contrariety. Within their model, they portray ‘power’ as, on one hand, a “one-dimensional commodity”, but also something that can be experienced and perceived by individuals in vastly different ways, some of which very difficult to conceive. Therefore, it was through their “logico-semantic” framework of semiotics that they were able to express “power” in not only its most basic form as “being-able-to-do” (or “freedom”), and not only within its basic contradiction of “not-being-able-to-do” (“powerlessness”), but also by showing it contraries in “being-able-NOT-to-do” (“independence”) and “NOT-being-able-NOT-to-do” (“submission”). These findings, done with this semiotic framework, was helpful in confirming that ‘power’ is important when looking at perception in America’s schools, but again, does not fully account for how ‘power’ might be perceived, and thus adopted by schools, in other, yet related, ways. Quite simply, the one oversight with it is that it

ignores the dynamic of social ideology given its focus on just one particular culture in one school district; likewise, while it provides a four-dimensional, and thus more of an axiomatic approach, to how power is perceived, their study rests on a preconceived ideological frameworks of the past, within that of the Marxist tradition and of Critical Theory in particular. While these provide well accepted, if not valid, results given their traditions, and while the subsequent semiotic model provided a logical system of seeing the role of language in the distribution and perception of power, Spielman and Radnofsky's study falls short of seeing past, present and future reform as a living, breathing 'thing', subject to change over time. What's more, is that it subjects a theoretical tradition *onto* the data *before* it had its chance present itself, and for the language of the participants a chance to provide a deeper, if not fresher, understanding of reform and power relationships in schools. And once they did get their data, their chosen semiotic model fell short of seeing how language, even that directly related to power, could be seen within the unique social context of schooling, and how that relates to the social construct as a whole - while a progressive, if not democratic, model of education was essentially advocated for, it made the ontological assumption from the very beginning that this was *the ideal*. What if a 'progressive', 'democratization' of schools is *not* what is needed, or wanted, by the stakeholding groups on the level of perception? How have NCLB and its legacy of reform has changed this landscape forever? How, then, might this be understood, and if not understood, at least theorized?

On the other hand, as Hodge and Kress (1988) attested in their rationalization of Social Semiotics, they argued that it can cast a much larger net on these varied perceptions over time, thus adequately "capturing the contradiction characteristic of

ideological forms” (p. 4). It provides more options for seeing the social relationships derived from ‘power’, accounting for how different individuals in different groups perceive it in their lives, yet as part of a greater social system based on the “ideological complexes” that these relationships portray as “one social group imposes itself on another” because of their own interests, while the other subversively fights it to preserve their own. And while a more traditional semiotic method does show how one group may be in contradiction with another, and even in contrariety with another, showing these complexities, it does not account for the “second level of messages which regulates the functioning of [the] ideological complexes [themselves], a level which is *directly* concerned with the production and reception of meanings” (p. 5).

So, by honoring these “complexes” through seeing the language used by interviewees in different, yet related, stakeholding groups on a “second level” of ideology, new modalities of seeing “power” in schools, particularly in relation to school reform, could present themselves. This analytical approach, coupled with Charmaz’s more flexible and adaptive methodology of data collection, allowed this study for more than four modalities of ‘power’ to emerge, as well as other related thematic and substantive categories (such as ‘deception’, ‘purpose’, ‘fear’ and what many interviewees described as “buy-in”), all of which brought with them a more ideologically-sensitive understanding of how power works in the success or failure of school reform. (Again, these themes and categories, and their ideological relationship to ‘power’ in and around schooling, will be discussed in **Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Presentation.**)

Additionally, Creswell noted the unique use of such a flexible approach, describing Charmaz’s Constructivist approach to Grounded Theory as one that “places



more emphasis on the views, values, beliefs, feelings, assumptions, and ideologies of individuals than on the [positivist] methods of research” (p. 65). Again, given the problem that Lemke noted within the use of language in any institution where there are individual perceptions at work in an infinitely complex web of relational experiences, then the method of data collection must itself promote flexibility and attention to process, allowing for interviews to build on each other and themselves in an effort to arrive at a more substantive theory. And while Strauss and Corbin’s more traditional methodology of Grounded Theory might provide a more directed, if not methodologically safe, way of gathering data, thus creating a more positivist attention to reliability and validity, Creswell also pointed out that Charmaz’s Constructivist method of Grounded Theory (2006) does, in fact, advocate for specific practices in gathering data and coding it, as well as in reaching a Grounded Theory for within which it can rest.

One of these practices has to do with the emergent role of the researcher in a Constructivist Grounded Theory (or CGT); as Mills, Bonner and Francis explained in the 2006 essay on the history and emergence of Constructivist Grounded Theory (particularly in the fields of psychology, education and nursing), CGT’s purpose is actually to “maintain the presence of the participants’ throughout” the data collection process, yet to also give the researcher “explanatory power” in doing so (p. 32). They also suggest that CGT provides an “ontologically relativist and epistemologically subjectivist” model for research that effectively “reshapes the interaction between researcher and participants” so that the researcher can also be “author” (p. 31). In essence, the researcher can and should have the ‘power’ to shape the participants’ stories, thus give power back to them over their own experience. The researcher, along with the participants, is a “co-

producer”, with an particular allowance to him or her to freely perceive, along with the participant. In this way, GCT gives license to the researcher to write “evocative[ly], so that the “participant’s voice and meaning [are] present in the theoretical outcome of the study (p. 31). Without this voice, and without the freedom for the researcher to evoke their own perceptions about how interviews went, and how meaning is perceived, then the needed “explanatory power” is lost in existing theory, without any real ‘progress’ at all.

Therefore, CGT also allows the researcher to go “beyond the surface of meaning” in an effort to surface and question the implied and bring substance to the perceived (p. 31). This interactive and integrated process of data collection and analysis was needed for this study to deal with the postmodern dilemma presented by NCLB and its many iterations over more than a decade, and to allow subjective room for a new “discovered reality” to present itself throughout the process, without any theoretical ‘strings-attached’.

### **An Integrated Approach to Data Analysis**

Again, it is in her 2006 book, *Constructivist Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide to Qualitative Analysis*, that Kathy Charmaz explained just how practical this method *can* be, even (and especially) when dealing with the ontological dilemmas of language and perception. For instance, she argued how it naturally “presupposes” the construction of substantive categories of reality because of both how it has, within itself, “comparative methods of analyzing data”, and how it “can complement other approaches to qualitative data analysis, rather than stand in opposition to them”, such as in the case of this study with the use of Social Semiotics (pgs. 9, 100). Therefore, because of its highly inductive nature and flexibility to how data presents itself throughout the research

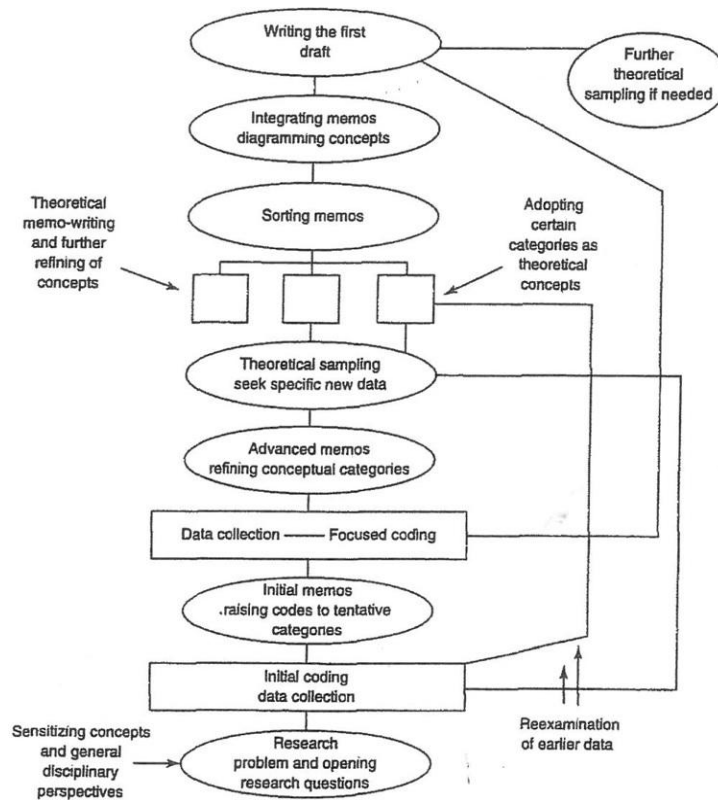
process, Constructivist Grounded Theory can do what other qualitative methods sometimes fall short of, even when they are determined to be highly reliable, and when the aim is to generalize for larger population distributions; it can work for purposes other than, and in addition to generalizability, one that Charmaz claimed many researchers irresponsibly assume that qualitative inquiry *must* create. Instead, Charmaz pointed out that her method not only allows flexibility for, but also honors, the fact that “people construct data”, and that with each individual person who has constructed it, this data *can* be observed, recorded and analyzed with a focus on quality and relevance (p. 16). This can help to reveal to the researcher how the data “flows from some purpose” or another, to a place where a real and “particular objective” can be found (p. 16). And while this may compromise the level of reliability a Constructivist Grounded Theory can provide for a larger population, it provides a robust process of data collection and analysis that can offset this limitation. Furthermore, it should be noted, again, that this more postmodern form of Grounded Theory does not pretend to be at all positivist, but rather unabashedly post-positivist in its intent to uncover possibility not certainty; a new, fresh theory is the goal, and therefore, was the goal of this study.

What’s more, is that a Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology honors the diversity of these perspectives, as well as the researcher’s own perceptual construction of data, therefore also reconceptualizing what it means for a study to be ‘valid’. Thus, she promoted a system that while not purely logical or systematic, does make the active assumption (rather than a passive dismissal of one), that “we [researchers] are part of the world we study and the data we collect” (p. 10). In essence, her approach does not pretend to provide an exact rendering of reality in relationship to any large population or

discipline of study, but instead provides an “interpretive portrayal of the studied world” , in order to potentially construct a newer, fresher, and deeper “construction of reality” (p. 10). After a decade of NCLB, and, moreover, after a century of one trend or another, none of which gaining any real support or longitudinal traction, this study contends that something new, fresh and deep is needed if we are to understand how or why any reform succeeds or fails, especially if it can’t superficially reach accepted standards of reliability and validity.

That being said, in order to address the concerns of those that support more traditional qualitative methodology, particularly in relation to reliability, Constructivist Grounded Theory *does* use a logical system of sorts to gather and code this kind of “rich” data. To reach the inductive demands of this model of inquiry, a careful yet flexible process is used to gather data, to analyze it throughout, and to craft subsequent questions for more specific sample groups. As Charmaz explained, the researcher must go into this process of interviewing and data collection with an open mind, trying to put aside any one preconceived or assumed theoretical orientation, that is until the data points toward it within the initial coding, the secondary/focused coding, and/or the final and theoretical coding of data. Throughout and in between these efforts in coding, interviews are performed to flush out pertinent themes, to develop thematic categories, and finally, to create a substantive theory. Throughout this process, reflective research “memos” are written to theoretically develop new interview questions, to test conceptual frameworks, to identify potent themes, and to point towards more specific sample groups as a theory begins to emerge. The end goal, here, is a Theoretical Saturation of data, determined throughout this process. Therefore, there is no one single number for N that indicates

saturation, but rather what Charmaz called a “Theoretical Sensitivity” that will tell the researcher when and where to stop the data collection process. *Figure 2*, below, provides a visual model of the process of Constructivist Grounded Theory as depicted by Charmaz, and that is used to create a qualitative degree of validity in reaching saturation, and in advocacy of her concept of Theoretical Sensitivity throughout this process (2006, p. 11):



*Figure 2. The inductive process of Constructivist Grounded Theory*

In order to continually review data, and to create the ethic of Theoretical Sensitivity, this Constructivist process relies on the use of “memoing”, and what Charmaz calls “active coding”, throughout the collection and analysis of data.

Essentially, by continually addressing the data throughout the collection of it, memos

help to guide how, why, and where the research will go, and ultimately where the data ends up. They allows the researcher to follow hunches and his/her theoretical and philosophical “sensitivities”, while also recording the data in a way where it can be continuously considered, re-read, and re-crafted in attunement with the participants’ own sensitivities and natural proclivities (p. 10). Written throughout the data collection process, these memos provide ways to compare data, to explore ideas about the codes [that emerge through the data], and to direct further data-collection. Therefore, as this study progressed, and as memos were written and data coded, a symbiotic relationship evolved between the researcher and data, the participants and the data, and thus the researcher and participants, ultimately lending for greater theoretical saturation. For this study, these memos provided the direction for the Constructivist process of Theoretical Sampling, Saturation and Sorting, helped for a more substantive theory to evolve - one that would not be forced into a preconceived methodological framework with its own technicalities and conceptual requirements (such as Spielman and Radnofsky’s 1997 Grounded Theory study on school reform and perceptions of it).

This study therefore utilized memoing to collect data throughout the interviewing process, and to engage in new ideas, questions, themes, and categories that emerged in subsequent interviews. With a transcription of each interview (those that gave permission for audio taping/transcription), as well as notes taken during each interview with the presupposition of a Socio-semiotic analysis of the language used, an active coding was done during the memo-writing process to reach this end. Furthermore, in accordance with Charmaz’s argument that such an approach helps the researcher to “shape and reshape”, and thus “refine”, the data collected, a Socio-semiotic analysis was

done throughout; however, she also indicated that this requires a “keen eye, open mind, discerning ear, and steady hand” in order to navigate the complexities of a phenomenon as potent, yet not easily generalizable, as NCLB (p. 15). Again, this was where and when Social Semiotics also helped to gauge where to go with future interviewing, and how to subsequently analyze the new data with Theoretical Sensitivity.

Likewise, Charmaz (2006) went on to state that the “logic” of her methodology can “guide [not only one’s] methods of data-gathering”, but also of “theoretical development” so that the researcher can push his/her “emerging ideas” towards a substantive theory (p. 16). Given that NCLB has been so immersed into the lives of educators, and given that its meaning has naturally shifted with perception many times over since its inception, this Constructivist method of inquiry should be used while interviewing and collecting data to organically guide inquiry towards the “nuances” of the interviewees’ “language and meanings” (p. 34). Therefore, in order to do make this move towards nuance, and to provide a saturation of possible perceptions that could lend towards some kind of substantive theory or generalization, this also calls for what Charmaz (2006) called “intense interviewing”. Charmaz (2006) offered the following criterion as guidance for successfully engaging in the process of “intense interviewing” (p. 23):

- 1.) “Attending to actions and processes as well as words
- 2.) Delineating the context, scenes, and situations of action carefully
- 3.) Recording who did what, when it occurred, why it happened (if you can ascertain the reasons), and how it occurred
- 4.) Identifying the conditions under which specific actions, intentions, and processes emerge or are muted
- 5.) Looking for ways to interpret these data
- 6.) Focusing on specific words and phrases to which participants seem to attribute particular meaning

- 7.) Finding taken-for-granted and hidden assumptions of various participants; showing how they are revealed through and affect actions.”

Using these as guideposts during and throughout the interview process, the data collection phase of this study was flexible in its approach, yet also focused; moreover, with a particular focus on “words and phrases”, as well as in the end goal of uncovering “hidden assumptions” through them, the data collection process invited a Social Semiotic method of data analysis, which later aided in inductively reaching a saturation of information, and therefore a ‘Grounded’ Theory.

### **Interviewing Towards a Grounded Theory**

In order to achieve the inductive demands of Grounded Theory, then the interviewing process must also be seen as not just a deductive mode of data collection, but also a constructive and inductive part of the methodology itself. Therefore, the questions asked must be both directed and open-ended enough to draw out an authentic response - enough to lead to new ‘texts’ within each participant’s story. It is then that a meaningful relationship between NCLB and their experiences might be uncovered, and that a pragmatically “social construction of meaning” (Shank, 1994) might emerge. This socially-constructive process, as Shank (1994) also indicated, is the very “linchpin of the entire educational process”. The interview questions should, too, honor that process. (**Appendix A** provides a snapshot of what leading and sub-questions were asked and to whom, as well as what probing questions that were used to cue interviewees in a non-invasive and authentic manner.)

However, what became abundantly clear through each interview, and as the research moved into the second and third phase of interviewing (where it moved from a



“discriminant” to a more “theoretical” sample group), the questions evolved, as they should given the both methodological demands and promise of Constructivist Grounded Theory. Most interviews took a shape of their own – some moved towards personal experience right away without any further cueing or questioning, while others stayed within the theoretical realm for quite some time, needing some specific questioning to prompt a narrative experience. In either case, what became clear was that in addition to the very many patterns that developed in relation to the interviewees and their perceptions of NCLB, the participants also wanted to discuss the Common Core reform, either in lieu of or in connection with their experiences with NCLB. This suggested that it, too, needed to be part of the study’s focus as the data emerged.

With these questions in tow, I conducted a total of 12 interviews within small, criterion-based samples of 2-3 participants from five different stakeholding groups - 3 parents, 3 teachers, 2 administrators (one former and one current), 2 superintendents, and 2 state legislators (one former and one current) . The first four were chosen using a “purposeful sampling” (Seideman, 2006). This provided the first glimpse into what themes might present themselves. Subsequent interviewees were chosen in lieu of the coding results of these initial interviews. The next four were chosen using a “discriminant sampling” (Charmaz, 2006) to bring these themes to categories. Finally, a “theoretical sampling” was done to test variations in data and to arrive at a substantive theory. Each interviewee was asked to provide, if willing, a name of another potential interviewee who they thought could add new perspective to the study. Depending on the thematic and categorical needs determined through the coding process, some of these contacts were pursued, while others not. While this could be considered a major

limitation in relation to this study's reliability, the methodology of Constructive Grounded Theory allows for what Seidman (2006) called the "snowball effect" in gaining contacts for interviewing. And while somewhat taboo in the field of what could be considered more empirically Qualitative Research in the Social Sciences, this method of sampling has proven to be quite useful in a Grounded Theory study when a substantive theory, not a superficial or generalized one, is the goal. This methodological combination of Constructivist Grounded Theory, along with a Socio-semiotic framework of analysis, provided the means for this study to, as Shank (1994) suggested, inductively use the "raw experience" of its participants to arrive at a "settling [of] meaning", therefore allowing room for us to move beyond what "we already know [or think we know] or understand" about school reform, and thus into a new discussion of it.

However, that being said, in order to provide a sense of balance and direction to this inductive approach to sampling, a more specific purpose was brought to the study through its overall focus within the state of Idaho; this kept the samples organized within the educational culture of one state (and one that, as discussed in **Chapter Five**, provided a unique ideological glimpse into the potential promise and relative failure of educational reform in America, and how NCLB had, and continues to have, a fundamental role in that 'big picture'.) And while there were limitations associated with such small samples groups in only one of 50 states with millions of stakeholders across a rising number of stakeholding groups in both the public and private sectors it is the contention of this study that the Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology, in concert with the analytical mode of Social Semiotics, not only aided in arriving at a working theory for the state of

Idaho to use, but that could, with further research at the state and local levels, be similarly applied to other states as they navigate the current trends of reform in a post-NCLB era.

In order to carefully make the ontological jump from language to perception to application at any level, Idaho or otherwise, then interviews were performed, and coding done, in three distinct parts, each designed to engage in the inductive process of discovery in which Charmaz's Constructivist Grounded Theory demands:

- 1.) *Initial Interviewing and Coding of Data* (Including a Line-by-Line and En-Vivo Coding to identify themes within the first data set/interviews.)
- 2.) *Focused Interviewing and Coding of Data* (Adding a Conceptual Coding of new data from secondary interviews to identify theoretical categories.)
- 3.) *Theoretical Sampling and Coding of Data* (Using an Axial Coding of four final interviews to identify theoretical relationships between categories, and to develop a substantiated theory.)

Again, within and between each of these distinct parts of the study, memos were written in order to, as Charmaz (2006) also explained, "provide a space to become actively engaged with [the] material, to develop ideas, and to fine-tune subsequent data-gathering" (p. 72). Additionally, a Socio-semiotic analysis was done within each memo in an effort to: 1.) Identify potent themes, 2.) Establish ideological categories of themes, and, 3.) Move towards a substantiated theory. Through memo writing, as well as active coding of data, variations in data were also identified, and recorded as questions, a part of the Constructivist process that Charmaz argued is essential to the inductive, and often abductive, nature of it.

In phase one of data collection, four interviewees were initially chosen using a Theoretical Sampling<sup>2</sup> technique, each representing a slightly different demographic of the state, yet all with significant years of experience in education, some in multiple roles. The first interviewee was “Caroline”, a parent of two high school-aged children, as well as a current school-board member in a rural/resort school district in Idaho. The second was “Jackie”, a former Idaho state legislator from the same area, who had represented its interests at the state capitol for eight years. The third interviewee, “George”, recently retired as principal of a local elementary school in this same community, and had been a long-time teacher and principal in the state of Washington. The last of the first four interviewees, “Jack”, currently holds the position as superintendent of a very small, farming district and community, also in southern Idaho. Each were chosen because of their years of experience in education in Idaho, as well as their representation of rural Idaho, which given the geography and demography of the state, makes up a good deal of its voting public.

With each of these first four interviews, both a “line-by-line” and “in-vivo” coding<sup>3</sup> were used to differentiate the “general” terms/language, and those that Charmaz (2006) calls “innovative” or “insider” terms/language, used by the first group of four

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<sup>2</sup> Charmaz (2006) argued that for a CGT, sampling does not have to follow traditional qualitative sampling criteria. Rather, sampling is done as a result of “theoretical concerns”, lending to the qualitative strength of CGT, allowing the researcher to “tighten” the “hermeneutic spiral” so that the researcher can “end up with a theory that perfectly matches [the] data” presented (p. 101). Thus, who is interviewed is constructively determined by the data itself, rather than with any kind of presupposition or theory.

<sup>3</sup> Line-by-Line coding is the first step of coding in a CGT, wherein each line of the interview text is coded for its thematic value, so that connections and comparisons can present themselves. In addition, “in-vivo” coding brings a specific emphasis to the words used by interviewees, showing an ‘insider’s’ view of how language can provide “symbolic markers” to “catch” meaning, lending to more robust and creative themes and thematic categories (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 50-55).

interviewees. The goal here was to begin to identify literal and metaphorical patterns within the language used, as well as the themes that codify them.

In these first interviews, as well as those in the second and third round of interviews, each of the interviewees were first prompted same question: *Tell me about a time when you had experienced NCLB - either for the first time or sometime thereafter - as a [parent/teacher/administrator/superintendent/legislator].* This initial prompt invited a variety of responses, some narrative and others of a more expository nature. With this first question, interviews took on a more organic nature; interviewees were prompted only for clarification and to probe their use of specific language as they described their experiences with NCLB within their specific roles. During the interviews, and using a transcription of each, a particular emphasis was put on the language used by the interviewees, and within their use of figurative language in particular. In the first stage of interviewing, an analytical focus was put primarily on repetition and pattern within and in between these initial interviews to identify themes. These themes were thematically coded and organized to reflect these patterns with the identifying descriptors of ‘Fear’, ‘Distrust’, ‘Profit’, etc. (as listed above). Each interview ended with another specific question, wherein interviewees were asked to create a metaphor for NCLB, completing the following statement: *NCLB is like a/an [ \_\_\_\_\_ ].* This was done in an effort to purposefully instigate a metaphorical response - the kind of “keen metaphor” that Otte (2011) suggested as important in arriving at “something different”. While these metaphors were somewhat forced upon the interviewees as a fill-in-the-blank kind of response, one that was admittedly not as natural or organic as the ones that emerged throughout each interview, they did help to support these more unconscious uses of

language, and ultimately the analytical use of these themes as underpinnings for the second and third round of interviews, and following those, the creation of Theoretical Categories and ultimately a Grounded Theory. While these fill-in-the-blank responses were used in some of the later interviews during the second and third rounds, there wasn't always a need for them; as themes were verified, variations tested, categories developed, and questions fine-tuned in lieu of them, the need to force metaphor became less important. Rather, metaphor presented itself more readily, also partially because the interviewer became more keenly aware of them.

That being said, the first four interviews were especially important in starting this Constructivist process. In order to honor their importance in this process, within and between these initial interviews, transcripts of interviews were coded line-by-line, looking for the use of word choice, both literal and figurative, that indicated both the individual experiences and the shared social constructs that frame them. In essence, the goal here was to identify what happened within each interviewee's experience, and to recreate and refine that within a story, of sorts. Then, the focus shifted to the specific language they used on a word-to-word level that each interviewee chose to use, consciously or unconsciously, to encapsulate that experience. In this sense, the initial coding follows the logic of Herbert Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism, one that Charmaz identified as being fundamentally important in the rationalization and methodological implementation of Constructivist Grounded Theory, allowing "constructivists to study how - and sometimes why - participants construct meanings and actions in specific situations" (Charmaz, p. 130).

Following this logic, and in an effort to thematically identify these socio-linguistic relationships in meaning-making, a special emphasis was put on what Charmaz (2006) called “en vivo” language used by the interviewees - both the “general terms” that were uniformly used to reflect the cultural and social norms of their experience in relation to NCLB, as well as the uniquely “innovative”/“insider” terms used by them, each unique to either their own experience or respective setting and role. These terms were first isolated, and then categorized and codified depending on both their literal and denotative meaning, as well as their implied and connotative suggestions, so that there would be more robust evidence for the how the language used can symbolically mark how meaning was created, and thus also how they might be thematically understood as manifestations of both the individual and the collective. Here, it should be noted that this interpretive process was also relational in that it was, as Social Semiotics suggests, based within a social experience. So, it can be argued that these terms were the most important indicator of meaning in the initial interviews given that they represent not only the interviewees’ experiences from their own social/relational reality, but also that of the environment they have come from, as well as the different but interrelated roles they have assumed within that environment. These terms provided a glimpse into what it was like for each of the interviewees as they have encountered NCLB since 2002, and thus how they perceive it today. Some of these more general terms were expected, such as their use of ‘Accountability’ and ‘Standardization’, while others were not, providing further insight into how the more common and ubiquitous language of reform (like ‘Accountability’ and ‘Standardization’) has been perceived by individuals who have experienced it, at least since its 2001 ratification and 2002 implementation. As Eisner so poignantly pointed out

in his 2001 essay, “What Does it Mean to Say a School is Doing Well”, “what something means comes *both* from the features of the phenomenon to be addressed *and* from the way those features are interpreted or experienced by individuals” (Flinders and Thornton, 2004).

Therefore, as Eisner above suggested, and in order to first address how the “features” of the NCLB phenomenon mean to those that have experienced it, the first interviews done with Caroline, George, Jack and Jackie aimed at uncovering how they perceive meaning in the reform ‘buzz-words’ that have come out of it. These more “general” terms, as Charmaz indicated, helped to bring emphasis to the phenomenon studied as it relates to the chosen interviewees. On the other hand, in order to also address how “those features are interpreted and experienced by individuals”, the “insider” terms used by the first four interviewees were also identified. By uncovering both, then relationships between both sets of terms were built, and identifying themes constructed, to bring semiotic meaning to NCLB in relation to how the phenomenon has been experienced within the social construct of schools in Idaho. Both “general” and “insider” terms became, very important in the identification of any unifying themes that not only helped to encapsulate meaning within these groups, but also to identify variations between them. In short, what they said, down to the very word, mattered in these first interviews.

In the second round of interviewees where a more focused sampling and interviewing process was completed, these initial themes were then used to confirm the meaning found within the terms and language used, as well as to investigate variations and to construct Theoretical Categories. In the third round of interviewing, these were



tested were ultimately ‘tested’ in the theoretical sampling and coding phase of data collection and analysis. This way, as Eisner also suggested in his 2001 essay, meaning wasn’t so easily settled upon, thus leaving us with yet still “an approach to reform that leaves little room for surprise, for imagination, for improvisation or the cultivation of productive idiosyncrasies”. The Constructivist methodology used within and between these three different phases of interviewing, and as shown in the memos written throughout, helped to both choose the questions asked, as well as to focus the coding process, eventually isolated some of the more potent themes and terms, and to filter out those that were not as influential in the construction of a Grounded Theory of what school reform looks like today (more of the same), where that comes from (NCLB and pre-NCLB testing reform), and where schools in Idaho, and other states, could go with this awareness as they continue to attempt lasting and meaningful reform (Common Core or otherwise).

## **Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Presentation**

The following chapter provides a detailed synopsis of the language used, both general and insider, by each of the 12 interviewees. It shows how their use of this language reflects on their internalization of it, on both an institutional and individual level. What's more is that this shows that despite the overuse of such terms as 'accountability' and 'standardization', new, imaginative and improvised ways of understanding these 'buzz-words' do exist today in the minds and lives of those who have been affected by it and other related reform efforts. Each of these 12 interviewees were done in three phases, as reflected below; interviewees were chosen, and questions were asked, in lieu of the data that each preceding interview provided. Again, a CGT needs to honor this inductive/abductive approach to data collection and analysis. Likewise, each of the following sections provides revised and detailed memos of the interviews themselves to show what was said and how it was semiotically analyzed. Each of the three phases are followed by a discussion of how themes, categories of themes, and ultimately a substantive Grounded Theory, developed over time, from one phase and interview to the next.

### **Phase One: Initial Interviewing and Thematic Coding**

In the first four interviews, Caroline, George, Jack, and Jackie uncovered the following dichotomous themes, as shown in the word choice and metaphorical descriptions used by these interviewees when sharing their experiences with NCLB, as

well as with the current Common Core reform in their state (in which all four of them moved into, quite naturally, after speaking of their experiences with NCLB):

- Joy vs. Fear
- Trust vs. Distrust
- Truth vs. Deception
- Success vs. Failure
- Democracy vs. Hierarchy ('top-down')
- Freedom vs. Oppression
- Isolation vs. Inclusion
- Acceptance ('Buy-in') vs. Rebellion

Each of the first four interviewees used both literal language and metaphor during their interviews, much of which indicating these various themes on a more apocryphal level; however, while many of them spoke both dichotomously and axiomatically about their experiences with NCLB, as would be expected given the past and current controversy of 'accountability', 'standardization', and 'high-stakes testing', they also spoke more candidly and naturally at times, using metaphor and other figurative language to suggest these themes and dichotomies. What's more, is that when they moved from the more "general" terms to the "insider" language describing their specific experiences, these dichotomies became more dialectical and paradoxical. Therefore, as each are discussed, and the language and metaphors identified within the context of them, these 'versus' distinctions will better be understood as 'and/or' relationships to show how the literal and more "general" language interacts with the more metaphorical, "insider"

language used by the interviewees, thus representing a more holistic interpretation of their experiences as perceived by them, and interpreted by me, the researcher.

The following sub-sections are revised analytical and reflective memos written after each interview, and returned to throughout the first phase of the interview process. In each, (and in the presentation of data from the second and third phases of interviewing) you will be able to experience each interview, along with the language used by the interviewees and its subsequent socio-semiotic analysis. Each read very inductively, but this is the point; as Charmaz's Constructivist Grounded Theory demands, the writing must reflect the process, as well as provide an interface between the researcher, the participants, and in this case, NCLB (and the Common, as it seemed necessary).

***Caroline's concern.*** In this first interview, it became clear that pedagogy is only one of the many dimensions in the "ecology" of schooling (Eisner, 2002), but nevertheless an important one, for it is where, as Caroline said, "the rubber meets the road". It is in the classroom, when the student and teacher interact that learning happens or it doesn't, and the strategies that the teacher employs is essential to not only the relationship built between teacher and student, but so that the curriculum is learned, retained, and made relevant. According to her, it needs to be based on mutual respect, relevancy, and most of all, "joy". Without joy in learning, then the relationship between the student and teacher deteriorates, and the student can be forever lost in that subject area, or in their schooling as a whole. Caroline described the way in which her son lost joy in math because of a disrespectful teacher, who not only disrespected him by berating him, but also by being a "worksheet guy", thus effectively "killing" his love of Math. (She used the word "killed" three times to explain what had happened to her son's love of

learning, and to many of his teachers' love of teaching.) Once her son experienced this kind of pedagogy in math, Caroline claimed that he lost his love of learning, and which ultimately resulted in the family deciding to put him in an independent school setting, where she claimed he felt more respected as an "individual person", and where his learning could be one of "celebration" and not aberration. What's more is that Caroline, as a parent, also felt berated, isolated, disempowered, and disrespected as a result of not only her son's classroom experience, but also as a parent-member of the community, a co-president of the district PTA, and currently as an active board member. After 14 years of experience within these roles, she has come to understand the district as a "machine", that not only treats kids as "robots" and numbers, but that has built itself on NCLB and 'High-Stakes Testing' - as she explains, it had "pervaded *everything*", and had established a leadership that thrived on (and, in the case of her district, even profited from) it.

That being said, Caroline also pointed out that many teachers in the district do value things like critical thinking, joy in learning, and 21st century skills. What's more, is that plenty of them, as Caroline puts it, value their students and their relationships with them. She pointed out that even "love" can even be used to describe how many teachers see their "calling". She, too, showed her "love" of education and of the students in the district given the way that she leaned forward when talking about them (and her own children, of course), and how her voice became solemn when speaking of how her son had been so disrespected and isolated as an elementary schooler. Her passion for the district can be seen in her words, but also in her actions (in which she says is the *most* important indicator of someone's authenticity and intention, and in which she says the

leadership in the district has had trouble realizing over the past decade). Showing her authenticity and intention, she worked for six years to get back the property tax funding that her small, rural/resort district had lost following NCLB's 2001 ratification, and following that work, she began to address curriculum in the district. Much of that curriculum she saw as being "rote" and not relevant to her kids', nevertheless other kids', educations. And while she admits that with her daughter, who naturally does well with testing, the "rote" curriculum and "worksheets" didn't negatively affect, it nevertheless affected her "joy" in learning greatly, leading Caroline to put herself out there for criticism, and even abuse, from the district leadership.

She took on this burden herself, and along with some good friends and colleagues in the parent-body, "took on" the district's leadership, and in effect, NCLB and the Idaho Department of Education. Despite all of the "talk" of "critical thinking" and "21st century skills", she didn't believe that this "lip-service" could be trusted, and that something had to be done. In essence, she and few others, felt as if they were being deceived. So, she came together with a small group of other concerned parents, and wrote an op-ed piece that even caught the attention of the regional director of education under NCLB. In the piece, she criticized the rote nature of the district's curriculum, and called for a new one, citing the International Baccalaureate curriculum as a potential answer. After receiving this kind of attention, which was her initial goal in raising public awareness, the superintendent felt prompted to call her in for a private meeting, where he angrily threatened her and the PTA, saying that if they tried to change the curriculum in their schools - if they tried to "shove this [IB curriculum] down our throats, we're gonna vomit it back up". When remembering and speaking of that experience, Caroline's voice

quivered just a little bit, showing a mix of fear, sadness and anger. To explain what she was feeling at the time, and even now, she said that she felt he publically and privately “cuckoo-fied” her, making her feel “isolated”, if not bullied into a state of shameful submission. She felt humiliated, and thought that her work would be dismissed by the public in their faithful following of whom she recognized as being publically well-spoken. What happened, though, was something quite different. The word got out via her op-ed piece, which prompted the teachers, themselves, to write her and the PTA an “anonymous” letter asking Caroline and other parents like her to “save them” from NCLB and the testing environment that threatened their own joy in learning, and ultimately also their jobs. This kind of desperation followed Caroline in all her work with the district, as did her perseverance and dedication to her community and its kids. However, few other parents knew that kind of school district. Many, as she explained, were totally oblivious to the “crisis” that the district had experienced following NCLB’s ratification and implementation in her small, rural/resort school district in Idaho.

Most parents, it seemed to her, were very naive to the realities of budgeting, of curriculum decision-making, and of the value (or lack thereof) of testing. Caroline spoke of one parent that she thought was informed, smart and educated, yet who took quite a bit of ‘stock’ in what student’s scores were higher than others, and how that reflected on a school’s value. In Caroline’s view, many parents saw, and still see, the Idaho Standard Achievement Test (ISAT) as a competitive measure, something that can be used to boast scores and boost morale. Caroline argued that, unlike her, few parents asked the right questions, or ever took the kind of time that has taken to understand the implications of this test. And even fewer have taken the public risk that she has shown to better the

education of their children. Rather, many have relied on the media for their understanding, and have thus followed the popular and political lines in their opinions on their schools, on NCLB, and on testing in general. Few really talk about it, outside of when those tests are released to the media. This could either be because of how they are mis-educated by the schools and their rhetoric (again, the “lip-service” of critical thinking and 21st century skills that the leadership uses in their mission statements, statements to the press, etc.), or because they have been isolated themselves like their students. Maybe it’s something not worth talking about because they have been so deceived to the point where they have felt helpless?

In any case, it does seem that there is a prevailing and “pervasive” pedagogy that NCLB and testing have created in her district, not only in the classrooms, but also for the public in general. Much of it is based on the idioms, slogans, and ‘buzz-words’ that were born of it, and that the leadership had capitalized on with words like “accountability”, “critical thinking”, “21st century”, “world-class”, etc. According to Caroline, similar the students in the classrooms, parents have been given “rote knowledge”, and asked to think very little, and certainly not very critically, on the curriculum that was used, the way money was being spent, and how students were being taught. This kind of rhetoric, this “drumming” of sorts, distorts what Caroline has seen as what actually *happens* in classrooms - how students are being taught-to-the-test with worksheets. It overshadows the work of the teachers who do care about “joy in learning”, and can even protect, if not plaudit, those who don’t.

‘Pedagogy’ literally means, in its Greek root, to ‘lead the child’, and in its Progressive sense, is a term that addresses the methods, practices and instructional



techniques used to ‘lead the child’ towards a both body of knowledge and experiences that support what a given society believes to be valuable. If Caroline’s description of student and parent experiences under the particular “reign” of leadership born of NCLB is true, and if pedagogical practices based on deception, fear, isolation, and even intimidation are being used, then how both the student and the public are being ‘lead’ (or, rather, *mislead*) must be scrutinized. Caroline has made it her personal and public duty to do just this.

She claimed that the leadership in Caroline’s school district have developed a pedagogy much like that of the “worksheet guy” - one that asks educators to focus on numbers rather than the individual needs of the student or parent, that limits knowledge rather than promotes it, and that does not value inquiry or ‘critical thinking’ at all. What’s more, is that the “machine”, starting with NCLB and its leadership, has trickled-down to how education has operated on the state and district levels, and thus the classroom and even home life, thus creating a dynamic so difficult to understand and navigate (and nevertheless change), one could argue that it has created not only an mis-educated, but *uneducated* populace on the whole. Only a few, like Caroline, have been willing to suffer and to endure great hardship, and fewer have transcended it. So, if Caroline provides an example of how one individual *can* create some change, how can real reform be made, if only a few are willing and able to do that? Her example suggests that systematic reform cannot be made from the ‘top-down’, but must be done at a grassroots level to permeate the politics of it all.

Caroline did, however, state that she thought that her district *was* beginning on an “exciting” and “new era of education with the Common Core”. While she expressed that

she is still unsure as to what this will bring, given that a test is still at the center of it, that the “cooperative” nature of the curriculum, and the “freedom” that it could bring to classroom teachers, may ultimately help to empower parents and teachers, and thus create a new culture in the district. She agreed, however, that ‘only time will tell’; what she worries about, though, is that by time her district and state figures it out that it will be on to something else “new” and “exciting” like it feels for her, and others, right now. She makes us wonder if the reform ‘pendulum’ will simply swing, once again, resulting no real, lasting change? Will testing, and federal involvement in the educational decisions of states and their localities, once again take over, bringing NCLB back to life under the premises of the Common Core? Are we just coming up with new names for much of the same? In Idaho, the new Common Core Standards Assessment will take on the name of its predecessor as the ISAT, leading one to question whether the “radical change” it promises will lead to what Caroline hopes to be “common ground” - a “leveling of the playing field” - or will it make her and others feel once again “cuckoo-fied”?

***King George’s peace and protest.*** ‘King George’ (as one of his former special education students called him, making him “feel like royalty”) learned from a very early age that testing has *always* been used to separate the “good” from the “bad” kids. At age four (and after showing a school psychologist that he could put batteries in a remote-control car and park it next to a file cabinet thus showing his “learning readiness”), George skipped kindergarten and being deemed “good”, put into the first grade, effectively making him the youngest in his class by almost two years, and also making him quite “different” than all of his peers for the rest of his school days. While this may have helped him to become more resilient than other kids, he relayed that this also made

him feel like an “outsider”. In essence, he said that it was a “stupid test” that determined his fate, for better and for worse. And what’s worse, is that he and his family never really figured out *why* he was tested, or *how* his childhood school determined that he was better or smarter or more advanced than his friends, who he desperately wanted to go through school with. This question of “*Why are we testing?*” threaded its way through his entire interview, and through his stories as a student, teacher, administrator, and even cancer survivor. This is, and always has been, quite a potent question to ask, and especially in consideration of George’s own story, which shows that testing as a way to separate kids from each other, from themselves, and from joy in learning, has *always* been a part of the educational landscape. His story shows that long before NCLB, and even today, testing has been at the center for how we gauge success for our students and our schools.

However, as George so readily began his interview with, what remains is that *we still* have not answered the question of the purpose of testing, a question he has wondered from an early age when forced to skip kindergarten and leave his friends behind, and one he certainly encountered when he began his educational career.

When George began teaching Vietnam “broke out”, and while he wanted to stay in college, he also felt a “duty” to serve - a duty to public that he later said he felt at an early age, and that has guided him in his career as an educator ever since. However, by chance, he was “tested” and thus “misdiagnosed” with a kidney disease, and therefore medically discharged before being deployed. This was, yet, another example of how he saw deep paradox in how and why we test. So, he returned to college, and when faced with the decision to choose a career, he chose education, mostly because of his uncle who had inspired him. He began teaching upon graduation in 1969, and upon finishing his

Masters degree in 1976, he decided he wanted to become an administrator. He cited the “Feds” as one of the reasons why he wanted to serve kids as an administrator - that when Affirmative Action “stepped in”, and when schools became mandated towards desegregation, he knew that something had to change, and that schools would have to quickly adapt or fail. He also knew that resources would not be allocated fairly, and that some schools would do well, while others would not by virtue of their district lines and neighborhood boundaries. He also saw a great “white flight”, and knew that schools would need a lot of support from within to thrive. Again, he saw this as his “duty” to serve. However, also because of Affirmative Action, he had to wait six years to become a principal, given that many women were given that chance before him. His frustration for how the “Feds” influenced education without any real thought to how it might affect the teachers, students and parents, showed in this part of the interview. That being said, though, he again said that he now has “no regrets”, for he finally did get his chance to become a principal, and later to work on many special committees and projects that would help him to better understand the testing landscape he had been essentially born into, and the political world that painted it.

But does having ‘no regrets’ imply that George has become passive to the reality of testing in our schools - that, now in retirement, something that has beat him into submission? Or, does it mean that through an acceptance of this reality that he has come to a pragmatic place of reflection, allowing him to see schooling as a means to an end - the end being something that is drastically changing in the 21st century? I got the feeling that while George was still resentful and even angry at the state of public education, both past and present, that given a recent bout with a very deadly form of cancer, and the long

odds that he faced in lieu of it, that he has found a place of relative serenity for what he has done as an educator, and what impact that may or may not have had on schools he had worked within. After listening to George's story, and after garnering a better understanding of his notion of "duty", it became clear that the struggles he has faced in an era of testing have been "worth it" to him.

After working in Washington state as a teacher, then as school administrator, and then as a district consultant for school administrators and special educators, George came out of retirement to come to the small, rural/resort valley (the same one Caroline comes from) to start up a new elementary school. While he was hesitant to come back into schools, valuing his newfound time apart from them, he took this on as part of his "duty"; similar to what he saw in the late-1960's during the desegregation of schools, he wanted to help start a new school in the valley, one that was aimed at accommodating the growing numbers of residents in the valley, and consequently, the changing demographics of it. This was in 2007, just six years after NCLB's ratification and when testing became the priority for district leadership. George seemed to recognize that reality, and rather than dismissing it, he chose to "do the dance" - to take this "swallow of castor oil" - and make this reality work "without crushing the kids". In essence, he 'bought in', but did so out of a feeling of service and duty.

This sense of duty drove many of his decisions as an administrator at this new school, yet one that he knew, because of school boundaries and changing demographic in the area, was bound to "fail", that is at least on the ISAT. Therefore, he saw his greater duty as one of morale-keeping, and to find a "compromise" for the school in a compromising testing environment, thus keeping teachers and students "out of the fray".

George decided that in order to balance out the fear and resentment that teachers were feeling, and the inevitability of failure on the state tests, that he would have to integrate his own programs based on recovery. He wanted to create responsible thinkers and an environment that fostered this, even in a standardized and high-stakes testing environment. He knew that he had to work hard to create an environment where all kids thrive. He called this “showing up”, and this seemed to be his universal expectation for himself, for his teachers, and for his students. Here, he used the adage that “I can is more important than IQ”. He felt that his role as an administrator, especially at this new school where the “lever and hammer” of NCLB was being expressedly felt because of its vulnerability, was to help teachers use their strengths in their teacher and to help students find relevance in their education. Having had so much previous experience in “Special Education”, he believed that “all students should have an IEP” (an Individualized Education Plan), and that all students were “special”. However, funding didn’t allow this, and under NCLB the trick was to find a way to secure it for as many students as possible; the “magic trick” of NCLB, as George called it, was one of finding ways to deal with the “pressure” of it, yet also try and use it as an “opportunity” for growth. He worked hard to find grant money, and promptly put it into the early-childhood program at this new school, hoping that this would somehow create a “joy” in learning for those kids, as well as foster a “readiness for learning” at the earliest levels of education. While he expressed that this helped create a more positive atmosphere in the school, he and everyone else knew that a “black cloud was coming”, eventually, with the ISAT test. This reality, however, seemed to awaken his sense of duty, rather than “crush” it as it had so many others that he saw around him.

When asked specifically about Common Core, given that it had come up quite organically in the interview with Caroline, George expressed concern for it, given that he sees much of reform as “one test replacing another stupid test”. While he hoped that it would honor the teacher, and foster “creativity” and a “using of the environment”, it may just be another “dance” that schools have to do while their educators find ways to do what they know best. This kind of pragmatism also seemed to pretend his sense of duty. For George, any reform, no matter how “good” or “bad” it may seem, must be carefully examined, especially when it involves a test, Common Core notwithstanding.

What was most apparent in George’s interview was that he has an unwavering faith in public education, and since his bout with cancer, he has come to understand schooling a lot like “life”. Having survived a cancer that should have killed him, and with a healthy prognosis for quite some time, he has come to realize that “whatever brings joy” must be valued most. If testing doesn’t do that, then it must be questioned, if not cut out of life altogether. On the other hand, while he was sure to note that it was a ‘test’ that diagnosed him early enough to fight his cancer, he believes that something greater had helped him to survive it, and moreover, to “live” today and *for* today. He likened it to what he feels when he hears Joshua Bell play the violin - how it resonates with something deep within, awakening a deeper sense of duty. He finished the interview by asking all educators: “How do you ‘measure’ something like that...or duplicate it...or even explain it?”

***Jackie’s ‘schtick’.*** Jackie’s political ‘schtick’ is education, yet not so much so for her former constituencies as a state legislator for eight years. She had, until recently, represented mostly rural communities in the state capitol of Boise, but for them, other

things tend to matter more, historically, like the local harvest and church. On the other hand, since the Great Recession, their basic needs and the local and state economy have begun to filter into their consciousness, and therefore, quite necessarily so, into Jackie's own. She noted that while they have not traditionally been very active in educational reform, they are becoming more and more conscious as to the educational needs of their children, taking more action than ever and expressing their voice on these matters. So, despite her political affiliations as being a liberal Democrat in a very conservatively Republican state, Jackie has been trusted by many of them to be their voice on such matters, and she has taken this role seriously. As she expressed in her interview, she also trusts them. However, this trust is not universal, particularly when it comes to Idaho and 'big' government.

Once NCLB hit the national stage, many of these smaller rural communities spoke out against the federal legislation. In fact, on almost a statewide level, people rejected the mandate, yet not because of its track record (because there wasn't any), but more because the legislation and the tests represented 'big government' stepping in and infringing on the rights of these local communities. Trust, it seems, had been lost somewhere along the way, replaced by an ethos based on distrust, discontent, and even anger.

Jackie expressed that in her smaller, rural constituencies, there has always been a distrust in the government, making her job very difficult at times. However, in these communities, teachers ARE trusted. They are integral members of the community, and valued for their role in raising the children of it - many of which come from these small, rural communities, and when return, they tend to stay showing great teacher retention.



So, when the government stepped in and began disrupting the lives of the teachers, and thus the students, the community responded accordingly. Since then, anything related to NCLB and state-mandated testing has been vilified. Again, this has made Jackie's job difficult, because, after all, she is a representative of the government.

So, in response, Jackie has spent quite a bit of time in the schools, classrooms, and board meetings within these communities. What she found is that while many of these communities are not fully aware of pedagogy, curriculum and other educational matters, that they are fully aware of the politics of it all. This upsets them, and their sense of balance, which precipitates on having control over their local schools and government. I wonder if this is their sense of democracy, and if that trumps the politics?

In her time in these schools, observing and interacting with teachers, administrators, students, and parents, she made some important discoveries that have helped her to be a politician (and a liberal one) in rural, conservative communities such as these. She has found that this kind of one-on-one interaction shows that she is caring, that she listens, and that she represents them in a democratic way; through her, they have a political voice, and while these communities have traditionally been wary of getting involved in politics, education since NCLB has been one of their major platforms. After some time spent with these people, in these schools, Jackie said that she does trust them; she said that she believes each teacher should be able to assess authentically in the classroom, and make appropriate decisions. She made clear that authentic assessment is NOT necessarily testing, although testing can provide a sense of "rigor". Overall, she said that she "has a problem with testing" - that it is "not good for kids" to test 7-9 hours on any given day; that it "taps the resources of the school" (computer labs, in particular);

that these tests haven't been tested yet, themselves, leading her to question their validity and reliability.

Here, she also mentioned the "Race-to-the-Top", and connected it to her notion of "rigor". While she distrusts testing, she does believe in "rigor" - making kids "college-ready" (a problem, it seems, in Idaho). With this, she pointed to also the need to address problems within Higher Education, particularly in regard to access and affordability, and, in Idaho, the problem of both getting kids TO college and getting them *to stay* in college. What's interesting, is that Jackie made sure to begin this entire part of the interview with a plug, of sorts, for the Common Core. She stated that it could help to create "more rigor", especially in the rural areas of the state, and that while it is still "standardized" it builds in "more choice", also important to people in these small, localized, rural areas.

Similar to both Caroline and George, Jackie made a conscious effort to talk about Common Core, and to use it to differentiate her understanding of it from her experiences with NCLB. The question remains, at least in Idaho and within her constituencies, whether or not the this new reform will provide teachers the freedom to be able to assess and make appropriate decisions - or, as she said, to be the 'guide-on-the-side', and one that promotes professional development and what she believes are the qualities of a "great teacher" (Like Caroline, this meant to be tech-savvy, collaborative, and project-based in pedagogical approach). The other, dichotomous result would be that Common Core will ultimately be experienced in the social construct of schools a lot like NCLB. Once it is fully implemented and experienced by the teachers, students and parents, will it, like NCLB, be perceived for its "top down-iness"? While Jackie was not privy to any first-person experience once the test was piloted this past spring, she did note that she had

heard from teachers and administrators alike, that the piloting of the test did not go as well as she would have hoped. It was reported to her that the test “tapped the resources of the school”, particularly its fledgling computer labs, and that it created too much “test-anxiety” for teachers and students. What’s more, is that she argued that this “test has not been ‘tested’ yet”, suggesting that it isn’t a valid measurement for student success.

By “success”, Jackie was sure to say that, in Idaho, this meant not only in elementary, middle and high schools, but moreover, being “College and Career Ready”, a term used by many political proponents of Common Core and educational reform in Idaho. She pointed to more pressing problems in Idaho’s higher education system, arguing that in order to affect change in ‘higher’ education, then significant change must happen in elementary, middle and high schools. This sort of ‘bottom-up’ approach differentiated how she saw lasting and progressive reform, and certainly reflected her liberally democratic politics and approach to leadership. She vehemently argued for “professional development” and “teacher-training” to provide “support and mentoring” for Idaho’s public school teachers. She had developed a grant program for teachers pursuing “best practices” in literacy, and who work hard to create individualized assessments. She went on to say that because teachers “can’t understand or use the test results anyway”, that these kinds of reform efforts will help to secure a successful future for Idaho’s kids, and Idaho in general. In essence, while she finds value in the Common Core for its “rigor” and focus on being “college-ready”, even also citing its “rebellion” against the past “mandates” of NCLB, that it may still not work well in Idaho, a place where priority is placed on “community values” with an inherent “distrust in the Federal government”. Similarly, given its corporate connections and interests, and even while

Common Core advocates often cite its “consortium” of states, this kind of thinking does “not go over well” in Idaho.

While Jackie does value the new Idaho Common Core Standards as a way to promote “collaboration” in schools and to provide “resources” for teachers, she argued that the dominant political ideologies of the state would not support it if Idahoans believe that it is coming from the “top-down”. If they think that somebody, particularly a governmental or corporate structure, is “standing over [them] with a big stick”, like NCLB did, then it will fail. However, if this could be seen as more of a “carrot-on-a-stick” (the “carrot” being college, and the way to secure Idaho’s economic future when its agricultural one is so uncertain), then it may be accepted as a lasting reform. However, she prefers to see this new reform effort as a “litmus-test-stick”, proactively used as a way to research, gather data, and provide “flexibility” for Idaho, a somewhat rigid state in a rapidly changing and globalized economic landscape.

So while Jackie does have some hesitance around the Common Core reform given her political sensibilities, she does think it can work, and that old ideas such as “Accountability” may still also work. When specifically asked what the term means to her, Jackie said that it equates to having “Premium Pay”, rather than “Performance Pay”, for teachers. She believes that with this kind of ‘accountability’, growth can happen internally and not externally. Within the construct, Jack believes that teachers should be evaluated from 360 degrees - from “all angles” and not just through one test - followed by opportunity for coaching. In essence, teachers will be “educated” and not just evaluated. In fact she, believes that all major reform effort since the 1980’s have all tried to promote this, but just haven’t done so very well. So, is the Common Core just more of

the same, or something different? Is it just a political ‘schtick’, or rather another “big stick” wielded with power, or will it being used as a “litmus-test-stick”, and thus democratically become Idaho’s own, homegrown ‘schtick’? As George had mentioned, ‘only time will tell’, yet for some the ‘time is now’.

*In Jack’s own time.* Jack’s metaphorical analogy for NCLB as a reform movement: it is like the story “A Wrinkle in Time”. This certainly reflects his experience, from teacher to superintendent today. Having been part of every major reform movement in Idaho since the late 1970’s, Jack has experienced everything, from A Nation at Risk, to the Race-to-the-Top, to NCLB, to CC today. What’s more, is that he has experienced these from the point-of-view of first a teacher, then a building principal, and today as a superintendent at a small rural district in Idaho. He has been part of the political landscape as well, citing that he was one of the few who were brought in the room to discuss Tom Lunas reform effort for Accountability in Idaho in recent years, saying that it will be “interesting” to see how Idaho will develop educationally since the otherwise public had, to the surprise of Tom Luna and many others, vehemently denied the ‘Luna Laws’ that had promoted stricter ‘Accountability’, ‘Merit Pay’, and a dissolution of the teacher’s union.

Amongst all of these changes in Idaho education, and the many conflicts that have arisen from these changes, Jack continually described these as “challenges”, all of which can be overcome through “positiv[ity]”. The first challenge that he cited, at least in being positive about these changes, was “transitioning my teachers into thinking” that ‘Accountability’ was and is positive - to “watch to data a little bit closer” let it “guide [their] instruction”. This came to a head during the era of NCLB and state testing, but as

he quickly (and naturally) transitioned into his description of CC, he too cited this convincing of teachers as the major challenge for him as a superintendent - to “make it positive” for both them and the students.

Is Jack’s focus on positivity through Accountability, especially given his 37 years in Idaho education and in multiple roles, a pragmatic result of what he had once struggled with but has now succumbed to the reality of, or rather what he really believes is good and right for kids and teachers in Idaho? On one hand, when describing what it was like for him as a teacher, he said that he was “really stressed out” because of “high-stakes testing”, but this was *before* NCLB; he cited that the Iowa tests were just as bad in how they affected the lives of teachers and students. With the Iowa tests, he remembered being scolded by school administration for low test scores, but was never truly “held accountable” for them. However, it was when NCLB came out that this happened, and this was also when he became a building principal (if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em, right?). He said that the testing continued with the ISAT test, but the only difference between the pre-NCLB and post-NCLB world was the “accountability piece”, in which he figured he should, given his newfound role, take on this “unique challenge”.

Similar to ‘George’, with his role as an administrator, and now as a SI, Jack focused on teacher buy-in. He argued that NCLB was a “good idea”, and that most other administrators believed the same, and that it was designed to only make teachers just a “bit more accountable”, and that if they could see that, as well as how the “data” could be used to help them, then his job would be done. With his efforts, he said that “a lot of teacher profoundly came around” to the “idea that being accountable was right”, “correct” and “appropriate” - that “it as what we needed to be anyway”. While Jack

paused here to be sure I understood that being an ES principal was “fun”, and that the “teachers are so engaged”, “prepared” and “excited about learning”, and moreover, that this was “okay” and “great”, *but* that they still needed to assess and “watch the growth of each of [the] kids” with “individual goals for each individual student” (as if this wasn’t happening already?). As a building principal he certainly referenced how he heard teachers say that they were testing “way too much”, and recognized how this must have been “a huge shift for them”. His answer to this distress? To be sure that “each teacher understood the value of each assessment” and to use regular staff meetings to work with the data in subgroups within his school - to turn his “teachers into researchers”, helping them to identify the “main problems” and to set “attainable and achievable” goals to address them. He attributes that because of this kind of shift in schools, as a direct result of Accountability that we now have “research-based” instruction and that many schools are now having these “discussions” within their ranks. These “positives” are what Jack obviously chooses to focus on, and with the Common Core initiatives in Idaho, he believes they are even more pronounced.

With the Common Core, Jack believes that Accountability will breed even more of these “positives” - those that promote professional development, collaboration, and differentiation, particularly for the “Hispanic, LEP, low-income-type” kids that rural Idaho districts are seeing more and more of, and that have become a big part of his new “challenge” as a SI. With NCLB, he said that “we were ‘breaking down’ individual kids”, and that with CC, this will aid in setting even more “state objectives” that will aid in more “literacy” - that with the “Common Core, my goodness, we are really ‘digging into’ those”. (“Breaking down”? “Digging into”? His reductionist approach became

very clear, here.) In fact, he went on to say that with the CC that the “actual standards of man” can be focused on, and that these are “powerful”. This kind of shift in his language, and in his demeanor when he spoke of Common Core, shows that maybe he *does believe* in CC - “powerful” is so much more dramatic of a descriptor than “positive”, the one he continually used when speaking of reform efforts related to NCLB. He also began to use some other, new terms such as “teaming” and “instructional practices” and “alignment”. With CC, he says that it now “appears that standards are working ‘hand-in-hand’ with the new state test”. “Hand in Hand” sounds quite collaborative, if not peaceful, and there is, at least, a “new state test”, but has there really been, or will there really be a “shift” or will this be just more of the same? Will this just be another “challenge” that has to be met with more “positivity” and pragmatism, or will this be the answer to Idaho’s educational woes? Jack isn’t quite ‘sold’ yet, but sounds confident in Common Core even though he recognized that this will be a “huge, huge challenge”. At the very least, he said that as of now and even after just its pilot, that it has been “kind of eye-opening”, getting teachers to say, “Whoa...my kids are going to do this?”, and thus forcing them to really “look at our kids” (again, assuming that his wasn’t already happening, especially after NCLB’s Accountability measures?). As Jack mentioned, this is “going to be tough” for teachers, then suggested that we “just take the real positive of what these core standards are, and teach that and assess them along the way”? With these new reforms, he sincerely believes, “They [students? teachers? parents?] will be fine”. And for Jack, only time will tell, and he is willing to endure it.

***Thematic Discussion.*** After these first four interviews, and in finishing them with Jack’s “positivity”, I wonder what other teachers, parents, and administrators would



have to say? Do they feel “fine” with the Common Core, after a decade-plus of Accountability and High-Stakes testing ‘under’ NCLB? Will the “top-down-iness” of the former bias them against the latter? Will they feel, and have they felt since NCLB, a need to “buy-in” to current school reform efforts, or will this result in further feelings of isolation, deception and fear? On the other hand, will this be a motivating force to seek out opportunities for change, like Caroline, drawing from a deep sense of “duty”, like George? How does fear play a pivotal role in all of these perceptions, and what does that mean for the success of any systemic educational reform?

As suggested in these initial interviews, people are wary, but nevertheless ready, for change - for ‘reform’. However, even the word ‘reform’ itself has its etymological, historical, and connotative complications. In the world of science, it refers to the chemical process involved in turning molecules into gasoline, suggesting that it may just add more ‘fuel’ to the NCLB ‘fire’; in relation to Western history, it refers to Martin Luther’s *95 Theses*, wherein he suggested that the people use the institution of religion to gain personal access to God, and that all of education should work towards that end; in a cultural and sociological sense, it could be understood within the institution of Corrections, which could be said given that Caroline, George and Jackie all spoke of the threat of “AYP jail” for schools that failed under NCLB and the ISAT test. (This reference also specifically came up in the second round of interviewing.)

And when asked specifically to create a metaphor for NCLB, the prevailing message was that this kind of ‘reform’ creates a deep, insidious sense of fear. For Caroline, NCLB was like a “bad dream”, one that she hopes we have awoken from with the Common Core. For George, it was like a “black cloud” that inevitably came once the

tests were administered, and results of those tests released, threatening to rain negativity on the morale of schools. For Jackie, it was like “Big Brother”, a totalitarian, mustachioed man looking down on a fearful populace, threatening them with propaganda. And for Jack, someone who tried to remain as “positive” as possible about it given his role within it, NCLB was like a “wrinkle in time”, an enigma in the history of reform that we can and should leave in the past, like a fantasy of sorts. *Fear* permeated many of these images and metaphors with their dark, threatening, ominous nature. These first interviews suggested that fear was the most potent theme, and the one that could encompass all of the other themes. For instance, for Caroline it may have been a fear of isolation, both of her and her kids, that seemed to purpose her in her efforts as an active PTA and school board member. Similarly, it may have been her fear of being publically “cuckoo-fied”, that she found the motivation to uncover what she saw as the truth behind the deception of the district leadership. For George, it was a generalized fear of failure, in the eyes of a test and thus the “Feds”, as well as a need for him as an administrator to find a way for his schools to be accepted for their differences, that may have fueled part of his sense of “duty”. Similarly, for Jackie, it was potentially a fear of being dismissed by her many of her conservative constituents and colleagues in the state legislator, that led her to rebelliously question the given hierarchy, to vehemently argue for democratic values in schools, and to get others to ‘buy-in’ to these values. Lastly, Jack’s positivity, and his willingness to take on the “challenge” of being a superintendent in a state that typically rejects all reform, may have also been why he is so intent on creating ways of getting his teachers to ‘buy-in’, if not accept, it. For him, the success of the Common

Core, in particular, could give him a sense of success, if not purpose, especially in a state where ‘buying-in’ to any mandated policy or reform is quite rare indeed.

However, in order to bring more substance to how fear does or does not motivate different stakeholding groups, and to potentially uncover what this looks like on an ideological level, as Social Semiotics depends, it had to be parsed out into categories, and ‘tested’ in the second round of interviewing. Therefore, coming into this second round of interviews, and given the thematic results of the first round of interviews, the following categories were investigated in an effort to bring some kind of dichotomous substance to how fear does or does not work in schools:

- *Feeling Purpose*
- *Paradoxes of Power*
- *Learning Acceptance*
- *Sensing Community*

Purpose, power, acceptance and community all provide a way to see fear within a social construct; fear can be a powerful motivator, and one that can be confused with all of these other motivators. Fear can, in itself, provide purpose. It can manifest itself within the paradox of how power is experienced by different stakeholding groups. It can prompt acceptance of one’s role in the hierarchy of schools, and can be experienced either gracefully or with anger and resentment. It can also even be confused with a sense of community, as different groups ‘entrench’ themselves in their beliefs; similarly, community, as Spielman and Radnofsky (1997) found, can be faked in schools, deceiving teachers and others into feeling like they are part of something bigger than themselves. However, these dynamics of fear needed to be further investigated in interviews with

other stakeholders, to see how fear can create a feeling of purpose, can be seen as a permutation of power, can potentially be dealt with through acceptance, and can even be hidden within an illusion of community.

Therefore, within the context of these four categories, the language used by interviewees was coded axiomatically and ideologically. Charmaz (2006) suggested that, at this point in a Constructivist Grounded Theory, the coding must maintain a sense of coherence so that the themes presented throughout the line-by-line and en-vivo coding process could be “focused”. Similarly, then, the sampling has to be “focused”.

Therefore, for the second round of interviews, interviewees were chosen with the help of the first four in identifying a more “purposeful” sample, one that would help bring a broader, contextual ideological “focus” to the initial themes/dichotomies. Therefore, in this sample, a high school teacher (“Leigh”), an elementary school teacher (“Heidi”), a current elementary school administrator (“Charlie”), and a recently resigned superintendent (“Sophie”) were all asked to reflect on the days of a NCLB past, as well as on the possibilities of a future with the Common Core reform. In order to substantiate if and how the above categories were viable, then also a more “purposeful” and “focused” questioning also became part of this Constructivist process. Interviewees were asked, for example, what they believe to be the purpose of education, how they see power distributed within their schools/districts, how they have been asked to accept (or ‘buy-in’) to school reform efforts, and what the idea of community looks like to them, or not for that matter. Through a more focused questioning, as well as coding process, then the element of fear was better understood before going into the third and final round of interviews. The following section discusses what this process looked like from interview

to interview, each reflecting on how each of these categories presented themselves in the language of the interviewees.

### **Phase Two: Focused Interviewing and Categorical Coding**

*Leigh's lamentation.* Leigh began her interview in declaration that, "NCLB is a manifestation of the public desire for Accountability". Well-put, and so well-put that I can't help but think that Leigh had prepared that ahead of time, showing that she cares about education in Idaho as a teacher, at that she is aware of how policy and reform are related to her life as an educator. This is precisely why I chose her as my first teacher participant in the second round of interviewing and in the constructing of the first category; for Leigh, it is all about *feeling purpose*, and moreover, to help students feel it, too.

Leigh began to describe how she first felt a sense of educational purpose through her telling of a story about her junior year history teacher, Mr. Chapman, who she believed influenced her decision to become a teacher. She went on to say that as a teacher today, she tries to actively bring meaning to students, and that this purpose is based on her experiences as a student in Mr. Chapman's class. In her class with Mr. Chapman, Leigh said she first discovered what it means to have a "true education" - one that is inquiry-based (not rote), based on asking hard questions, that involves multiple genres and ways of representing knowledge, and that invites independence and freedom of thought and content. In essence, she learned that there is a difference between "truth" and "lies", and that investigating this is the key to Critical Thinking, and thus a "true education". It was with this definition that she began her discussion of NCLB - that it "defeated everything that [this kind of] education is all about". That when she realized

the reality that NCLB was “what was coming down the pipe” that she had to work harder to keep Mr. Chapman’s class alive within her own. It has given her a sense of purpose, to keep doing what she is doing in spite of all of the pressures of Accountability, High-Stakes, and Standardization.

Returning to her opening statement on NCLB as “manifestation of the public desire for Accountability”, she then spent some time trying to explain what she means by “Accountability”. Leigh immediately referenced a common analogy for education and schooling - that of a business - saying that “Accountability” meant that the public could feel that they are “getting their money’s worth”, and like a “stockbroker”, therefore “hoping for a good return”. This kind of “hoping” serves as a significant departure from the kind of “hoping” that Mr. Chapman’s class inspired within her. She also referenced the image of a “measuring stick” transitioning into the topic of state and high-stakes testing, pointing out that the tests are what helped this “manifestation” - these profit-driven “hopes” - to become a tangible thing. If “hope” can be quantified, then it can be legitimized, and so can schools and teachers. The business model provides a way to tangibly see education, and conversely, to also not see it. For Leigh, what it creates is a false image of students and their capabilities; NCLB is a “failure to recognize that students are not rigid...and that you can’t hold a school ‘accountable’ in the same way that stockholders can hold a business ‘accountable’”. By “rigid”, does this indicate that she doesn’t see “rigor” as an important part of a meaningful school reform, as Jackie suggested that Common Core provides? What’s more, is how can this be measured in a way that does not see kids as “rigid”, but as human beings?

What's so difficult, though, is that while the tests are the "measuring stick", Leigh attested that no one really ever sees them, particularly students, parents and teachers. However, they know these scores are "out there somewhere...creating restriction and judgment". Not knowing or seeing is an important metaphor here, one that both George and Jack vehemently argued is and was happening in our schools. So, as Mr. Chapman's class had begged of her, I wonder who is telling the truth - what is true and what is untrue about how state tests like the ISAT are used, or not for that matter?

Nevertheless, Leigh argued that someone must be seeing them, because it wasn't long before she began to hear of schools that were in "AYP-Jail", and ones that were blatantly "teaching-to-the-test". Once a school is put into "jail", and new politics are mandated", Leigh said that that is when things "don't make a whole lot of sense", and that "artificial" education happens. Again, she was sure to point out that this is NOT a "true education", and then chose to really explain what that meant to her, and how one cannot reach it when in jail or threatened with it with policies and mandates that come from test scores that nobody ever really sees. She described a "true education" as: "relevant", "beneficial", Democratically responsible, "student-centered", meta-cognitive, "individualized", "skill-based", "NOT standardized", full of "voice", "critical", and "honest". In particular, she noted that it must "ask why?", and that there *must* be student and teacher "buy-in". This element of 'buy-in' seems to be the real point-of-departure, and of no-return once it turns into spite and anger and fear. Leigh told me that she feels "lucky" to never have had been part of a school that had to experience the worst of the latter.

It was with her definition of a “true education” that she quickly transitioned into her thoughts and feelings on the Common Core initiative just piloted in Idaho. She first noted that unlike the ISAT and all of the “mandates” related to NCLB, that with Common Core there has been teacher-training and efforts at some professional development. This is the first change she has noticed between the old and the new. However, it isn’t really change that she sees as CC’s greatest asset; in fact, it is the fact that she feels she “doesn’t really have to change anything” she does (particularly related to her AP courses) in order to satisfy the demands of a Common Core curriculum in her district. She perceives it as “right on with everything [she] is already doing”, at least in its proposed curriculum. Teachers, like her, have had a “voice” in what goes into the curriculum in preparation for the test, showing that “democratic responsibility” that she values. On a curricular level she cited that it is the critical reading and writing parts of the Common Core curriculum that is a departure from the kind of test-prep done for the ISAT, which is all multiple choice. (Jack also noted this difference - is this “true”, or part of the rhetoric?)

However, it was when the state test was administered in the spring during this first pilot year that Leigh felt like Common Core has some problems, similar to her experiences with NCLB and the ISAT. It being a state-mandated and written test, she argued that it reflects, like NCLB and the ISAT, “top-down mentality”, and while does have more on it that reflects the kind of Critical Thinking that she values in a “true education”. What’s more is that, like the ISAT, no one has seen the scores of this pilot test. This takes away Leigh’s ability to work with the test, and her students, in a way that fosters growth and ownership of learning.



With these reservations, Leigh specifically noted that it a reform of how and we test is the “key to progressive reform” - that is, as long as it is “aligned”, NOT “high-stakes” or “standardized”, and locally controlled within the district or even the individual school. Freedom, seems to be the key here. Despite all of the things pointing towards the progressive nature of Common Core, Leigh seemed somewhat hesitant to say that it will be the answer. While she has written some op-eds in support of it, more or less as the alternative to the ISAT, her first experience with the piloted test wasn’t all that positive for teachers or students alike, which like Leigh said, is the “key” to making any “measuring stick” valuable and sustainable. She spent hours and days “prepping” her students for it by getting their “buy-in”, convincing them that if they do what it is she has taught through the AP model, then they can take “pride” in doing well on the test as if it were an AP one for college credit. However, when it came time to test, her students were given just 45 minutes to complete a short section of it, creating a dynamic of mistrust for her, as if she was “just talk”. However, she was also sure to point out that if it were to become “legitimate at the district level”, and not just at the state level, then there could be true “buy-in”. For Leigh, a grassroots approach is the answer; one that must start in the classroom, between teacher and student. It is when the students and the teacher feel a sense of purpose - or ‘buy-in’ - that they then can take the test with confidence. Once that is done and over with, then they can continue doing what it is that makes for a “true education” without concern or worry or *fear* of being held accountable in a system that they do not have any discernable power over. Essentially, they have to find a way to take pride in the test in order to accept its power, as a means to an end - that end being the freedom to carry on doing what they know is best.

***Heidi's humility and humiliation.*** Heidi's car is adorned with a bumper sticker that publicly proclaims her position, both as a parent of a high schooler and elementary school teacher, that "*A kid is much more than a test score*". When asked why she so publically shares her feelings on testing, even though her job often depends on it, she explained that the need comes from her experience with both the ISAT and the recent Common Core pilot tests. She explained that these tests are, and have always been, "humiliating", "awful", and certainly "too much" for her and her second grade students. For Heidi, its power over what and how she teaches has created a powerful paradox in her world, between what she is told to do and what she knows is "best for kids". Yet, she does willingly believe that "accountability is good", and that "tests are important", but when she sees how it affects her students and their families, her willingness to do what she is told by her administration becomes difficult to bear. Throughout the entire interview, Heidi visibly struggled with her these feeling; on one hand, she believes she has a responsibility to protect her kids from the abuse of high-stakes testing, yet knows that it is not only a reality in their world, but one that could be well if done right. She is caught somewhere in between wanting to use her power as a professional classroom teacher and advocate for kids, and the demands of those in power that want and need results. Conflicted by the many powerful influences that affect her teaching life, both internally and externally, she has long been caught within these ***paradoxes of power***. Yes, as she admitted in her interview, she does her best to comply, but not without restraint, and certainly not without showing off her bumper sticker in the faculty parking lot.

More than anything, Heidi considers herself a humble advocate for her students and their families, and takes it on as her responsibility to work on behalf of them. She said that when the testing day comes around, that there are always “break-downs” and “tears”, and that both she and the kids felt a great degree of “pressure” to do well. She also reflected that it was this “regimented” and “top-down” culture that has asked both her and her students “to do things with an apology”; given that she knew both her building administrators were feeling their own “pressure” for results, that they felt the need to apologize in advance for putting the teachers and students through testing that she believes is not data-driven at all, and certainly not in the best interests of kids. Again, she feels empowered to do just this, yet feels conflicted by an equally as powerful need to please her administration and colleagues, many who she sees as friends.

This has led to many difficult years of teaching for her - years when she often wanted to throw up her hands, saying “screw this...I am going to do what I know is best”, but then felt the need to “prep” her kids to perform so that they (and she) would be deemed “proficient”; when the anger and resentment would subside, she would almost always ‘come around’ (as Jack said teachers will inevitably do). Her attitude would then become one of “tell me what you want me to do”, yet she also added that, “in the end I will do what’s best for kid’s”. Her frustration in teaching within this paradox of power presented itself quite potently throughout her interview, as she flip-flopped back and forth between resentment and acceptance. She also spoke of her colleagues, and even the district curriculum director, who she said she felt “so sorry” for, despite the “scripted curriculum” that the said director was demanding teachers to use. It seems that within her apology, and that of her school administrators, that Heidi was trying to maintain some

sense of trust and purpose in a system where “rote learning” was being pushed, if not mandated.

What seemed to frustrate her even more, was that over the last ten-plus years, there have been so many different “adoptions” of curriculums handed down from the state and district level. The ideal of “alignment” would be impressed upon the teachers as a way for them to ‘buy-in’ to these systematic changes in curriculum. (Sam, the elementary school principal in a neighboring elementary school facetiously called these mass changes the expected “flavor-of-the-year”.) Even her use of the word “adoption” carries with it some interesting connotations. It implies a level of ‘buy-in’ that goes beyond a systematic approach’. It implies an emotional attachment. It implies going ‘*all-in*’. She, and other teachers, have balked at that word, because they assume that whatever new program or curriculum they are asked to implement will be changed, and that the test scores will be the primary impetus for that change. It is difficult to go ‘*all-in*’ when there is a way-out. Commitment to any one reform has been a challenge for Heidi because she knows that once any sense of consistency is felt, and once she and her students become familiar and comfortable with any change, the instability of the system will ultimately overpower them. To deal with the stress of these cyclic changes, and the over-emphasis put on tests to measure the viability and success of them, Heidi suggested a new way for using the term ‘Accountability’. She described it as a “listening” to both the student and the administrator, essentially putting the teacher into the position of power. In this role, the teacher becomes the intermediary - they are in a unique position to meet the needs of the students and their families (because they *know* them), as well as that of the administrators (because they *know* the students, and should be trusted with that

knowledge). However, her experience has told a different story, one that puts the teacher in compromising positions, and that doesn't involve them at all in the decision-making process, particularly concerning curriculum and testing.

Heidi believes, however, that teachers have this unique knowledge and ability to lead from within, suggesting that they can be trusted with making decisions for students. (Given that they often do it anyway, once they close their classroom door, and the test is over with.) For instance, she argued that teachers have a unique understanding of the differences between what can be considered a "test", and what should be considered as an "assessment". She explained that a test is "paper and pencil", and that it is "for parents" so that they can "see what kids are held accountable for". This is strikingly similar to how Leigh saw testing as a "public manifestation of the public's desire for 'accountability'", so that they feel as if they are, as Caroline indicated, "getting their money's worth". As Heidi mentioned, it is something teachers "have to do". In a sense, this is done with the pragmatic intent of helping the public to feel as if they have power in knowledge, and thus over their kids' educations. On the other hand, Heidi explained that "assessment" is something that is more formative, "performance-based" and observational, all done *in* the classroom and with a teacher's expertise. It demands that kids "show" their growth through "cooperative learning opportunities", facilitated by the teacher. This, it seems, is what Heidi thinks is "best for kids", and she feels as if she can deliver on it. This individual ownership of learning, however, is not part of the systematic formula of reform, as she has experienced it since NCLB - that is, until now, Heidi hopes, with the Common Core.

When speaking of the Common Core, Heidi did note that it does not hold the same kind of “negativity” that NCLB and the ISAT did. This was because she and her colleagues “knew it was coming down the pike”, and had time to form committees to ready themselves for it. She also said that it does allow for more “freedom”, given the nature of the Core Standards, and that this has led to more willingness for teachers to “adopt” it. On the other hand, she called the teacher training that she and other teachers were given as “Common Core Boot Camp”, showing that while she felt prepared for the new “adoption” of it, that this reform, like many others, have been perceived by teachers as a militaristic, top-down effort. In ‘boot camp’ soldiers are broken down, and then built back up in a utilitarian effort to wage war. Again, like so many of the metaphors used by teachers to describe their time ‘in the trenches’, this suggests that they feel as if they are ‘at war’.

Heidi was also sure to point out that in order for the Common Core to work, that there must also be some “Parent-PR” (public relations), so that they are informed about how they can use the test. A public relations department in any organization is typically used to control the flow of information between individuals and that organization. In essence, it suggests that some information should be shared, and some should be kept secret. It can be manipulative, and can have a profit-motive behind it. This shows that power resides in information, and those that control it, have the power. For Heidi and the parents in her school district, this has been problematic even in the short time that the Common Core has been adopted. The district and state will not release the results of the pilot test given this past spring, essentially withholding all information. In this case, Heidi does not only feel “powerlessness” in her classroom (a feeling of “not-being-able-

to-do”), but in contrariety, has also been forced into what Spielman and Radnofsky (1997) also recognized as “submission” - a state of “not-being-able-NOT-to-do”.

Without any test results, Heidi has *nothing* to work with or against. Without, at the very least, this information, Heidi cannot advocate for or against the test in favor of her students, and thus has no purpose. In essence, Heidi’s bumper sticker also has no purpose, for it doesn’t have something to fight against if there is no test. It’s almost as if the pilot test didn’t happen, and doesn’t exist. Yet, Heidi knows it does, and that someone, somewhere, has been looking at it, making decisions for her and her students without their knowledge, and certainly without any resistance.

Heidi said that she does think the test will eventually become part of her curriculum-making and pedagogical decisions, but must wait, in submission, until that happens. She hopes that it will be more strength rather than deficit-based, and that it may even promote “skills over content”. Once she and her students “learn the language” of the test, then they can “be educated” on it, and thus “buy-in” to it. This will take a while, she said, so the risk is that by the time she and her students “buy-in”, a new curriculum and test will be “adopted” by the district. This instability bothers her. She expressed that once she decides to “put in the work” on this new curriculum and test, that the state legislation will move on to another agenda. Not knowing, creates an even greater paradox for her, for it takes away any sense of “independence” (a feeling of “being-able-not-to-do”) (Spielman and Radnofsky, 1997). Without this feeling, at the very least, her purpose as an advocate for kids, and as a professional, is lost. She might as well just rip that bumper sticker off her car.

*Sophie's Choice.* When recalling her early days in education as a high school science teacher, just before the ratification of NCLB, Sophie described it as the “best and worst of times”. When asked what was so good about those years, she said that she had been able to participate in a regional consortium of teachers who worked to create a common consensus on what science standards were to be taught. Like so many other interviewees, she described this experience as a moment when she felt “buy-in”, and when education and schooling did not feel so “top-down”. However, she knew, like Heidi, what was “coming down the pike” in NCLB and state-mandated testing, leading her to wonder, “Why did we just spend three years on this [regional consortium/curriculum committee]?”. It was as if three years of her work and her life, were gone, like it had no real purpose. Having once having sensed a feeling of “buy-in”, this was lost to the federal and state mandate of NCLB. At the time, she had to accept this reality, but decided that she wanted to be part of the implementation of these new mandates, prompting her to seek out the job of curriculum director for her district, and to continue her own education as an educator. This led to her recent role as superintendent to a small, rural Idaho school district, one that she had to work hard to understand. In a sense, she knew she had a lot to learn about how schools operate in Idaho, and that the only to reclaim that sense of “buy-in” was to actively engage in *learning acceptance*.

When she began her first administrative role in this capacity, the first idea she had to accept was that her school was in “AYP-Jail”, which means it was failing. Having accepted this reality, she decided to use it to the school’s advantage, applying for grant money to help teachers in their “professional development” - to help them “align” themselves with these new realities, and to change their “expectations” of their students,



their classrooms, and their schools. In essence, by accepting the reality of her school's demographic, and that of the state and federal mandates, she was able to use it to the school's advantage in helping the other teachers accept the same reality and to likewise work with it, instead of against it. This more pragmatic sense of "buy-in" established her as a leader, and as someone who can learn and adapt.

Sophie explained that she now knows that while NCLB "had its flaws", it did "start a conversation" about how and why schools do what they do (or, not do, for that matter). And while being put in "AYP-Jail" was a "morale killer" in Idaho, with over 600 schools deemed as "failing", the conversation that happened was one based on "a hope and a prayer". So, she and other school leaders decided to take on a "shotgun-approach" to "break down" the skills that the students needed to be "proficient", and to get teachers, families and students to take advantage of the many opportunities available (similar to how Sophie did by applying for professional development grants.) She does believe that, at the time, Idaho's schools needed "scripted" intervention, to "level the playing field" between schools and districts, and between Idaho and the nation. On one hand, she had accepted Idaho's reality, but on the other hand, wanted to use it to better the lives of Idaho's students and teachers. At the very least, she said, these efforts (albeit still "failing" for some schools) provided a "foundation" with which a new and better reform could proceed, that reform being the Common Core.

For Sophie, 'Accountability' is a word that describes a "system" within which the state, taxpayers, employers, employees and students take on the "responsibility" of their education, and she believes that the Common Core allows room and flexibility to do that. She went on to say that it "makes sense" to use this new reform to help lessen cultural

and socio-economic division between schools, and to create a feeling of independence and choice for constituents (whom, she also admitted, are “anti-Fed”). However, she also admitted that as of the spring pilot, the tests exposed its flaws; there were no results being given, even to her as a superintendent, nevertheless the teachers (like Heidi). She also noted that it was “ridiculous in its testing time”, and that it was not appropriate for students to test for eight-plus hours on end. She showed some faith, though, when she said that the “consortium” of Common Core will certainly improve the test. Her only major stipulation? That there be “transparency” in this process, and with the test. Otherwise, how will school leaders, like her, be able to work with it, and to seek out the resources available to help with its successful transition into schools?

It is this issue of “transparency” that Sophie still struggles with as an educator and school leader. As a superintendent, because the public wanted and needed to know what was happening in their schools (so that it wasn’t too aligned with the ‘Feds’), she often felt like she lived and worked “in a fishbowl”, and that the state has been “throwing us [she and other school leaders] food, just to watch us swim for it”. This effort in bringing “transparency” to schools seemed to be done at the expense of the school leaders, creating more distraction and deception around the state legislature. She seemed to feel somewhat like a pawn for the state legislature, and that in its view, her only job was to “process cattle”. In her most recent role as superintendent, this feeling overwhelmed her, prompting her to resign her position just this past summer. She no longer felt as if she had ‘buy-in’, and while she hadn’t given up on education in Idaho, taking a professorial position in a university teacher education program, she no longer felt as if she had the resources to work with the “system”.

Nevertheless, she thinks that the Common Core has what it takes to be “the right thing” for Idaho education; it has standards, yet ones that are flexible, and is not federally mandated (again, a point of departure for many Idahoans). Yet, despite this optimism, she has now faced the reality that, in Idaho, “people aren’t ready to do the right thing” by education. If the test “feels or looks like ‘Big Brother’ and NCLB,” then it will inevitably fail. (Jackie, a former state legislator has quite the same sentiments, ironically.) In essence, Idaho needs to *choose to learn acceptance*. With this choice, comes power, even if it isn’t over the entire system. In the meantime, Sophie will do her best to work with her resources in teacher education, helping to foster teacher-leaders that can do this *for* Idaho in the classroom, that is until Idaho can do it on their own, as a community, and for its community.

***Charlie’s community.*** Charlie has been a teacher and administrator in the same school district in rural/resort Idaho for three decades, and has seen just about every major reform come through it. He has been not only a teacher, but also an administrator at all levels of public education, from his current position in an elementary school, to one at the middle school, high school, and college levels. In short, when it comes to reform, he has seen and experienced a lot. What’s more is that he has survived, with a very personal and working *sense of community* in tact. For him, no matter what the “flavor-of-the-month” in regard to school reform, community is what matters, and this is what he believes will help schools to survive it, and moreover, carry on with or without it. Like George, this has been his primary “duty” as a building principal - to maintain a sense of community in a competitive, and sometime volatile, world of testing and Accountability.

Charlie's interview began with him explaining that he believes "coaches make better administrators" - that an experienced athletics coach has usually garnered the needed experience to navigate the demands of being an administrator. A good coach must be a mediator between the team and the parent body, between the parent body and the school, and between the school and the media. Using this metaphor of administrator as 'coach', then the teachers and students become the 'team', lending to a very distinct value system that Charlie holds as an administrator. He believes that he is the 'coach', and that his job is to motivate his 'team', as well as protect it against any unfair judgment by the public. He takes pride in this, and like a good 'coach', more in how the 'game' is 'played', rather than in whether his 'team' wins or loses.

When asked how he has experienced reform in his many roles, and especially as an administrator, he did not hesitate to recognize "A Nation at Risk", which he felt was the "original call" for standardized reform, and also what he also recognized was the first call for "21st century skills". However, when asked about NCLB, and his first experiences with it as a teacher (who happened to be just moving into administration at that time), Charlie described it, from the start, as a "scam", one that was "based on a lie" told by the Bush administration, by Rod Paige (Bush's Sec. of Education), and by the State of Texas. His understanding of it went like this: Paige and his schools in Houston were able to be "successful" in their testing because they purposely (and deceptively) opted out the low-performing students by either "held" them back in the 8th grade and/or "pushed" them up to the 10th grade before the scheduled testing years so that scores would be higher. And while Charlie said that he thought "everyone knew" this, NCLB was nevertheless "pushed through" and became a national mandate. He cited this

as the first problem with NCLB - that while it sought to make educators 'Accountable', it did so under false circumstances and claims. And, while sub-groups of children did become part of the discussion, and had then become the most talked about part of the problem with education in the 200's (i.e. the 'achievement gap'), they still struggled to "pass the test".

It was the passing of the test that Charlie said mattered then, and still does today, and sees the purpose of any accountability measure as one that must be designed and implemented "ensure that each student gets a 'solid' education". What's interesting, however, is that while he knew that NCLB was "born" of a "scam" and of "lies", he still thought it had its merits. He didn't apologize for the idea of "teaching-to-the-test", because he explained that education happens in schools beyond any test, and that it is understandable for teachers and students to be held 'accountable'; he implied that this is nothing to be ashamed of because once the ISAT became part of the "teacher culture", and once the teachers, administration and students figured out how to take it, then being held 'accountable' was not a problem. In essence, the ISAT test began to work in schools. People, eventually, experienced "buy-in". The problem, he went on to note, was and is that once any reform hits schools, and once the teachers and students get used to it, then it changes. Again, he called this the "flavor-of-the-month", which can lead to great frustration for him, his staff, and the students. This is where he finds much of his purpose: to lead his 'team' through these reforms, and to pragmatically help it to 'play the game' to the best of its ability.

Charlie, like so many other interviewees thus far, used the term "buy-in" as both the problem with any reform effort based on testing and Accountability, as well as the

formula for the success of one. He also cited *time* as an important part of that formula - that if legislators and educational leaders could be patient with our schools, that whatever reform is handed down, schools will, eventually, figure out how to reform themselves accordingly. It was plain to see that Charlie has faith in schools to adapt, as he has had to throughout his long career in education. Adapt, and survive. Don't, then die.

This pragmatism, however, did not completely glaze over the problems that Charlie had seen with the ISAT test and NCLB, and now in the Common Core. With the ISAT test, observed student and teachers working together, but with “rote-learning” as the focus, which has thus created what he calls an “I pick ‘C’” generation. So, while proficient in academic disciplines and content, this generation has had trouble figuring out what it really means to be part of a working “team”, and to work “creatively and collaboratively” with others. In essence, the focus on passing the test has become less of a ‘team effort’, but one based on individual survival. As a matter of survival, these students, and their teachers, have found a way to “get over the bar”, but since the “bar” keeps changing, and when it does no one seems to know how high or low it is, and what to do if a school and its teachers and students do not reach or top it. This is also both the promise and the potential failure of the Common Core as Charlie has also experienced it through its pilot this past spring. It was this that we focused the latter half of the interview on.

Charlie noted that the Common Core nevertheless has promise - that it shows a mass ‘buying-in’ of states (or, at least the governors and legislatures of those states), lending to more of a democratic notion of reform. Other interviewees also recognized this “consortium” as being a positive element of this reform. While Charlie and all of the

other interviewees have not identified the Common Core as altogether ‘good’ or ‘bad’, their descriptions of it have, as Spielman and Radnofsky indicated in their 1997 study on school reform, indicated that they do see it as “non-euphoric”, neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad’ but something in between. And like many other interviewees, Charlie said that while he does believe the CC does answer the “original call” for “21st century skills” in *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 (something that NCLB and the ISAT fell very short of given its political nature), and that it does “raise the bar” quite effectively, the Common Core test itself has caused many to question its efficacy in Idaho. He called this test not only “difficult to maneuver” (showing his pragmatic values, and how he does think his teachers and students will eventually figure that part out), it is nevertheless a “horrendous” test. This makes the ‘game’ hard to play, if not unfair. And, like other interviewees, he said that because no one knows what is on it, and that no one knows how students did until it is too late, makes it a flawed test, even if and when it is more skills and inquiry-based (something that the ISAT was not in his estimation). How can he and his teacher and students be held ‘accountable’ when there is not data to use in adapting to this new reform? He said that if, at the very least, the test results were given in a more timely manner, then he and his teachers could “celebrate with the kids”, and feel like there was *purpose* to it. Otherwise, when this information is held back, then a general feeling of distrust sets in, and once this sets in, then any reform is doomed for failure. Who would trust themselves or anyone they are with when they feel as if they are in, as Charlie described, “a dark room shooting at a target” that they can’t see?

When a reform “comes down” he agreed that it takes three or four years for the teachers themselves to get used to it - to “buy-in” on a practical level, and to feel like

they have some “purpose” or control over it. Then, he argued, that it takes another few years for the students to do the same. However, then things change, and everyone is shook up once again. At least in the decade of NCLB, his teachers and students were able to figure it out, and to succeed on the test. Now, they are being asked to, once again, prepare students for a test that they do not know, and cannot know. They are being set up for failure, and since many just assume something new will come along, many teachers don’t want to even try; they “won’t ‘buy-in’ if they think it is just going to change”.

So, since this is the current reality, Charlie also pointed towards higher education as the place where the reform needs to be focused. The ultimate “buy-in” has to happen at this level. The state needs to focus more on making college not only accessible to students, but also careers. With this, Charlie began to talk about bringing Vocational Education back, so that students have more options, and that the state colleges and universities need to make themselves available in the smaller rural communities of Idaho as both academic and vocational institutions - in order for real change to happen in the K-12 system. This includes also educating the farmers and ranchers about what it takes for kids to be employable in the 21st century, and that by focusing these small rural communities on academics, these communities of kids are being set up to fail when they get to the “big cities” of Pocatello, Moscow, and Boise, where Idaho’s state colleges reside. And, given the work done with NCLB and the ISAT test, while they may have the basic academic skills to succeed, they are not used to working with others, to being in collaborative environments, and to applying their academic skills to these kinds of situations. Therefore, Charlie also attested that the colleges and universities must also have some “buy-in” in these small communities in order help them with this transition;



moreover, he said that then these small communities might therefore “buy-in” to education more (that is, if they see a more practical value in it).

Charlie finished the interview saying that Idaho is an “anti-government” state, and will always be. If this is true (as other interviewees have also attested), then how do educational leaders and legislators in the state get the public to “buy-in” with anything that exists within or is associated with the state and national, if not local, levels of governance? He points to the state’s leadership as the key to this positive change, and that they must act like ‘coaches’, and approach their representative communities as part of their ‘team’. However, while the leadership in Idaho has tried to do that with its adoption of the Common Core at the state-level of governance two years ago, it seems that once this (or any) test is administered, and handed down from someone, somewhere, at the governmental or institutional level, “buy-in” will be lost amongst Idaho’s people, particularly in its many smaller, rural communities, who live on, what he called, “social islands”. So, given this dynamic, Charlie attested that the state’s legislators and Department of Education must remain connected to its constituencies, and include them in this discussion. If the test is not working for each and every individual community, then there must be a ‘team effort’ in creating change. If they continue to make decisions on a “political whim” and not cultivate a *sense of community*, then it and every other reform will fail, and so will its schools.

***Categorical discussion.*** After this second phase of interviewing, it became clear that while fear has played a significant role in the motivations of the interviewees in their educational careers and decisions, they also want and need to experience a general need of purpose, acceptance and community, as well as a sense of having power, at the very

least within their own domain. These are ways in which each seemed to have quelled their fear of failure, of not belonging, and feeling ill at ease. In some ways, it is as if Idaho's schools are suffering from a 'disease' - 'dis', meaning not, and 'ease', meaning at peace. For each of them, a certain level of acceptance has been needed to emotionally deal with feeling 'not-at-ease'.

Each and all of them used the term "buy-in" as a way to encapsulate this need. However, buy-in means so much more, at least culturally, socially and politically. In the world of business, a 'buy-in' happens when a company is in financial trouble, and a wealthy investor intervenes to either save it, or in many cases, to sell it off for its parts and, quite strategically, for a profit. In the world of stocks and trades, it refers to the process within which a broker steps in to buy up the shares within a 'failing' company in order to gain a majority vote, and thus have control over it. For the 'failing' company, and its managers, employees and shareholders, there is little hope but to somehow maintain their position, or to get out without taking too much of a financial loss. Is this truly 'acceptance', thus gaining the power of self-knowledge and serenity, leading to a sense of *empowerment*? Or, rather, is 'buying-in' really a giving up of power, a 'selling-out', therefore marking a resignation of self and all of the power associate with it? These interviewees experiences with reform, past and present, coupled by the language they used to share those experiences, point towards the theoretical possibility that power really means to feeling *empowered*, and that the most reasonable way to gain that is to enter into a state of *acceptance*, if not *serenity*, similar to how Eastern philosophers gauge happiness.

In the final round of interviews, the idea of *empowerment*, and relative to it also *acceptance*, was further investigated through a more purposeful and theoretical sample of educational stakeholders in Idaho. First, an active state legislator was interviewed, someone who is well known for his politics on education. Next, a first-year teacher was interviewed, one who has spent all of her life in Idaho's schools, first as a young student, then as an undergraduate, then as a graduate student in teacher education, then as a student-teacher, and now, as an elementary school teacher in a small rural town in the southern part of the state. In addition, a parent was interviewed, who considers herself as quite "involved" and "strongly opinionated", yet who feels as if she is quite disconnected from her child's schooling, and even as an educator herself working with a local non-profit that specializes in experiential and environmental education with school groups. Finally, a high school teacher from suburban Boise was interviewed, who has struggled with the 'system' of education in Idaho given her past experiences as a private-school student, yet who has nevertheless stayed in the 'system', and will continue to as her own son grows up and enters the public school environment. These interviews marked the third phase of the study, **Theoretical Sampling and Coding**, which, as Charmaz (2007) explained, brings the "suggestive" nature of the categories described above, towards something more "definitive" (p. 103). It provides a more "strategic, specific, and systematic" way of refining these categories, all in an effort to "delineate and develop the properties" of each category, and thus deal with variation within and between them (p. 103). It allows for the Grounded Theorist to better "predict where and when" data is needed to "fill gaps and saturate categories", explicitly "seek[ing] statements, events, or cases that illuminate" them (p. 103). For this study, this abductive rationale for choosing

each of the last four interviewees, whose position and role in Idaho schooling allow room to “follow up on [the] analytic leads” of *acceptance* and *empowerment* (p. 107). Their roles and relative experience in education provided a way to be more “selective about the data”, and thus see variations more clearly; in addition, it is their roles relative to the time spent in education in Idaho that allowed this phase of data collection and analysis to focus on the “actions, experiences, events [and] issues”, rather than just the “individuals per se” (p. 109). While this, admittedly, brings this study “back into the empirical worlds with all their ambiguities and tensions”, this is exactly what was needed to honor the “relationships and reciprocities” seen within the first eight interviews, and moreover, to honor their humanity, as well as my [the researcher’s] own. Education, after all, is a human and social pursuit, yet one with emotional, if not spiritual, ramifications for those that accept its calling. It seems that in a system based on power, that a spiritual level of acceptance is needed to maintain a sense of wholeness within it.

Therefore, it was with these final interviews, the goal was to develop a theoretical understanding of how *power* can be achieved through *acceptance*, as well as to look at what it means to experience *empowerment*, a term that has often been associated with radical social and cultural movements aimed at creating change from the inside-out. These movements (i.e. the Civil Rights Movement) have been all about *not accepting* the status-quo, yet have also been used to create change that is *acceptable* to the whole. Therefore, it made sense to start this last round of interviewing with a state legislator, someone whose political position allows him to see reform from the ‘top-down’, yet whose political platform has been quite publically based on creating change in the community, and for his community, from the ‘bottom-up’.

### **Phase Three: Theoretical Sampling and Coding**

In this final phase of interviewing and coding, interviewees were chosen with theoretical purpose. Again, each were chosen for their roles and relative experiences in Idaho public education, and questions were specifically designed to address not only their experiences and perceptions of NCLB and the Common Core reform efforts, but to uncover how power (or, rather, *empowerment*) relates to *acceptance*, (or, 'buy-in') and how this potential relationship might be used to reconsider and reconceptualize how power plays a role in the success, or failure, of any given reform (and especially those that come from the 'top-down').

The first interviewee, "Sam", was chosen because of not only his position as a state legislator in Idaho, but because he has been quite outspoken in his beliefs on the education in his state. For him, reform is something to be carefully questioned, especially if it is coming from the 'top-down'; his conservative beliefs certainly epitomize Idaho's anti-governmental federal sentiments, in which previous interviewees had resonated. Sam's own sentiments and political platform certainly gives idea of individual *empowerment* a very particular voice.

Next, "Sasha" was interviewed for her relative inexperience as a teacher in her first year of public school teaching, but also for her depth of experience as a student and student-teacher in Idaho, in both public and independent school environments respectively. Sasha has grown up in an era of Accountability, as well as in Idaho, and has chosen to pursue a career in schooling in her home state, providing her a unique perspective on Idaho educational reform. It seems as if she has chosen this path, either because she believes in Idaho education, or because she wants to be a part of its reform

(or, a little bit of both, for that matter, as her language later suggested). She is, in effect, quite ‘bought-in’, and given her inexperience as a teacher, also at the ‘bottom’ of the school hierarchy. What’s more, is that she has chosen to teach in a ‘failing’ school and district in rural Idaho, a choice that one could see as being either quite brave, or, conversely, somewhat naive. Her voice was chosen to try and flush out what acceptance looks like, especially for someone who has very little power in a ‘top-down’ ‘system’.

The third interviewee chosen was Christine an urban Idaho parent of high school aged students, who was referred to by Leigh as someone who cares about education, and who has been quite vocal about it. Her voice was important, too, for it helped to test the variance of Caroline’s experience, which being the first of this study, was very formative in the move from talking about NCLB to that of the Common Core, as well as in the generation of fear as a prevalent theme. With a better idea as to how Christine perceives reform in the urban center of Boise, close to the capitol where much of it “trickles-down” (Wimpelberg & Ginsberg, 1987) from the capitol building to local schools quite dramatically and quickly, the perceptive role of parents became more clear. She is also what she called in her interview an “informal educator”, working with a local non-profit that hosts classes from Boise schools to participate in experiential and environmental education. This role also provides her with a valuable perspective on what it is that schools are missing in their test-driven, standards-based curriculum, and why she feels programs like this are needed.

The final interview in the Theoretical Sampling process was with “Sarah”, a high school teacher in suburban Boise. Having been educated herself in mostly independent schools, Sarah’s perspective on public schooling was useful in addressing how power is

perceived. Her experiences as a private school student, from early childhood through her higher education, provided a unique context for how and why she teaches in a public school, and in a state like Idaho that struggles with reform. Having come from a much more liberal part of the country, she doesn't really 'fit in' to the conservative mindset of Idaho. Yet, like many Idahoans, she was very actively vocal in the recent public debates on what were called the "Luna Laws" just a few years ago; these new laws were designed to dramatically reform education in the state with a very conservative standard. As discussed earlier in this paper, they aimed at dissolving teachers' unions, introducing merit pay as an Accountability measure, and demanding students to take a certain amount of online classes to ease the financial burden of schools, and to promote '21st century learning'. She, like so many of her conservative neighbors and peers, voted these out, and called for Tom Luna's resignation. While they didn't succeed on the latter, the Luna Laws did not pass. In many ways, at that moment, teachers and parents came together, no matter what their political line. This reinvigorated Sarah's sense of a 'calling', and so she stayed in teaching after she had strongly considered leaving it. With the birth of her son right around this time, she could have easily justified resigning to be at home with him, yet she didn't. Therefore, her experience as a teacher during these dynamic years of educational reform in Idaho, provided an axiomatic way of seeing how acceptance and rebellion can be dialectically held within the paradox of power.

As Charmaz (2006) argued, theoretical sampling and theoretical coding provides a way to bridge the coding done early in the research process with the more substantive and focused codes in the middle and later parts of the research process. She cites Glaser (1992), another prominent Grounded Theorist, saying that the theoretical stage of

sampling and coding can “weave the fractured story together”, and bring a sense of “coherence” and “integrat[ion]” to the data collected (p. 63). As the above description explains, in the how and why each of the final four interviews were chosen, the inductive goal was to use early codes and themes, as well as the conceptual categories developed from them in the second round of interviewing, to “conceptualize how they are related” (p. 63). Moreover, it is through the theoretical process of sampling and coding within these final interviews that a Grounded Theory can be abductively imagined - one that reconsiders and reconceptualizes how power relates to acceptance, and how this may help educational leaders to better integrate lasting and progressive reform in their schools. The following details what came of these final interviews, followed by a theoretical discussion of how they individually and collectively help to bring integration to early themes and categories, and thus present a new and imaginative conception of power in schools.

*Sam’s secret for success.* Sam’s office in the State Capitol didn’t look like it has been occupied for long, although he had been in the Idaho House of Representatives for three terms, and a senator now for three years. When I showed up at 7:30 a.m. on a Thursday, all I could hear were my own footsteps in the marbled halls of the capitol’s basement, and when Sam arrived we were the only two in the building. I was just starting my day. Sam, however, had been up since 4:30, (he was and still is a dairy farmer), and agreed to come and meet me even though he had no other reason to come to the capitol building as the legislature was out-of-session. Luckily for me, Sam is never really ‘out-of-session’. A family man, and father of eight and grandfather to 14, he is a busy man. An Idaho native and businessman/dairy farmer for almost twenty years, Sam



also taught high school Spanish in his native farming town, now part of the Boise suburban sprawl. He knows the rural mindset, and the political landscape. He also knows quite a bit about education in Idaho (he has been on a special “task force” on public education for the past two years, and is very outspoken in his views on it, as my interview with him certainly confirmed.) I thought he might give me both an insider’s view on the politics of reform in Idaho, as well as a unique one because of his conservative and religious roots. Thankfully, he delivered on all accounts, and then some.

The first point that Sam made was that he wouldn’t say much in the interview, that is unless I chose to “talk” to him, too. He also pointed out that he is used to being misquoted and misrepresented, so he demanded integrity from those that he “talks” with. This led me to believe that he values open dialogue, and that he wasn’t in the mood for political ‘talking points’, but rather a conversation about education. (Later he told me that “open dialogue equals good policy”, yet was sure to clarify that “open dialogue” doesn’t mean saying whatever you want and whenever you want, that is at least not without doing some research first.)

So, when the interview began with the question that began every interview with – *“What experiences have you had with NCLB and other school reforms in your role as a state legislator”* - failed miserably in creating any kind “open dialogue”. I was stunned. He didn’t want to share about an early experience with NCLB. In fact, all he said, with a great degree of stoicism, was that he “wasn’t really affected by it”, even as a high school Spanish teacher in the early 2000’s. (Spanish, he explained, wasn’t tested on, so how could NCLB have affected him?) So when he was asked if he nevertheless noticed any

stress on his colleagues, he said that it “probably” had some impact on them, but that he didn’t notice that either, really. However, he admitted that he soon left teaching. He didn’t explain why, as I didn’t ask (I was still in a bit of shock, but also glad that this interview was heading a refreshingly new direction). That being said, he did remark that it was the “minimal skills and standards” of NCLB that he does remember, and that he disagreed with them then, and still does with the standards of schools today. He also said that he didn’t think that the goal of NCLB - to achieve “100% success for all students” - was possible. He then defined what he means as “success”, and with this our “talk” moved on from NCLB and into what Sam said was his theory of success, not only in politics, but also in education, and more importantly, “life”. (As discussed later, he sees education as dichotomously related; there is the kind of ‘education’ that schools can provide, and the kind that the home provides, the latter being more important in the success of a student in his or her life after formal schooling.) Yet before he defined what this kind of education looks like, and how he has worked to make the political moves needed to reform it accordingly, Sam did say, with the first real sense of conviction in his voice, that what he doesn’t like about NCLB, or any “top-down” policy is that it was designed “to control the people”, and to limit their ability to be “productive” and “prosperous”.

With this, Sam went into a bit of a diatribe about what he does believes in, and in particular, what he called “production theory”, which he argued is “*not* consumption theory”, the framework that the educational system operates on. He referenced Locke and Keynes to explain the difference between the two divergent ways of operating schools, or any other public institution, arguing that in order for anyone to experience

“success” or “prosperity”, then the state’s educational system has to have “access to resources” without any kind of “top-down system”, or federal system controlling those resources. He even went as far to say that this “system” came about almost five hundred years ago with Martin Luther’s claim that man could have a personal relationship with God, and that education (religion, at the time) could create “an army” of followers. While a religious and deeply devout man, this obviously bothered Sam - he seemed to be saying that Martin Luther had made it too easy for man to be divine, and that he was organizing man with his own personal and political intentions; that if he were to convince man that man was, in fact divine, then Luther himself must be the most divine of all, and should thus be followed. He was the first to exercise “standards” for man, and was the first to practice “mind-control”, the worst kind of control there is, it seems. And this was called the *reformation*.

So, naturally, I asked him to tell me what that word, “reform”, means to him. With this he created another dichotomy, one that he was so impressed with, that he said he would “put in [his] book”. And, at that point, he gave me his book, a pocket-sized first edition of a book he had just published, his “doctrine” entitled *Using the Power of Government to Empower the People*. The title of the book created an almost perfect segway into his explanation of what he saw as two types of reform:

- 1.) The status-quo kind, which comes from the “top-down”, and that attempts a “systems change”, such as changing testing, pay for teachers, standards, etc.
- 2.) The more rare kind, which involves an “*empowering* of individuals through *choice*”

His use of the word “empower”, here, brings the notion of ‘power’ to a level that few other interviewees had done, to one that implies some kind of social or cultural movement. This word was used a lot during large, cathartic movements like the Civil Rights movement in the 1960’s. It was as if Sam was suggested that the people needed to rebel, and that their rebellion was sacred to some degree. Here, he also used one of his important key words/terms in “bottom-up” to explain in order to “empower” the people, the change must come from. This is what he believes.

Sam used the word “sacred” more than once, as well as “divine”, but was sure to differentiate how his use of those words are not necessarily fitting when talking about a ‘PUBLIC education’. He, like he did with the terms “reform” and “success”, he shared what he saw as the difference between what he called “Education” vs. “Public Education”, the former having to do with “life” and “experience” and the “divine”, and the latter having to do with simple “knowledge”, something not at all divine like we sometimes assume it is. Sam went on to explain that the kind of “education” that has to do with “life” and with “God” isn’t up to our public schools to handle, and so they shouldn’t pretend to. Rather this kind of “education” - the divine kind that really matters - is something that must happen in the home, with the family. Therefore, he argued that the individual family should have that choice alone.

Sam has been so frustrated with public education in Idaho, that he pulled his own children out of the public school, one by one, teaching all eight of them from his home for half of every year. For him, and many of his friends and constituents in his small Idaho town, this is not at all extreme, but rather a “right”; in fact, he argued that homeschooling is “sacred in Idaho”, a state where many exercise their individual

freedoms quite literally. He explained that homeschooling had been historically used to address the need of the harvest, and so it became part of rural Idaho's lore and ideological identity, particular in rural areas. The harvest has always been "sacred", and so, then, so has homeschooling. However, he also told a story that brought a real edge to the "right to homeschool", which goes like this, according to Sam: "One day a governor put a family into jail for not going to school. In jail, an infant died. Now, nobody in government wants to mess with homeschooling. Nobody wants another dead child."

Wow, talk about 'high-stakes'. Stories like this show what much of Idaho values, whether they are homeschoolers or not: *freedom to choose*. Without that choice, then education becomes "indoctrination", as Sam suggested. This is why many of his policies engage the private sector in education, and promote ways of learning outside of the walls of a public school. When I said, "It sounds like you are promoting 'democracy'", however, Sam retorted, "NO...it's not 'democracy....it's being reasonable". So, is it Pragmatism or Idealism that Sam is preaching through his "doctrine"? I am not one to make that judgment, but it is clear that this tension is one he is very familiar with - the paradox of the individual and government. In this paradox, *power* takes on familiar faces, but not for Sam, and not in Idaho as far as he is concerned. For Sam and many others, Idaho is a place where a dairy farmer, who homeschools his kids, can become a senator, and even while dealing with the bureaucracy of any government, can stay true to his "sacred" beliefs.

While he wasn't a storyteller, Sam had a lot to say, and seemed to have a clear idea for himself what he believes and what he doesn't. In our short hour together, Sam was full of dichotomies, showing that as a political leader he believes in his side of the

aisle. However, he was sure to say that he wants other leaders, and the people alike, to enter into a more open and honest discussion of education in Idaho. He was sure to say that whatever the outcome might be, in relation to CC or another other top-down reform, that he will have to continue to “do the dance” with the federal government to keep funding, because that is what the majority still want and think they need.

Sam did say, however, that he thinks Idaho could do it without any federal government assistance at all, but doesn't think people will go that way, and that he was happy to continue this struggle. I guess anyone would have to develop a thick-skin, like he has, to have such strong convictions, and to be the conservative minority in a conservative state. Yet, like his book suggests, Sam won't give up. He does, in fact, want reform, but from the “bottom-up”. He continually referenced the very “top-down system” that he is part of with a particular degree of disdain in his tone, yet he does seem to actively know that he is part of that system, and even embraces it. Some might call that hypocritical. I might, however, call this *acceptance*. He has accepted the system as a way of bucking it. He is a member of government speaking out against government. He truly is living *in* the paradox of it all, and makes no apologies for it. He doesn't even seem to *trust* his own peers in the Capitol, yet he must trust the legislative process if he hopes to make the kind of change he speaks of.

However, is this really *acceptance*, or another form of control? Is he just trying to create a new ‘system’ within which some have power and others don't, or is this truly an example of *empowerment* in the best sense of the word? Are teacher, parents and students feeling *empowered* by leaders like him or not, and if so, how? Is the Common Core really giving them this kind of freedom of choice, or is it holding power over them?

Will it in the end, as Sam himself recognized, “come down to the test”, and whether we are willing to accept it or not? If we do, then with what end? Will it come to be that Idaho, and other states, will ‘accept’ its reality, like Sam, but only with the goal of subversion? Or is everyone just too tired to get up at 4:30, and go into work on a day when no one is ‘in session’?

The next interview, with ‘Sasha’, provided some perspective on the willingness of teachers to bear hardship for the ‘greater good’ of schooling. As a first year public school teacher in rural southern Idaho, but also with some experience in an independent school and as a teacher-education program graduate in Idaho, her take on how reform has been perceived by a young teacher was much needed; she provided the perspective of a native Idahoan, who had spent most of her schooling as a student and student-teacher in the crux of the NCLB era. It wasn’t until she began her teacher training, and then her first job as an intern at an independent school from 2011-2013, that she realized education could look different than what high-stakes testing and standardization provided. In many ways, she had to adapt, and deal with it over the years, yet now she knows that it can be different. The question for her, as a young teacher now in a public school with her own classroom, is whether or not she will continue to adapt and assimilate now that she knows there are other ways to teach and learn. As she said, and showed, in her interview, a more serene, and less subversive, notion of *acceptance* might be the very key to success in today’s educational climate. If ‘standards’ are here to stay, then why not just accept them, and focus on what one can control, which it seems, may be very little after all? This could certainly redefine how teachers perceive ‘power’, for it

takes away the desire or need for it, and, rather, provides a relieved sense of freedom from it.

*Sasha's serenity.* In her first year of teaching full-time at a small, rural ES in Idaho, one that gets Title 1 accommodations and that has been under scrutiny for its testing performance, Sasha is already experiencing the pressures of the state's accountability 'systems'. What's more, is that she was a high school student herself in Idaho when NCLB and the ISAT were at their height. Then, she went to an Idaho college, and majored in Education. Then, she entered a teacher education and Masters degree program, landing her first in a public school and then in an independent school to do her student-teaching. This experience certainly shifted her perspective on testing, and how it affects teaching and learning. This dynamic and diverse set of experiences, all in a NCLB and post-NCLB world, and all in Idaho, make her perception all the more valuable in the construction of a Grounded Theory, and in identifying both variations and consistency within and between previous interviews.

In remembering her experiences as a student, she said that she "always wants to reflect on her own education" - this shows that she values her experiences as a student, and that she uses that to help guide her teaching today. She is a student as much as a teacher, and a 'life-long learner'. In her reflection of those experiences, she remembers her high school days as being "high pressure", which in turn, "convinced me that testing was important". She was *forced* to 'buy-in' early on.

Then, as an undergraduate and TEP student, she remembered having a teacher that very much impacted her who was very "anti-NCLB", and whose hidden curriculum seemed to be one that was aimed at teaching would-be teachers to "know the politics in



schools”, but not as much in an effort to just blindly ‘buy-in’, but to make meaningful change. This kind of pragmatic approach seems to have stayed with Sasha, and when she began her first student teaching job as a reading specialist in a suburban elementary school, gave her perspective on how her mentor teachers were themselves responding to the same “high pressure” environment she knew as a student.

In her first student-teaching position, she noticed that the other teachers would “joke about the tests”, and “make light of it”, yet she also noticed that this wasn’t as much of a dismissal of the tests, but rather done as a way to cope with the pressures of them. She noted that she thought they were in fear of the tests, but given that they had to focus on them, the teachers poked fun of them to help them deal with this pressure. This fear became very palpable when test day came; Sasha remembered seeing her mentor teachers “freaking out”, and that some were even reduced to tears. This seemed to have scared Sasha too, prompting her to seek out an internship at an independent school where she believed she could truly see how educational theory and philosophy in an environment that “fosters possibilities and freedom”, and where this could be done without all of the pressure of testing. However, she did state that she was “sad” that this couldn’t be in a public school, something that she wants to believe in.

Since leaving that internship, she has since returned to a public school environment. She moved back to this environment, and at an elementary school, to “be with kids”, which is her ultimate motivation. She said that while she is facing a whole “different set of problems” here, and while she did admit that she has had to get used to a “cookie-cutter” type of curriculum, that she needs and wants the “structure” of the environment to help her grow as a teacher. She does appreciate how, in this test-driven

environment, that she can “quickly assess and re-teach”, something that didn’t happen as readily and easily in the independent school she had worked in. The big difference she noticed was that in the public school she is currently in, it is more linear and outcome-based, while in the independent school, it was more about “intuition”. This brought her to the Common Core reform in Idaho, for she said that it could be the way to combine these two worlds, but like so many others, isn’t convinced.

Like Sam, when talking about these current reform efforts, she used the word “empowerment”. That with the CC standards, teachers have the “time to be creative”, and that they don’t have to always “follow the book”. While there are still “benchmarks and standards”, she noticed that teachers can say and use those terms without joking or crying. She believes that these standards are more ‘transparent’, and that the kids are, themselves, being ‘bought-in’ on a daily basis as teacher rewrite these standards in “kids-friendly” words and put on the board every day. However, she has also noticed that some of the more veteran teachers are struggling with their ‘buy-in’ - that they have gotten quite used to the ISAT, and to making that work for them. To deal with this, and to show their ‘buy-in’, they are “doing the same things” as they had been doing; the only change is now they are “just putting the standards on the board”. (Is this acceptance? Is it conformity? Is it transgression/subservience?) However, many teachers in her school are being given “time to be creative”, as well as “training and resources” to do so (assuming that it takes ‘training’ and outside ‘resources’ to be ‘creative’?). It is all, in her experience so far, promoting a process of “going deeper, and deeper” than ever before. ‘Deeper’ into what, I wonder? Whatever that is, it does seem that she, and others, are buying-in...

Sasha has, for intents and purpose, ‘bought-in’ to the CC and its standards, and even looks forward to some “scripted lessons”, because for her, as a new teacher, she lacks *time*. She believes that even the veteran teachers will eventually “embrace” this change, even if it means being “forced” into it. She argued that once they realize its benefits - which, for her, is that it isn’t completely “mastery-based” - teachers will “come around” (similar to what Jack said!) On the other hand, she anticipates that (given what she has heard about last year’s pilot test, and likewise indicated in other interviews) when the test comes around, that it will interrupt the flow of this development. She said there is “a lot of anticipation” around the test, for everyone including many of her parent-body, which I interpret as a euphemistic way of saying “freaking out”. Many parents, of the early-ES-aged kids in particular, are wondering, “Why are we doing this”, and testing little kids on it?

So, again, it is the TEST itself that is still contentious, mostly because it is still a mystery for many. She and other teachers are still confused about what it will look like, how it will be used, and why it matters. This is when I, like I did in early interviews, ask her what the words ‘Accountability’, ‘High Stakes’ and ‘Standardization’ mean to her:

‘Accountability’ = Performance being judged, “from the teacher, to the student, to the teacher’s job”.

‘High Stakes’ = “one assessment” measuring “it all”.

‘Standardization’ = a “scary word for goal”, that is based on the fear that students will be “pulled out” and “intervened”.

With these definitions, she recognized that she, like her colleagues and even the kids and parents, are “part of a system” - one that is kind of “scary” but only in its words - and this

it will “eventually be my future” to identify and reference herself as a “test score”. She, like her students, could be “pulled out” and “intervened” with if she doesn’t simply go with it. To instigate change from within, or from the ‘bottom-up’ could be met with some real consequences, from being isolated to losing her job.

Once she came to this realization in our interview, she told a story from her recent experiences as a first year teacher, which went something like this: Recently, Sasha wanted to take some of what she learned from her ‘independent school’ experience and incorporate recycling into her classroom routine. She wanted to teach kids sustainability. However, when she began doing it with her class after lunch times, she was met with a lot of fear and discontent from her colleagues. School leadership even approached her, saying that this was too much change for her to implement, and that it was making other teachers uncomfortable. Sasha felt guilty for having done something that she thought was good for the school, for her kids, and for the environment. She thought that it was an example of a small change that could make a big difference. However, the resistance she experienced argued that if she was to make a small change like this, then everything would have to change - that an “overhaul” like this must be vetted and agreed upon by everyone.

Given this storied experience, it seems that for many teachers, staff, and administrators in her school, ‘reform’ means to “overhaul”, and that with so many changes that teachers are already being forced to implement in their classrooms in regard to curriculum and assessment, it scares teachers if they feel like anyone else is forcing another reform on them, and even a colleague with best practices and intentions in mind. This has been confusing for Sasha - back to her early experiences of teacher education,

and the influence of that “anti-NCLB” professor, she always thought that “small change in the classroom could create big change”, and that this was her job. What’s more, is that this was her freedom. It seems that because of the “system” she is part of, she is questioning that purpose.

By the end of the interview, Sasha made a statement that really encompasses how she perceives reform, testing, accountability, etc., etc. She said: “I have to tell myself that I have the *power* over my own 20 sq. ft. of space”...that “this, at least, is manageable”. Here, I did push her a little bit on her use of the word “power”, to see if it at all related to her earlier use of “*empowered*”. Her response was that to have “power” is the same as to feel “empowered”, that is, to “have confidence in yourself and your own actions”. For Sasha, being able to “have a voice and to cast a vote”, and yet still to “be okay with being different” is the balance needed, somewhere in between having ‘power’ and feeling ‘empowered’. She believes that if one can accept that, then everything will be “okay”.

Being “okay”. Is that good enough? If it is, I wonder if Sasha and others are giving up, which is quite different than acceptance? She doesn’t think so, though. She finished by saying that she believes “everyone [teachers, parents, admin., etc.] is there to help kids, and that is what is important on a day-to-day basis”; that “schools are great places to work...and every day there is something to smile and laugh about”. If that isn’t serenity in action, I don’t know what is.

In the next interview of Christine, the theoretical purpose was to discover what really is “okay” by an active and vocal parent’s standard. In referring her as a parent interview, Leigh described Christine as being “involved” and “caring” about her kids’

educations. Her role as an “involved” parent provided a context to explore the relative reliability of not only this idea of acceptance (if not serenity), but also as a theoretical barometer, of sorts, in returning to Caroline’s interview early on in the research process; being the first interview in this study, Caroline’s dramatic experience as a parent and board member, and one who has clearly not accepted the bureaucratic nature of her school district, had to be tested for its variance. If she is one of a few parents who are willing to be so passionately involved in school reform (to the point where she had even burdened the abuse of school leaders, and risk of ostracization in her community), then the idea of empowerment through acceptance could and should be questioned. Christine, someone not as “involved” as Caroline, but certainly caring enough to take an interview on the behest of one of her kid’s teachers, provided insight as to what it is parents think about when it comes to reform, and what power they think they have or do not have in it.

*Christine’s connection.* Christine began her interview by making the declarative statement that NCLB “doesn’t mean much of anything, anymore” to her as a parent, and certainly not to her as, what she called, an “informal educator”. For her, the “particulars of it” have long been forgotten, and were likely never even understood in the first place. She explained that from its inception it was all too formal and complicated for anyone outside of school administration to ever understand, and even for an “involved” parent like herself. From the very beginning, she never felt “connected” to NCLB, and thus has historically had trouble “connecting” to her child’s schools, even though she considers herself somewhat of an “involved” parent, and even as an “informal educator” that works with Boise public schools, yet as part of an “outside”, community-based environmental education program.

When asked about what it means to be an “informal educator”, she replied that she gets to do the “fun stuff”, learning with kids “outside of the classroom”. She also noted that an “informal educator” can be differentiated from a “formal” one by the amount of time spent with kids in an educational environment, implying that classroom teachers have to be more “formal”, and thus, it seems, *less* “fun” in their approach to teaching and learning. Within her role as an “informal educator”, working with a non-profit that brings classes in on experiential “field trips” in environmental education, she naturally wouldn’t have much connection with NCLB, and particularly not anymore since it has been ‘replaced’ by the Race to the Top program, and now in Idaho with the Common Core. Again, NCLB “doesn’t mean much” to her anymore, both given her professional role as an experiential educator, as well as the relative disconnect she has felt from her daughter’s schools over the last decade. However, it was when she began to speak of her own kids’ experiences, that she *could* speak a little towards NCLB and school reform in general, as her daughter’s experience has, in some ways, also been Christine’s own.

As what she also called an “average parent”, it is quite natural indeed for her to experience schooling through her own child, even as an educator in the community at large where her professional life has been defined quite differently from the ‘formalities’ of her own kid’s schools over the years. In fact, she believes that the very reason why her non-profit, and other community-based programs, are so popularly needed today is a direct result of the ‘formality’ of schools in a culture defined by NCLB, and other standards-based reform movements since; the program she works with has served Boise schools, providing something that the schools cannot. She later identified this

‘something’ as “holistic” educational practices, which allows for more “connection”, extra “time” to learn, and a different “voice” for teachers and students to explore in a more natural environment. However, despite her experiences in these more holistically progressive approaches to education, it is, again, her own child’s experiences in the classroom that she can’t escape. When describing those experiences, she said that she saw her daughter’s schools become more and more crowded, taking on more of a “mob-mode” approach to teaching and learning than what is comfortable for her as a holistic educator, and certainly as an “involved”, yet “average”, parent. She cited rising teacher-student ratios as a primary part of that problem, for she believes that with these numbers there cannot be “connection”, “understanding”, and a focus on “relationships”, all basic tenets of her own educational philosophy and practice. However, she considers her daughter (and, thus, herself) as quite “lucky” for having been identified as being Gifted and Talented early on, because it provided her daughter’s teachers with the resources, time, money, and, most of all, smaller classes to create authentic “connection” with their students. Yet, despite this, Christine has always felt that it is her duty to be critical of this, even and especially if her own child has, for the most part, had a wonderful experience in her public schooling. She said that she doesn’t ever want to be a parent, and moreover a community member, that just “coasts through” those formative years, accepting whatever comes her way without trying to truly connect with it. Many parents, she admitted, do this, and not because they are “bad”, but because they aren’t able to. They don’t have the “time” and/or they don’t know what it is they can do or how to go about it. The plight of the “average” parent who doesn’t feel connected to their own



kids' schools is certainly something that Christine identifies with, and moreover, wants to help change.

However, she also admitted that this change doesn't come very easily, even for the more "involved" parent like herself. She said that she really does want to just "call the principal" and tell him directly that she thinks teachers should have "better working conditions" in smaller teacher-student ratios and more classroom resources. She wants to tell him that she, as an "informal educator", thinks schools must focus more on holistic educational practices that "connect" kids to each other, to their teachers, to their world, and, most of all, to themselves. However, she admitted that she has yet to make that call. She, like so many "average" parents, does not want to "fight a fight that has already been won". Plus, she doesn't have the time, or the venue to do that. She pointed out that even the local parent organization doesn't provide much of that opportunity either, partly because it is too busy dealing with events like teacher lunches, after-prom parties, and sports boosters. While she said that she does value these things, as they help to promote a "sense of community", she believes that this organization could do more in its advocacy for teachers, because these efforts are the ones that will ultimately benefit the kids.

And when change does happen, even if done with the said intent of benefiting the kids, Christine argued that they often come too quickly, too haphazardly, and without any regard for the teachers, students and parents that directly experience them. She noted that these "district-down" reform efforts do not "come from the teachers", and therefore cannot be implemented well, and certainly are not communicated to parents before they happen. Given that it is the teachers, in Christine's experience, that are the best way for

parents to “connect” to schools, when they don’t know how or why a reform has taken place, then that leads to even more disconnect for parents. So, they then have to rely on their kids as that connection, and kids do not always know what to say, or how to say it. Kids are kids, and shouldn’t have the sole responsibility to be the primary point of contact between a school and its tax-paying community. If the teachers don’t know how and why a reform is made, then essentially, “*nobody* knows why”, leading towards anger in parents and/or general apathy. Once this happens, they feel helpless, and therefore speak badly of their kids schools, further ‘buying in’ to the ‘public manifestation of accountability’ (as Leigh had called it), or they “coast” through their kids’ school years without experiencing the educational promise of “connection”.

The “system” of schooling, Christine argued, does need change, but she argued that this kind of ‘top-down’ approach isn’t healthy for schools and their families. If district policy drives them, then what is actually happening in the classrooms can be lost within the rhetoric and politics of it. She said that she, and other parents, need a more direct way of knowing and understanding what is “coming down the pipe” *before* it “comes down the pipe”. This metaphor has come up before in interviews, and in Christine’s experience, becomes more potent in its meaning. If parents are at the end of a “pipe”, suggesting that their school systems are organized like ‘plumbing’, then that puts them in the proverbial ‘sewer’ of the system? Similarly, then, how is it that parents can get “plugged in”, as Christine called for? And if that metaphor implies that this is the best that parents can do, then it seems that their only hope in getting more involved in their children’s schooling would be one that implies that a parent’s role is to be an ‘obstruction’ of the ‘flow’ of schooling. Christine herself admitted that this is what many

parents feel relegated to doing, being more of a hindrance than a help to positive educational change, prompting some to hold teachers solely ‘accountable’ for the problems schools face. At the very least, it implies that parents have no choice than to be critical of teachers, essentially ‘plugging up’ the natural flow of teaching and learning with questions and concerns about policy change and mandated curriculums that the teachers, and certainly not the students, know much of anything about given their own disconnection to it all. Christine has worked hard to not be one of those parents, yet still feels that she needs to do something, anything, to create more change.

When asked what she thinks really needs to happen, she said, quite simply, that administration and school leaders need to start “listening”. They must create open and honest “forums for talking”, not just agenda-driven meetings and in-services. These “forums” must be place where teachers can “vent” without feeling like they will be punished for it; there needs to be places and spaces where teachers can work on “problem-solving” with the administration, where they can become part of the “big picture” of reform, rather than a passive recipient of it. She believes that teachers are the “experts”, and that they have the “wisdom” to become an active part of school change and reform. They, like the students, are not just ‘blank slates’, and certainly not ‘empty’, but rather the very ones who know the students best, and therefore, know what should happen in schools and classrooms. Her trust in teachers is something that has yet to come up in any interview. Might this be because of Christine’s holistic philosophy of education, one that encourages things like open-dialogue, honesty, humility, and “listening”, not just passive hearing?

So, when asked about what she thought about the Common Core reform in Idaho, she said that, at the very least, it is “more friend than foe” to these holistic ideals and pedagogies. In fact, she recalled a recent American Experiential Education conference that she attended where she “listened” to a very dynamic speaker on the Common Core who argued that experiential and holistic educational practices are “do-able” within the context of the Common Core standards. The speaker, Christine said, did quite an amazing job showing how these standards are flexible towards “cross-disciplinary” curriculums and pedagogies, and how they provide room for “layered-learning” given the “broad” nature of the Common Core curriculum. What’s more, is that, quite similar to what Leigh said in her comments on the Common Core, it essentially “allows” teachers to “do what they already are doing”, which for most is what is best for kids (as Heidi too mentioned). However, like just about all of the other interviews, outside of Jack, the “testing bugs” Christine. She said that “we still need to figure out what a ‘good’ evaluation looks like’, and that teachers would, still, know best. She sees “testing” and “curriculum” as “two different animals”, and that there needs to be a “matrix” that shows how any school makes this combination work, and if it doesn’t or can’t, then standardized testing should not be used. Furthermore, she argued that this is also why “merit-pay” should not be part of that equation, because there are so many other, more authentic, ways of “evaluating” student learning. Again, teachers know how to do this, and should therefore be “listened” to.

She doesn’t know if Common Core is the answer, even if it is “do-able”. She hopes that, at the very least, it will “get teachers talking”, and provide more time and space for them to share ideas, and thus “help each other do this thing”. Then, they can

educate parents, also empowering them to make that call to their principal, that is if it is even needed.

If teachers, and therefore also parents, are given this ‘power’ to make change, or at least to talk in open and honest forums, and if administrators make a real effort to “listen”, then we all may just realize that teachers are “already doing this” - “this” meaning educating children with authenticity and “connection”. Until then, non-profit and community-based programs like the one Christine is part of will have to be part of the picture so that kids get at least somewhat of a holistic educational experience. In a sense, if change doesn’t come soon, then programs such as these will simply have to do, and therefore, teachers will have to do their best with what they have, essentially outsourcing for what they don’t or can’t provide.

*Sarah’s saving grace.* This interview began with a question that hadn’t been directly asked of any interviewee: *How do you deal with all of the reforms and changes that are passed down to you from the ‘top’?* Previous interviews created the need and context for this question - systemic reform, whether it be NCLB-based or otherwise, typically comes from the ‘top-down’ in Idaho, creating stress for teachers, even those who have effectively ‘bought-in’. Sarah’s overall response was somewhat anticipated, but her answer somewhat surprising. For her, the top-down hierarchical nature of school reform is “seen” but not “felt”, at least by her. She sees evidence of it in the organization of the school ‘system’, and particularly in school/district meetings and in-services as well as on mailers and newsletters, but nevertheless doesn’t “feel it” like others do. She said that she sees herself as somewhat of a “unique type of educator” in that she has other income that she can rely on, so her sense of financial and social security is not at all

attached to her job. For her, teaching has “no strings attached”, so she can, in good conscience and without concern for her family’s well-being, teach with what she sees as “joy” and with “excitement” without the fear that other teachers have around Accountability.

In her large suburban school district, they have adopted ‘merit-pay’ within the district itself, and Sarah has received it both of the last two years it has been available. She said that she believes this is not because she “teaches-to-the-test”, or because she believes she conforms to anyone or anything, but because she can approach her daily life as a teacher with the “joy” of knowing that she teaches because she wants to, not because she has to. For her, it isn’t about being ‘bought in’ because that would imply that she has a financial ‘stake’ in her teaching. She doesn’t. In fact, she poignantly said that she does *not* “buy-in to any of the negative conversations or energy” that other teachers, parents, administrators or others get involved in; rather, she proclaimed that “this is when I stop listening”. For her, if there isn’t an opportunity to “embrace” whatever is happening in the school or classroom, and to do it “wholeheartedly”, then she won’t. This is why she said she has “trouble saying NO” to volunteer positions at her school. She wants to “embrace” everything, and she believes that this is a trait that most teachers share, but are taken advantage for. However, Sarah doesn’t blame anyone else. Rather she, says it is her choice, and her responsibility as both a teacher and a mother to balance out the time she spends at school and the time she spends at home. And while her husband has contested that she needs “stop volunteering so much”, and focus more on her family, and while she realizes that in her reality is she “can afford to”, she wants to do these things for her school. She was clear to say that she doesn’t feel like she “has to”, and that

“nobody is making [her] do it”, she finds joy in it, most of the time and enough of the time, to want to do it more. The fact is that she wants to be at schools, and with kids, for similar reasons why she wants to be home. While somewhat of a paradox for her, and one that she said has resulted in some “arguments at home”, it is one that she is thankful she gets to experience, because both places do give her so much “joy”. She is willing to live in it, as long as she can maintain a healthy degree of balance between her work and home life. Once school administrators start demanding her time, and once she feels like her time isn’t being valued by them, she will quite, because she can, quite simply, “afford to”. However, this has yet to happen. She keeps going back, day after day, knowing that if she can “filter out the negative”, there will always be something to celebrate both at school and at home.

Yet it is also this very fact - that she “can afford to” volunteer herself so willingly, and “stop listening to the negativity” when she wants to - that she knows gives her the freedom to teach with a frame-of-mind that keeps her happy and joyous. Again, Sarah “embraces” anything and everything “whole-heartedly”, but not without being aware of how it is affecting her family and her general “peace-of-mind” when she returns to them. For instance, she continually used the word “whole” throughout the interview, as she believes it is the “whole child” that must be the focus, and that it is with a “whole-heart” that one must do this. She also mentioned the “heart” on more than one occasion, saying that this is the place she gets to teach from, and the place that she hopes to reach her students. The “heart” is a place that few talk about in relation to educational goals and objectives, and certainly not within a conversation about ‘progressive’ reform. While Sarah doesn’t mind, at all, using whatever curriculum she is asked to use, she feels as if

she can use it to reach the “hearts and minds” of her students - that is, as long as she is nurturing both of those parts within herself.

One place that Sarah finds that inspiration is through her family and home-life (‘Inspiration’, it should be noted here, is a word that is very much attuned to Holism given its etymological roots, meaning a ‘taking in of the breath of the spirit’). In fact, just 30 minutes into our phone interview, she arrived at home from her commute home from school, where her husband was in the driveway teaching her three-year old son to ride a pedal-less bike. She tried to do both - to talk to me and watch and applaud her son and husband, but ultimately they won out. She politely asked me if she could call me back after she “got to see [her son] do his thing”. Her priorities are simple, and while she did say that she wishes she could spend even more time at home with him, that she “loves to teach”, so that keeps her coming back. Again, there aren’t any “strings attached”, outside of her own willingness, and ability, to teach with and for the “heart”, but in a way that leaves enough of it to take home to her family.

However, Sarah did note that she believes the current reform in the Common Core makes this balance easier for her. She said that it is the Common Core that provides a “flexible” and, moreover, “relevant” set of standards that she can teach “wholeheartedly” with, and that being an English and not a math or science teacher helps. She applauded how the Common Core encourages more writing, rather than multiple-choice questions, and asked students to show their writing process, another pedagogical and philosophical point that she strongly believes in as a reading and writing teacher - ‘process over product’ is one of her philosophical mantras. And like Heidi and Leigh, she said that the Common Core standards don’t ask her to do anything new or dramatic,



but rather validates what she is “already doing and has done”. When asked about the test, Sarah also pointed out that given its incorporation of merit-pay two years ago, the school is now in its third year of using the Common Core-based state test, doing it pilot a year before most other districts, and the more rural ones in particular. She believes that this advantage has allowed her and her colleagues to actually be part of the experimental process of integrating it. The teachers in her school have had many opportunities to not only see test results and use them to inform their teaching, but also to use their teaching to inform the test. In this way, she believes it has become a “relevant” test, and more than just “do-able” as Christine had said. Again, she even went as far to say that she “embraces it [the Common Core] whole-heartedly”, and again, not because she gets the merit-pay (everyone does in her district, when a school does well on the tests), or because it is easier or better, but because it allows her time and space to bring “joy” into the classroom, and to experience “joy” at home. Without that, then none of it is worth it, and certainly for her, not even for some merit-pay or a name on a plaque somewhere.

One might argue that Sarah is lucky - that she is lucky to have another source of income so that she can “afford” to teach with joy and happiness as the goal, and to volunteer without any expectations. Maybe she is, but then again, why hasn’t she left teaching, even and especially when her domestic life has been demanding more of her? There is something to be learned from Sarah, here. As Christine directly referenced, and as all of the interviewees noted either explicitly or implicitly within their language, there is a value-system that transcends even our most nobly democratic ideologies, and certainly one that defies the more corporatized, capitalist ones, that inspires educators to keep coming back. And while much time and effort has been put into ‘teacher retention’

programs and studies, maybe the focus on what it is they don't like is the wrong approach. If everyone did a cost-benefit analysis of how and why he or she teaches, nobody would come back. At this point, in this study, one can only theorize, and if that is as much as we can muster from her and the other interviewees' experiences and perceptions as shown in the simple words they used, then so be it. Knowing when and where, and how, to 'let go', and 'let it be', is not only Sarah's 'saving grace', but also, potentially, our own.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

“Theorizing is a *practice*. It entails the practical activity of engaging the world and of constructing abstract understanding about and within it...The acts involved in ‘theorizing’ foster *seeing* possibilities, *establishing* connections, and *asking* questions...When you theorize, you reach down to fundamentals, up to abstractions, and probe into experience. The content of theorizing cuts to the core of studied life and poses new questions about it” (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 128, 135).

In her 2006 guide to Constructivist Grounded Theory, Charmaz defined what it means to ‘theorize’ in a Constructive manner, and how her methodology offers a more socially-responsive way of doing it. She draws from many other Constructivist frameworks, all widely accepted in the field of educational research, such as Symbolic Interactionism, ethnomethodology, cultural studies, phenomenological discourse, and narrative analysis (p. 129). She argued that her methodology draws from these to provide a more “reflexive stance toward the research process”; it “consider[s] *how* theories evolve” within the Constructivist assumption that “both data and analyses are social constructions that reflect what their production entailed” (p. 131). She maintained that it is through developing a “theoretical sensitivity” throughout the research process itself (as shown within the above described memo writing and active coding processes), that a substantial Grounded Theory can evolve, one that could “preserve and present the form and content of the analytic work” itself (p. 151). Otherwise, to approach it linearly or deductively would leave the “fullness” of it behind, leaving us with an unsubstantiated theory. That is why this study patiently and constructively presented its data from one

interview to the next, allowing themes, categories, and ultimately a theory, to naturally presents itself. As a result, many of the inductive findings of this study were previously discussed within **Chapter Four**, and throughout the interview process.

This constructively-inductive process provided a much needed analytic freedom for a unique, yet substantive, theory to develop out of the 12 interviewees performed, so that the subsequent theory on the legacy of NCLB could “reach *up to* the hypothetical” rather than simply deduce it, thus providing an imaginative option for other researchers and practitioners to consider in the reform of schools. It, in essence, provided room for hope, even and especially in the social construct of schools, where, as the interviews themselves indicated, *power* “reigns” (to borrow ‘King’ George’s description of this “system”). With the analytic and interpretive freedom that CGT provided, ideological constructs based on relationships of *power* were carefully constructed throughout the interview process, allowing *power* to be reconsidered and reconstructed so that it could be less dependent on the other omnipresent theme found throughout the interviews: *fear*.

Yet, the problem is, as this study’s introduction presents, one of interpretation and perception, leading us back to the language of education and of school reform. For instance, even since Dewey’s popularization of it a century ago, the term ‘Progressivism’ has taken on many forms and interpretations, leading to a profound complexity as to how we perceive schooling in general, and what we believe is the purpose of it. Alfie Kohn recognized this paradox in his 2008 article entitled *Progressive Education: Why it’s hard to beat, but also hard to find*, saying that:

“Talk to enough progressive educators, in fact, and you’ll begin to notice certain paradoxes: Some people focus on the unique needs of *individual* students, while others invoke the importance of a *community* of learners; some describe learning as a process, more journey than destination, while others believe that tasks should result in authentic products that can be shared”.

Here, Kohn points towards the inherent paradox of education, and in being a ‘progressive’ educator in particular: the gap between theory and practice, and how educational policy can either widen or lessen that gap. Similarly, as many of this study’s interviews suggested, there does seem to be a powerful paradox at work within the public schooling system, one that qualifies both *power* and *fear*; these can be understood most within the context of the *individual versus community*. This is also where the paradox of power can be tangibly experienced and perceived, particularly in a high-stakes, standardized environment of accountability. The question still remains, however, is whether or not the paradox can and should be answered to, and whether or not a test-based reform could ever provide the kind of closure that we need.

For instance, when interviewees were asked to explain what the word ‘testing’ means to them, most responded with dark imagery and violent metaphor. Caroline said that it “stamps out the joy in learning”; George noted that it “separates the ‘good’ from the ‘bad’ kids”, and that it was a “black cloud coming”; Leigh argued that it simply meant that “your job was on-the-line”; Sophie called testing time a “morale-killer”, a “shotgun approach” to student achievement. Within all of these descriptions, power wasn’t an intangible concept, but rather a forcible determinant of one’s sense of well-being.

The word, 'accountability', also had, for the most part, quite a bit of negative imagery and word choice attached to it, but it was also apparent that each interviewee was desperately *trying* to use it as a way to mediate the aforementioned feelings of dread. George saw it as a reflection of "duty", but one that required him to use his administrative power to raise the morale of teachers and students in a school that, according to him, was set up to fail under NCLB. Caroline saw that it meant being "sensible", but that the powerful leaders, and her school district's superintendent in particular, were not using it in that way, thus abusing their power. Jackie described it on a more political level, arguing that 'accountability' is, or at least should be, synonymous with "performance pay", thus empowering teachers to take pride in their work in a setting that, because of rampant testing, can diminish that feeling. Jack said that it, in any form, is "right, correct and appropriate" in its purpose, even under NCLB, but was also sure to note that it must be done with "attainable and achievable goals" in mind, as well as appropriate training for teachers to engage the "data" with the power of confidence. Sophie said that it demands "transparency", but that with transparency comes a lack of privacy and autonomy, likening it to "living in a fishbowl", which created a feeling of powerlessness for her as a superintendent trying to make difficult decisions for the public. For Heidi, 'accountability' meant "listening" to the needs of everyone involved, which is not happening in many schools. Charlie saw it as an assurance that "all students are getting a 'solid' education", but that this wasn't always happening, suggesting that the 'system' may be holding the wrong people 'accountable' within the teachers and students in particular, who have very little power over what is being tested for and how that data is

used. Sam argued that it is a “term used by the government” to “co-op conservatives”, and to ultimately “control” schools and the public as a whole.

These reactions to such widely-used terminology in educational reform over the last decade (if not the last 40 years) show that while each individual in each group have experienced power in ways that have led to feelings of disconnection, deception and dissatisfaction, they also hold similar educational values in their identified purpose as educators and community members. They, in essence, simply want to feel *accepted* for their own individual needs and wants, and need and want others to understand that *purpose*, whether it be political or personal or professional or all of the above. Again, this is why ‘stakeholding’ is not an appropriate way of describing these different groups, especially in an “ecology” (Eisner, 2002) of schooling. By letting-go of their ideological ‘standards’, their true albeit hidden, values based on a desire to, quite essentially, be loved and listened to. Sasha described this as a feeling of “being okay” - her particular use of the words “being” and “okay” shows that she, like other teachers, parents, administrators, superintendents, and state legislators, simply want and need to be recognized for ‘being’ someone, and are left with the feeling that they are ‘okay’. ‘Accountability’, however, suggests that someone must answer to failure, and that doesn’t make anyone feel ‘okay’, or ‘good’, or ‘joy’ for that matter.

The reality, as the interviewees’ perceptions showed, is that schooling exists on a fundamentally Existential level, often asking its many stakeholders to live in what Palmer (2009) called the “tragic gap”; as the interviewees showed in their storied experiences, if this is fought or blindly dismissed then it will be met with grief. However, a ‘system’ that also values the nature of this paradox allows space for acceptance, if not forgiveness.

Some places where people can ‘congregate’ in this fashion happen to be places like churches, synagogues, mosques, community meeting houses, and, even, 12-step basements around the globe. In these places, similar to Parker Palmer’s “Circles of Trust” (2009), the paradox of power as it is found and experienced in our social and cultural existences are recognized and valued, rather than dissociated from and/or hyper-focused on. Rather, the paradox of living as an individual in community is honored, and used as a way to reconceptualize the ‘communities’ in which we live and operate within, schools being an important one that Palmer himself has worked extensively with. The curricular and operational possibilities that Palmer and other holistic theorists and educators could provide in creating these spaces, whether it be in school or legislative committee session on education.

In order to really understand the possibility of such a perceptual shift, even in just our use of educational language, attention must be brought to bear on how every one of the interviewees regressively spoke of any and all “top-down” approach to reform, and how easy it is to simply “buy-in” to these types of reforms despite deeply held beliefs, needs, wants or desires to the contrary. What’s more, is that all of them, in some way, expressed a deep disappointment in themselves and their schools for the lack of authenticity that these reforms created, and especially despite their “buying-in”. This points towards perceptual shift that NCLB had created then, how it has quite regressively presented itself in educational reform since NCLB, and even today in the Common Core reform.

While the premise and research questions of this study focused on NCLB as the potential culprit for lingering tensions around school reform, all of the interviewees



inevitably spoke towards their experiences with the Common Core movement as well. This trend began with Caroline, who brought it up in the opening minutes of her interview, and without any prompting. After the first phase of interviews, wherein all interviewees naturally went to the Common Core in relation to their experiences with NCLB, the constructivist nature of this study demanded that I ask all interviewees about their experiences with it. What was so telling about Caroline's natural need to talk about it in relation to NCLB, and how all subsequent interviewees did as well, is that while most of the interviewees' language expressed a deeply-seeded distrust and negative perception of NCLB, their language also showed a similar distrust in 'new', more 'progressive' reform efforts such as the Common Core. Many of the interviewees used potentially regressive language to describe their first experiences with the Common Core this past year in Idaho, noting that while they applauded its effort, they have had trouble getting past their distrust of the mandated Common Core test (and/or any test for that matter).

Similar to Desimone's (2013) findings, interviewee descriptions of their first experiences with the Common Core showed that they understand it to be 'good' in its intentions, yet simply don't trust where it will go, and particularly in relation to the test. Their use of regressive language in this case showed that (like Desimone's study also indicated with NCLB and RTT in 2013) interviewees fear that the Common Core will take away local control in Idaho, will lead to punitive sanctions (i.e. merit or performance pay) rather than authentic 'buy-in', and/or will create another environment where the test dictates everything. This is strikingly similar to their longstanding perceptions of NCLB, potentially pointing towards a deeper legacy at work, one that even precedes NCLB

itself. Wherever this distrust may be rooted in our educational history, it nevertheless remains that much of their language describing NCLB and Common Core show that when one's individual authority is perceived to be compromised, it will fail, and even if it is seemingly 'progressive' in its 'objectives'.

### **Transcending the Legacy of NCLB and Test-Based Reform**

The inherent distrust exhibited in interviewees' descriptions of their experiences with test-based reform presented through the regressive language they used when speaking of NCLB, and then the Common Core. And while they did use more progressive language when speaking of the latter, this suggested that while the Common Core movement has shown some promise in its relative 'progressiveness', it nevertheless reminisces a tradition of testing and accountability, one that NCLB had also promoted at all levels of school governance from the 'top-down'. What's more is that while many of the interviewees said that they believe it *could* be, as Caroline said, the "beginning of a new era" post-NCLB, most interviewees have, in fact, experienced the Common Core similarly to NCLB – with fear and distrust.

What's most striking, was that most of the interviewees indicated that, in many ways, this new reform is all too familiar to those of the past. Their language confirmed that on a semiotic level. (What probably doesn't help is that Idaho's department of education has recently announced it *will* be called the "ISAT-2", of all things!) Additionally, interviewee language suggested that even this 'new' test, under the seemingly more reasonable and progressive 'standards' that the Common Core promises, has nevertheless been perceived with an air of fear and distrust amongst all stakeholding groups studied. This was true in all of the interviewees' accounts of their first

experiences with it in its piloted form, each explaining that it either it had either taxed school resources too much (as even Jack noted, who was the closest interviewee to a negative case in his optimism of Common Core), or that their first experience with it had been just plain “awful” (as Heidi bluntly put it). In either case, each and every person interviewed noted how they felt the testing process itself had taxed the mental and emotional resources of the students themselves. In all cases, the interviewees used some progressive language in describing their expectations of the Common Core curriculum, speaking positively of the accessibility of the standards themselves, their tone dramatically shifted when speaking of the test. In many ways, their negative perceptions of the Common Core test experience sounded a lot like their past descriptions of their past NCLB experience - while the idea of it was good, if not noble, once put into action, and put into the context of a high-stakes test, it had lost its way. This suggests that it truly remains to be seen what will happen with the Common Core this year, and for years to come; that being said, the more pressing question that should be asked on a more holistic level, is whether or not it is truly ‘progressive’ as its proponents have touted, or, rather, if it is just as regressive as its predecessor in its honoring of the high-stakes tradition that had begun with the federalization of schooling and NCLB?

Therefore, the findings of this study indicate that it is time to re-define what it means to be ‘progressive’, or we continually risk this regression. At the very least, we must look at the language we use in creating the perceptive reality that our schools live within the minds of its many stakeholders. Otherwise, reform will continue to statically re-invent itself under the pretenses of the past, and that of NCLB in particular given its sheer scope. Rather, it is time, as the term ‘*stake-holding*’ itself suggests on a semiotic

level, to loosen our grip on our ideological ‘stakes’ of the past, to pull them from the ground, to remove the ‘standards’ left at the ‘front lines’ of reform, and thus reconsider how we allow our perceptions of power, and moreover our fear, to dominate our schools. The place that may free our schools, and our minds, of the past may be, as this study presents, within a more holistic, purposeful language of reform (one that may even suggest that ‘reform’ isn’t what is needed, but rather, maybe, a ‘decentering’ and ‘recentering’ of what we all already believe. Language that speaks of *joy, connection, relationships, honesty, openness, and love* could do this.

Again, while the interviewees did speak of the Common Core with some compelling evidence in the form of ‘progressive’ language like *cooperation, collaboration, alignment, coaching, rigor, and critical thinking*, when it came to their verbal description of the test experience this past spring, none of the interviewees used the language that they so naturally used when talking of what they valued in education. The difference in how they perceived educational reform and what they desire in an educational experience was both heard and felt in these two different vocabularies; *connection* and *relationship* are fundamentally different in their connotation than *collaboration* or *cooperation*, for they provide a softer, intimate tone. The former, in contrast, helps to create more space for other important, and predominantly holistic, qualities of an educational culture based on care, honesty, humility and happiness (Noddings, 2004).

Likewise, while every interviewee spoke of the want and need to feel a sense of “buy-in”, given that they do want to feel a sense of success, the use of this particular phrase implied that given the top-down and grossly systematic approach of reform since

NCLB, the best world that the interviewees could imagine for themselves was one where, like a securities ‘investor’ does in the ‘saving’ of fledgling companies, schools are destined to fail, and that their only chance in ‘success’ is to be financially ‘bailed out’ by the federal government. As a result, we have seen a dramatic rise in charter schools, as well as the entrepreneurial model in the organization and operation of ‘failing’ schools. However, again, it was how and when the interviewees spoke of their own students, kids, teachers, and constituents, and how they desperately want and desire the ‘best’ for them, that they showed what it truly means to parents, teachers, and even administrators and legislators to ‘educate’; they all described a schooling environment where schools provide *care* and *connection*, yet one that also sets students up for a successful *life* outside of school, and not just a test.

It became quite apparent in the interviewees responses, particularly in the way that they described their experiences with the “system” they exist and work within, that their regressive language, and even their attempt at using progressive language, provided a stark contrast to the authentic, if not holistic, language they used to describe what they truly want, and hope, to find in their schools and classrooms. [See **Appendix B** for a breakdown of this different language, showing the complexity, yet also the clarity, that language can provide us in understanding perception, and thus our reality.] There was a clear difference between how the interviewees spoke of both NCLB and the Common Core, but more so in how they spoke of their purpose in education outside of these two reform movements. In essence, while all of the interviewees lamented on how *powerless* they feel at times, from the capitol building to the classroom to the home, and while they do feel quite *disconnected* and dispirited under the pressures of testing and

accountability, they long for, and truly believe in, something quite different. Once we filter out all of the ‘buzz-words’ and dark metaphors, what we are left with is the need and desire to feel connected, to feel ‘whole’. These are qualities that more holistic models of reform could provide. As holistic educational theorist Scott Forbes (2003) advocated for in his argument for holistic education, this language and these models of schooling can provide the needed freedom and space for all educators and students alike to discover a sense of “ultimacy”, and the means for what his peer, Clifford Mayes, suggested as an “Existential/Phenomenological turn” towards the spiritual domain in the operation, curriculum and pedagogy of our schools. Again, this desire was clearly seen in the holistic language used by interviewees. Mayes also went on to argue that it is the language that certainly matters, for it is the “fundamental inadequacy of propositional language” such as ‘excellence’, ‘critical-thinking’, ‘accountability’, and ‘standardization’, that fails to “capture and certify the nature of deeply lived experience”, leaving us “mute in the face of such experience” (103). This could explain why, despite the interviewees’ attempts to speak of the Common Core with a progressive reverence, they nevertheless ended up in a negative, regressive state when talking about the ‘ultimacy’ of the mandated test that accompanies it, and that had been made so popularly accepted by NCLB.

Yet, once again, as the interviewees ‘other’ language suggested, this doesn’t have to be. Mayes, and other Holistic educational theorists and advocates [see Forbes (2003), Miller (1992), Miller (1996), Noddings (2003), Palmer (2009) and Eisner (1998)] contend that we can and should thus ‘defamiliarize’ ourselves with the current reality that we have created through “A Nation at Risk”, NCLB, and now with the Common Core. If

we really look at what we value as our purpose in education, and thus recreate it with, as Mayes also argued, an “enhanced intellectual perceptivity, emotional immediacy, and moral validity” (103), we can transcend the more recent past and ‘re-center’ ourselves in what we have always known. This could be as simple as fundamentally changing the way we talk, and thus think, about our schools, particularly around reform. With this language, we could recover our true ‘core’ of our educational ‘selves’; it could be the very vehicle we need for our educational spirit to ‘shine through’, from the inside-out.

What must also be noted, though, is that not in any of these holistic educational models, is the word or concept of a ‘top-down system’ valued. Rather, when interviewees were asked to reflect on their experiences with NCLB or any other school reform effort, this is the place that all of them naturally went to, almost by default, in their description of what they think the purpose of education really is, and could be. It was as if they couldn’t escape this ‘reality’, even in their own perceptive imagination, yet also couldn’t escape the reality of testing, creating a great tension for them. It is the focus of a holistic educational model to liberate the individual from this ‘system’ of signs and symbols, creating a model for education that, instead of deadening it, values the work of the imagination wherein our external and the internal worlds come together. It’s like looking at a landscape from the vantage point of a mountain top – the clouds, hills and land come together to create a multi-dimensional panorama of form and figure, juxtaposed by a blending of light and dark, and within which a shadow can become a source of beauty rather than fear. This symbiotic and unified way of ‘seeing’, one that also exists within the internal ‘landscape’ of education, allows the concept of reform to take on a more holistic image and approach (albeit from a different vantage point and

ontological ‘plane’ of perception). Again, when speaking about their experiences with NCLB and even the Common Core, the interviewees’ regressively reductionist language of ‘accountability’ and ‘standardization’ limited them to the isolated valleys and the darkness and deepest chasms of this landscape. In this place, they have had trouble seeing the beauty, at least outside of their mind’s-eye. Given how NCLB has been so negatively perceived by all of the interviewees as shown in their dominant word choice based on fear, deception, and doubt, this kind of ontological shift is needed, one that moves from what is now considered to be traditionally ‘progressive’ towards the ‘holistic’ realm. In fact, it may even be that the word ‘Progressivism’ doesn’t work anymore, because everyone can now use it whether they are for or against testing. ‘Holism’, being the only word that we have to both philosophically *and* curricularly point us towards the ‘core’ of our true educational selves, would therefore be the obvious choice in replacement of it; it works because it helps point us towards what ‘matters’ (or, rather, what doesn’t have a literally physical ‘matter’ to it, but what occupies the invisible world, holding what ‘matters’ in its cosmic place). With holism we can think and be Existential and Phenomenological, Literal and Metaphorical, all at once. On the most practical of levels, it provides for us a lexicon that we can work with in order to both transcend the reform rhetoric the past and, paradoxically, *recover it*.

For instance, with the Common Core reform (again, one that many of them displayed a sense of desperate hope for, yet not without some real distrust in its purpose), interviewees showed that beyond the “technical-bureaucratic object-talk” of ‘cooperative’ learning that they used to progressively describe it, they don’t think it will work in the long run, especially in the state of Idaho where distrust towards the federal government is



so rampant. Here, despite the promises that Common Core reformers have touted, the so-called ‘progressive’ language of it was used so fleetingly and automatically by the interviewees, that when they finally ‘came to their’ phenomenological ‘senses’, they admitted that they think it cannot work. It was as if, as Mayes (2003) also suggested, they were able to ‘see through’ the materialist and Capitalist “bottom-line efficiency” and “object-fetishism” of this reform, even if it is not technically a federally-mandated reform. It just feels that way, mostly because of the test, and they have had trouble transcending that seeming ‘reality’. While a systematic approach provides a theoretical model that attempts to make the “machine” run smoothly (as Caroline hastily recognized), it certainly stops short at achieving the Holistic, if not spiritual, goals that all of the interviewees spoke of, both when prompted and unprompted. Mayes (2003) likewise contended that this “pseudo-speech of alienation that makes up the glossy jargons and slick slogans of corporate capitalism” must be replaced by “politically engaged” language that fosters “rich relationships” between and within all stakeholding/congregational groups (109). The mind-less use of a systematic and mechanized language promoted by an era of accountability and standardization, phenomenologically opposes the use of language of *joy, connection, relationship and care* that interviewees naturally used when describing what it is they want and need in an educational environment. So, if we are to transcend the limitations of the past, and in particular the legacy of NCLB and other corporate-driven reforms, then *all* of the language we use in education must be reconceptualized, and especially that which we use so automatically and publically.

## **Transcending a Language of Regression and Progression**

The interviewees' unconscious use of the word "system" was one of the more subtle examples of regressive language disguised as Progressive ideology, showing that while they do feel part of something bigger than themselves, they feel powerless within it. Unfortunately, the word 'system' carries with it a connotation of powerlessness, if not submission. Within a 'system' the people (or 'parts') are subject the wants and needs of a fabricated entity (or, often, ideology) that cannot and should not be questioned because of the institutional values of altruism, community, and what many have blindly assumed as 'democracy' (when, in fact, capitalism is the true ideological value system at work). And, even when we speak out against these words, and thus the institutions that promote them (like Heidi does everyday on the rear bumper of her car), we are paradoxically giving power to them, thus disempowering us to act within an ethic of humility and acceptance.

Therefore, it is the systematic language of 'testing, 'accountability' and 'standardization', which was clearly popularized (if not mandated) during the NCLB era and still used today with more 'progressive' reforms like Common Core, that must be consciously reconsidered in its use. These two terms, as well as the word 'system', came up in every interview when each spoke of their NCLB experience, and now even with their Common Core experience, showing the legacy of not only NCLB, but the conflict that Dewey spoke of in this paper's opening quotation.

*In essence, the findings of this study indicate that it is important that each of these stakeholding/congregational groups find a way to live-in-the-paradox, and that the language they use, and the environments that foster it, matter in creating this kind of*

*phenomenological and existential shift in their reality. What's more, is that it provides a working theory for meaningful reform, one that promotes a turn back to holism on an existential and phenomenological level.* They must organize themselves with not rules, but, rather, values based on a language of acceptance, if not serenity and humility, (not 'buy-in'), as well as connection (and not, even, as Spielman and Radnofsky argued, 'community' for it is mostly an "illusion" created by the close-quarters of schooling and the utilitarian language we have become so used to). If not from the 'top-down', this could happen from the "bottom-up", or, even, from somewhere in between the two.

Thankfully, the nature of paradox suggests that any and all of these are possible, for it doesn't just provide dichotomous ends to work with. It allows, even, the paradox of power to exist beyond the "axiological structure" and "four modalities" that Spielman and Radnofsky provided in their 1997 study. By living-within-the-paradox-of-power, yet with a new language of reform discovered within politically-liberating spaces for open dialogue (Freire, 1978), these groups can start an honest and open conversation, with an honest and authentic language of learning, to understand the perceptual constructs of the past, as well as a promise for a future, and a language of reform, that transcends it. In this way, the power struggles that many educators suffer from can be brought into their field of awareness, and then humbly addressed in a communal, if not congregational, experience. Like the interviewees were able to do in one short hour of open dialogue, if we can create spaces like this, then the pain, suffering and powerlessness felt as a result of a decade-plus of test-based accountability reform can be transcended and cathartically learned from, rather than ignored, or worse, displaced by anger, resentment and fear.

As the interviewees responses were constructively collected, and then analyzed using a socio-semiotic method, the need to transcend the limitations of our social order became clear: it is all based on power, and its permutations of fear, deception, and the desperate need to ‘buy-in’. Again, even when parsed out semiotically into four modalities, like Spielman and Radnofsky did in their 1997 study, the internal and external struggle for power pervaded (again, to borrow Caroline’s verbiage) the language of the interviewees. And again, because of the dichotomous nature of power, and how it seems to permeate everything in and around schooling from the public to the private sectors, the desire for power has created the need for social and cultural ‘movements’ in which ideological groups have sought ‘empowerment’...yet not always peacefully. Hence, the war the Federal Commission of Education declared on public schools in 1983. Unfortunately, history also shows us that even with the best of intentions, this struggle for power in a militarist-bureaucratic environment has created much violence and oppression, and even when the oppressed find their voice and take action, as Marx suggested, another ‘system’ usually replaces it, often worse than the original. Certainly, the dominant language we used in describing our schools reflects this power struggle, one based on fear, deception, and oppression. As already discussed, when each of the interviewees were asked to consciously create a metaphor for NCLB, all were negative in their tone and figurative meaning (i.e. George’s “black cloud”, Jackie’s “Big Brother”, and Jack’s “wrinkle-in-time”).

Even in a ‘progressive’, self-proclaimed ‘democracy’ of schooling, this has been the case, and in a postmodern world it is even more apparent with power being shifted all over the place. And what about those who can’t even participate in this 21<sup>st</sup> century

game because of socioeconomic or political or geographical isolation? They, then, can't be 'educated' in how to survive this world through '21<sup>st</sup> century skills' and 'critical thinking'. And, why just try to survive? What about 'thrive'? Yet, we still hold up schools as the very democratic ideal that can and will save us from the uncertainty of this world, to make us feel like we are part of something great, something bigger-than-ourselves. This is why teachers and other educators, including politicians, speak of a "duty" as George did, or a 'calling' as many of us do.

So, even when educational philosophers and curriculum theorists speak of 'power' today, it is often done with a Democratic ideal in mind based on power - if a school isn't 'democratic', then it isn't 'progressive', and if it isn't progressive then it isn't doing its job. This logic, however, is self-limiting, and that school reform will never truly be 'progressive', and certainly not lasting, if it isn't approached (as Christine directly suggested) holistically - it must have a strong theoretical foundation that recognizes, if not values, the paradox of power, and how that is perceived across different stakeholding groups. What's more, is that if it can not only exist theoretically but also in practice, and even in its political form at the level of policy, then a more holistic ideal might actually become the most pragmatic of responses to the postmodern dilemma facing our schools as they try to transcend the legacy of NCLB, as well as the century-old conflict of tradition between the Essentialist and Progressivists. As the interviews themselves indicated, particularly in the interviewees' language related to what they do value and want in the education of our children, *a more holistically-minded language of education is needed to deal with this postmodern effect, which could, in turn, allow for more space for holistic models of education to truly develop in our schools with an*

*honoring of the 'core', if not spirit, of it.* Again, it was the very language that the interviewees spoke of in between their descriptive experiences with NCLB and the Common Core that spoke of this space towards the holistic models provided by the likes of Nel Noddings's Care Theory (1992, 2002), Parker Palmer's notion of "wholeness" (2009), as well as Ron Miller (1996) and John Miller's (1997) definitions and calls for a "Holistic Education". These models may help us to reconceptualize what it means to be 'progressive' in a post-NCLB era, and thus move back towards the core purpose of education that the interviewees so naturally spoke of, and in some cases, lamented for. Only then can the legacy of NCLB be 'left-behind' in its rightful place, and can love, joy, connection, openness and honesty become part of the consensus consciousness once again.

### **Implications and Limitations**

It is the hope that this study's Grounded Theory provided a context within which school leadership can consciously help to bridge those perceived gaps, and provide more for our state legislators and superintendents to think about in how they use (or abuse) NCLB and its related language at a level of policy and reform. It may even lead to a healthy discussion as to whether or not the Common Core is being truly accepted by communities across the nation, and even those that have officially ratified and 'adopted' it. In a deeply-rooted, 'top-down' system that doesn't seem to be changing anytime soon, it is the lawmakers and school administrators that must model this behavior, and begin to literally *talk* a new language of reform. Again, as Spielman and Radnofsky (1997) found, even when a reform is attempted on-site and in a grassroots fashion, that the "familiarity" between school leaders and teachers can lend to an "illusion" of community; while there

may be an assumed ethos that a school has a strong sense of ‘community’, the two “antagonistic cultures” of teachers and administration are often quite “distinct” in the organization and operation of that school, making even the smallest of reforms even more difficult to realize, especially from the ‘bottom-up’. Teachers and students are made to feel guilt and shame for doing or saying anything that does not support the rhetoric of ‘community’, thus making power not a simple matter of ‘be-able-to-do’ or ‘not-being-able-to-do’, but also as Spielman and Radnofsky (1997) suggested, a matter of ‘*not-being-able-to-not-do*’. Again, and in reference back to Sasha’s interview wherein she told the story of her classroom-based, grassroots reform effort in recycling, this can crop up in the most unexpected and unprompted ways. The dominant and hegemonic language used, from the top-down, is certainly a place where this disconnect can be identified, and where this can be changed.

So, when teachers, like Sasha, Sarah, Leigh and Heidi, were asked what they think about ‘power’ in schools, this disparity and tension in how different stakeholders think about school reform became even more apparent. For instance, in his paper entitled *No Child Left Behind?: To Whom are we Accountable* (2004), former teacher and current teacher-educator Stergios Betzakis explained that while NCLB and “all of its language about reaching ‘100% proficiency for all students’” could be considered an “ambitious but achievable goal”, he saw it as something that has “caused more harm than good” in practice (p. 8). In reflecting on his own teacher education and professional development as a teacher, Betzakis argued that, unlike Sasha in her interview, he never really encountered the language of NCLB during his teacher-education; however, it was when he became a practicing teacher that he encountered this language during his professional

development, saying that it was “prominent” in that respect, and that he and his teaching colleagues were forced to “include specific jargon”, and were explicitly “told” that they were to be “monitored to make sure [they] were teaching to the ‘standards’” (p. 9). He went on to say that he has to use these “buzz words”, especially during the “dog-and-pony shows” of the bi-yearly observations that were done that were to determine teacher “proficiency”, and the use of what NCLB has determined as “best practice” (p. 9).

What’s even more striking about his description of these experiences was that Betzakis admitted that he and his colleagues consciously decided to “just give them what they want”, so that “they’ll leave us alone” (9). It is hard to qualify this attitude as either ‘buy-in’ or ‘acceptance’; rather, it is firmly rooted in those feelings of fear, isolation, and oppression that our schools must transcend. The epistemological and ontological paradox, however, is that he, like the interviewees, must experience the pain and suffering of this oppression in order to ‘wake up’ to its reality, and moreover, in order to return to the purpose of their educational selves; like the interviewees, Betzakis, needed NCLB and all of its regressive terminology, images, and related experiences in order to transcend it. It often takes, as Aristotle suggested, a cathartic force coming from the outside-in (or, rather, in the case of NCLB and even the Common Core, from the ‘top-down’) in order to anamnetically reflect on the past in order to truly change.

Also, in Betzakis’ case, I wonder if his building and district administrators even *knew* there was this kind of discontent, and moreover, dissidence within one of its teachers, and if so, what would they have done about it? Likewise, I wonder if his word choice in describing his experiences with NCLB might have provided for leadership in his building and district a more honest glimpse into how teachers and others inevitably



perceive NCLB, and then proactively use this awareness to make more responsible and purposeful decisions based on them? Betzakis, like many teachers, parents, and even school administrators, superintendents and state legislators, aren't heard in this way; the 'system' isn't set up for honesty or humility, nor is it at all "okay" to admit this kind of suffering. It shows weakness, and a lack of commitment to the 'system', and to the utilitarian myth of a 'democratic' school 'community'.

While a systematic approach to school reform may work if the 'top' changes everything about how and why they work, it's when it doesn't work that schools run into trouble, and have problems moving 'progressively' beyond them. Unfortunately, the history of educational reform in America suggests that it doesn't, and that each of these are more like what Dewey recognized a century ago as "trends". What's worse, is that there remains to be very little evidence that the dramatic reform efforts of the last fifteen years has even created any of its intended changes in student achievement and performance (One could certainly argue that there has been little progressive change over the last 40 years, even, if one were to trace NCLB's roots within the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965). Garcia (2009) provided a sobering history of reform since 1965, arguing that:

"Over the past three decades, educational reform efforts in the U.S. have been peppered with educators' and politicians' *rhetoric* of their commitment that all children will learn. While in no way an indictment of this commitment, the startling actuality is that there has been little progress to measure. One could argue that this widespread commitment, coupled with considerable financial investments in education over this same period, should have resulted in sustained improvement of public school systems" (p. 72).

Here, Garcia recognized the short-sightedness of school reform since accountability and standardization became the new "commitment" of schools, and how the "rhetoric" of that

has created very little for those school reformers to based this staunchly static commitment on. Simply put, these past reforms have not been “sustainable” on a curricular, pedagogical, political, or economic level. So, reformers have continually reached back to testing. This has become the standards with which was a way we can “measure” the value of the financial and political commitment of any reform effort, creating a need for something - anything - to justify what is happening in lieu of what *should have* been happening in our public schools in authentic learning.

Like every interviewee also recognized in their rhetorical use of the phrase “buy-in”, testing and other accountability measures have become the way in which schools have tried to justify this myopic “commitment” to something that has been so clearly unjustified, even by the very “measures” it is committed to. This shows a lack of humility, and certainly an unwillingness to change - to ‘reform’ even. Yet, again as the interviewees showed, all stakeholding groups involved are not only aware of this paradox in their anger and resentment towards testing, but want and need a way to feel relief from the suffering of it; they desperately want “buy-in”, yet when they say it that way, they are unintentionally justifying the ‘system’ they are so critical of.

Again, however, if an environment based on holistic values, and a language of humility and acceptance, then this paradox could be mediated, and spaces to speak and talk from the ‘heart’ could be created and congregated within our schools and capitols. Then, educational reformers might be able to transcend the rhetoric of the past thirty years and reach the very goal that *all* stakeholding groups (and all of the interviewees in this study) recognized as the essence of education: *connection*, whether it be for the social and/or individual purpose of “*transformation*” (Miller, 1992). Just by becoming

aware of each other's differences, in an honest and humble way in a safe and supportive setting, and to become more aware of one's own mistakes in the way others are perceived, then the ground-work would be set to build something new and truly transcendent.

Again, however, this kind of call for reform demands a progressively-holistic model of education - from policy to classroom instruction - in an effort to develop an honest and humble 'awareness' of each stakeholding/congregational group's role in reform. 'Awareness' is a term that holistic educators use quite purposefully, suggesting that any communication should include an honest and humble reckoning of one's individual identity within their 'community'. John Miller (1996) defined a Holistic Education as one that "involves exploring and making connections", as one that "attempts to move from fragmentation to connectedness" (p. 13). As not only previous studies have indicated, but as every interviewee advocated for in some way, shape or form, there is an intense need to feel purposeful throughout all of the interviews, and for what Holistic educational theorist Scott Forbes (2003) called a deeply held sense of "ultimacy" in order to mediate our fundamentally Existential condition. Policy *can* provide, at the very least, opportunities to naturally (or quasi-naturally) discover this in open, honest and caring environment for discussion, and not a testing one for exploitation. Miller (1992), however, also demanded that in order to do this, all forms of communication in and around our schools (from both the top-down, and from the bottom-up) must not be limited to a bureaucratic "transmission", or even a progressive "transaction", but one that promotes a holistic "transformation" wherein the "whole person" is considered wholly. This is certainly a radical departure from the Essentialist

tradition, wherein “transmission” of curriculum from teacher *to* student was valued, and even from the Progressivist tradition of transaction, within which the curriculum interacts with the student through the teacher, who sets up experiences for problem-solving that the student inquires within. In essence, the “transformation position” creates an environment through an acceptance of the child/student as ‘whole’ already, and therefore intimately connects the curriculum to the student, and thus the teacher takes on the role as a spiritual ‘guide’ of sorts, creating opportunity for “authentic learning” (p. 11-12). With a shift in the way we perceive educational reform, and education as a ‘whole’, we might arrive at a space where teachers, parents, etc., are not at all deficient in anything, and therefore can be trusted, listened to, and connected to the reform process. And when a decision is made in haste, or when mistakes are naturally made at the governmental level out of our innate Existential ignorance, then these can be honestly addressed, accepted, and forgiven, allowing for real, authentic, internal change within the individual. When governmental and school leaders are afraid of the media, and of the public, and thus act on that fear through hasty policy, and when the public reacts to it with either disgust or dismissal, transformation cannot take place. The system will stay the same, not just in its organization and operation (which may or may not ever change), but also in its very essence. This may sound like an impossible goal, but it is the essence of us that is the real truth, and it is based on a fine-tuning of our transpersonal senses in an effort to get to a conscious state of being-in-the-paradox that would, as Mayes said, “relativize [the] rationality” of Standardization and Accountability, and of a top-down, didactic system of educational governance (99).

Authentic change, based on authentic relationships from the *inside-out* in schools can be implemented, and thus seen and felt, as a “transformational” process of spiritual development, rather than a one-directional “transmission” between reformers and schools, or even a two-dimensional “transaction” between the two. Even the accepted and widely used term ‘community’, as it presents itself in schools, does not effectively encourage or nurture “transformation”, despite its rhetoric. In its current state, at least shown in the school communities of many of the interviewees, ‘community’ can be deceiving, and as Spielman and Radnofsky’s (1997) found, it can be an illusion that schools create through constant meetings, in-services, and otherwise ‘friendly’ interactions between school leaders and teachers based on a so-called ‘open-door-policy’ of leadership. However, when relationships are built on a theoretical policy of openness, and when one person is given the sole responsibility for walking through the door of an authority figure, it becomes more of a transaction than an opportunity for transformation. Similarly, then, in order to transcend the limitations of a rhetoric of ‘community’, and move more towards that of a ‘congregation’, holistic educational practice and language must be at the ‘heart’ of policy-making and decision-making.

Therefore, it is through an understanding of how NCLB has evolved, how it has affected different stakeholding groups, and how perceptions of it continue to affect current reform in ways that its legislative founders may have never intended, that a more progressive, if not holistic, reform might be realized from school to school and state to state. What’s more, is that this can provide a more contextual understanding of reform based on stakeholder experience, which, in turn, could lead school leaders and state legislators to a more lasting and less contentious approach to school reform as we move

forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, thus leading the rest of us out of a regressive age of education in America based solely on the language of war, corporate idioms, and factory models. As Tyack and Cuban (1995) likewise attested, finding a way to “devise plausible policies for improvement in schooling that can command the support of [both] a worried public and the commitment of the educators upon whom reform must rely”. This is the hope and relative promise of this study - to start this conversation within and around schools in an open, caring, honest, and humble way.

However, there are certain limitations that must be considered in relation to this study, given the inductive and abductive nature of how its data was collected and analyzed, and especially when considering its potential implications for not only Idaho, but other states. First and foremost, it will be very difficult to generalize the findings of this study to different states and localities, given that it will have been limited to a small sample from one state alone, and a very politically isolationist one at that. Certainly, each state has its own ideological identity (Idaho certainly being one), even if the lexicon of language used within and between them is similar. Most studies that employ CGT as its methodology, particularly those in the field of medicine and/or nursing, use sample sizes typically greater than 25 participants in order to arrive at a Theoretical Saturation; on the other hand, there are a few CGT studies that use an  $N < 20$ , and one was found that used an  $N$  as low as eight (see Scott, 2004). That being said, a sample size of 12, as this study used, did provide a large enough  $N$  to reach a considerable degree of Theoretical Saturation, as patterns kept emerging, each slightly differently between the three phases of interviewing. It should be noted, though, that a larger  $N$  would have helped, particularly in investigating more negative cases (those that have little but good things to

say about NCLB and the Common Core), as well as to corroborate findings at the independent school level and/or through teacher-educators. Also, students themselves could and should have been interviewed if the hermeneutical circle was to be completed.

Similarly, NCLB has sent, as Linn (2005) found, “mixed messages” from state to state, given that each department of education has the ability to adopt it in their own (albeit limited) ways; as she stated, “for states with functioning assessment and accountability systems of their own, NCLB accountability has frequently been layered on as a separate system” (p. 2). Likewise, other studies focusing on NCLB have suggested that teachers, superintendents, administrators, and others do greatly differ in how they have used NCLB within their own work and practice. While this has also greatly complicated perception of it, given that experiences and uses of the policy differ so greatly from state to state and district to district, these studies have suggested that the disparate experiences that teachers, building administrators, superintendents, and others do matter in these differences, at least in determining the individual successes or failures of test reform at a state and local level. Again, a larger sample for this study may have allowed more of these differences to be flushed out, particularly at the state and local level. Likewise, if more than one state were to be included, a more reliable picture could be drawn as to how NLCB and related reform efforts are perceived by stakeholders on a national and/or regional level. Lastly, one of the other major limitations of this study was that there was little attention given to ethnic or gender diversity in choosing the sample, as well as in the analysis of the data collected. While, for example, the fact that most of the Holistic language used by interviewees was offered by female participants, and while this may have deeper implications on the level of Critical Theory, this was not further

investigated, yet could and should be. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, this study did find that attitudes do differ, and while this is important, it isn't necessary to theorizing a new language of reform; in fact, it is the differences, and the attention brought solely on those, that may be holding reform back from real progression, letting NCLB do its regressive work long after its lifespan.

One such study, with a very significant sample size, yet one that didn't go into the ontological depth that a Constructivist Grounded Theory could provide, was done by Barnett and Blankenship (2005), entitled *Superintendents Speak Out: A Survey of Superintendents' Opinions Regarding Recent School Reforms in Arkansas*. In their study, Barnett and Blankenship surveyed 254 Arkansas superintendents about how they thought school funding had affected teacher quality "in light of the NCLB requirement" that all schools have "highly-qualified teachers" (p. 48). In its findings, it confirmed that there are vastly different "attitudes towards school reform" across the state of Arkansas, showing how even in one state constituency school superintendents are very divided in how they perceive the effects of NCLB on their schools, yet *all* hope for the same outcome: that students learn, achieve, and feel successful. They also all hoped for the same for their teachers. While it didn't get into the same kind of depth that a CGT could in uncovering deeply-seeded perceptions of reform, their study did confirm how while there are, certainly, "mixed messages" from state to state, and from district to district, about how any school reform is communicated and perceived, all educators do seem to want the same for their students - the 'best', as so many of the interviewees spoke once the cloud of reform began to clear in the consciousness.



Again, however, like so many of the other studies done on school reform, Barnett and Blankenships's 2005 study, however, did not ask teachers, parents, building administrators, and others about their attitudes and perceptions of NCLB in particular, and those certainly do matter when it comes to the pedagogy, practice, and the day-to-day activity of our schools. So, while superintendents may agree, paradigmatically, that schools are for kids, and that they must be carefully organized and operated to that end, deeply-rooted perceptions based on personal experiences with NCLB and related reform efforts show that their common vision can be easily lost in the regressive state of reform. Rather than seeing the educational landscape from a mountaintop - seeing a panorama of differences and possibilities - they have been stuck in the canyons and chasms of past reform efforts based on Testing and Accountability. When in the gap itself, it is difficult to see a way out, and while this, or any other single, study does not pretend to offer any one specific answer to finding our way out, the first step must happen at the level of perception; if we truly *believe* we can find a way out, and in fact, if we believe that we are not stuck, and never have been, then these last ten-plus years of regressive reform can be simply accepted as part of our necessary experience. With this simple acceptance, coupled by a dose of humility, our new reality could be that we were *never really stuck in the first place*. This could start with, quite simply, how we talk about our true selves in relation to our schools, and do this in open, caring environments where this talk is not only tolerated, but also invited.

Again, it must be recognized that when interviewees spoke of their experiences and perceptions *not* related to any identified reform of the past or present, and when they spoke of what they hope for in education, their deeply-rooted desire to speak poetically

about their teaching shined through. And even though they couldn't seem to move completely away from the 'buzz-words' of 'progressive' reform (words such as 'alignment', 'standard', 'benchmark', 'rigor', and, even, 'critical-thinking'), they eventually found their way. While this dynamic interplay between regressive, progressive and holistic language looked slightly different from interviewee to interviewee, they all spoke of words like 'joy' and 'connection' quite ubiquitously as a goal of education and of themselves as educators. This implies that in order to move beyond - to transcend - the regressive and, even, progressive language of the past, then even words like 'community' (now a buzz-word in its own right) must also be transcended. Spielman and Radnofsky (1997) found that even word – 'community' – can be especially deceiving, based on a cultural illusion of democracy created within schools over the last few decades in a desperate response to the pressures of testing and accountability. Desperation can make us do funny things, like adopt a word that we don't truly understand. Perception can be tricky, yet a shift in it is needed.

For instance, in their article entitled *Spirituality and Curricular Reform: The Need to Engage the World*, Koetting and Combs (2005) called for a complete reconceptualization of schooling based on spiritual and holistic principles, and the particular need to do it in a Postmodern and post-NCLB context. Without a complete "overhaul" of how we talk about our schools, and thus perceive them, this cannot happen. It goes beyond a paradigmatic shift, even, and demands a spiritual one. Language, I would contend, is powerful enough to do that.

My hope is that this study provides a pragmatically useful, grounded theory for us to consider in today's postmodern world. My hope is that it shows not only how each

of education's major stakeholding group have perceived the NCLB phenomenon, but offered up a new language for reform that is more attuned to the heart, one that promotes a more honest and humble communication of the feelings and values around school reform, rather than such a passive (and, even, 'progressive') resistance to them. This language doesn't come from the 'top-down', or even from the 'bottom-up', but from the 'inside-out'.

This hermeneutic shift can start by creating what Christine called for in honest and open "forums" wherein all stakeholders can willingly participate. Or, this could look something like Palmer's "Circle of Trust" (2009), and/or "centers" that honor an ethic of "care" and a focus on "happiness" as Noddings (2003, 2005) hoped and advocated for. These types of teaching and learning environments, from the capitol to the classroom to the home, should and could happen if there is to be a more holistically-progressive idea of reform, and if the legacy of NCLB is to be holistically mediated for not just progress, but wholeness. And, as the Common Core reform continues to gain momentum (now used or in the early stages of implementation in 46 states), its success or failure from state-to-state, and nationwide, can be better evaluated relative to the legacy of its predecessor in NCLB. With this understanding, based on the perceptions of the stakeholders who thus construct its reality, Common Core itself might better be understood for its potential as a progressively-holistic reform - or, rather, if it is just more of the of the same, making it much less of a 'reform' than what many may think. On the other hand, though, it may be out of our control, at least for now. Like Charlie realized, it may just be the "flavor-of-the-month", and may simply 'run-its-course' in a few years. Until then, however, a patient serenity is needed, and when it comes time, so will dramatic social and cultural

shift. The wisdom that we all share, and that was seen within the sub-text of all of the interviews, no matter what their role or background, will serve us when that time comes, and hopefully maintain us in the meantime. A lot like an alcoholic or addict trying to overcome his or her past in order to rediscover a sober ('sober' meaning, quite literally 'humble' in its denotative form), we can practice the humility and serenity needed to move into the recovery phase of our educational history and lives, and, moreover, recover the spiritual purpose at the core of it.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

One of the major setbacks of any type of holistically-minded reform effort is that 'holism', and Holistic Education in general, is still viewed by many as being 'alternative', as even the title of Noddings' 2005 guide, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*, quite overtly suggests in its use of the word. Again, as this study depends on from a theoretical level, *words do matter*, and one of the words that we need to change is that word 'alternative', especially in reference to Holistic Education. As Ron Miller (1992) also lamented, that while the Holistic movement came from a "vibrant and coherent intellectual movement" within a great diversity of fields from medicine to physics to psychology and education, it has become branded as "New Age", a passive product of the 1960's sub-culture and of a distant and mythological (if not pagan) past (p. 6). After the Enlightenment, and even after the efforts of the Romantics of the mid-19th century, the "perennial wisdom" of Holism was replaced by the positivism of the West, in which we still suffer from today. However, it wasn't without the noble efforts of enlightened scholars such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel and Maslow that the discussion stayed alive - that the souls of children and of learning

were kept ‘alive’ through grassroots reform efforts, and made real by educational pioneers like Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner. Through these philosophies and educational models, a different rhetoric might be found, and moreover, a language that is *actively* aimed at transformation, not just transaction or transmission, employed in and around school reform.

For instance, we might choose to adopt Rousseau’s term, “*amour de soi*” in lieu of ‘excellence’, or ‘21<sup>st</sup> century learning’ or even ‘critical thinking’; *amour de soi* essentially means “love of self”, what Scott Forbes (2003) recognized as the most “natural and necessary part of our constitution”, and exists not in contradiction, but in company of, “*amour de prope*”, which is essentially *amour de soi* in excess without any consideration of the ‘other’. It is hubris, the tragic flaw of more than a handful of tragic heroes throughout the anthology of literature. When Leigh worked so hard to create a sense of pride in her students for the Common Core, and then the district “pulled the rug out from under” them, she felt underappreciated, unneeded, and unsure as to her meaning as an educator. Hadn’t she worked so hard to develop the skills needed to do well on the test, and even convinced the students that they should for the good of the school? So, why weren’t these efforts rewarded by system that created the game? In Leigh’s case, if she were in an environment, and even had the language, to follow through on her “natural passions” (Forbes, 2003) to motivate students, without the techno-bureaucracy of the test that she and her students felt so duped by, then that pride she felt going into the test, and the suffering she felt coming out of it, might have been leveled by a sense of ‘self-love’. What’s more, is that if the test were based on a Rousseauian notion of “competence” and not ‘achievement’ or ‘performance’, then the experience of taking the test itself in could

be the teaching methodology, rather than a dogged “emphasis on representations” wherein the “presentation of knowledge had come to be valued over the acquisition of knowledge” (Forbes, 2003). It may have even been that Leigh and her students were so conditioned to preparing for and taking tests like this, that they simply felt let down when the school district decided to use the test as a pilot, and to not publish the results. In essence, they were used to either passing or failing, and felt an awkwardness, a sense of vertigo, as if the “rug had been pulled out from under” them?

Similar to Rousseau but different in his humanistic approach to human nature, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi another lexicon of holistic language and practices that could help all ‘stakeholding’ groups to (or, rather, as it would be suggested by the Grounded Theory presented in this study, help all ‘congregational’ groups to) humbly ‘live-in-the-paradox’ of public education today These types of settings, and even others of an independent nature outside of public schooling (including independent schools, non-profit educational programs, etc.) must be further studied for the language that they use on a socio-semiotic level, in an effort to determine how their ideological realities both differ from that of public schooling, as well as where they and public schools are, in fact, quite the same. One study, conducted by Scott Forbes and Robin Ann Martin (2004) made an effort to identify what it is that a holistic education could provide in schools that actively use the principles of it. They used discourse analysis methods to look at schools that use these principles (72 public and independent schools across the United States and into Canada). What they found was that while holistic education shows up in many different ways in schools that claim to use them, these schools and their successes have often been “dismissed by the larger field (of educators and educational researchers) as

anecdotal”, and as isolated results of something more “temporal and idiosyncratic”, therefore “weakening the position and reputation” of these schools; consequently, the research in these schools, and the potential learning that could come from that, have been “stymied” (p. 22). Forbes and Martin thus advocated for a “taxonomy” of holistic education to be rigorously studied within empirical research across schools at a state and local level, so that even after over 240 years of holistic educational practice (as seen through Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Montessori, and others), schools that *do* actively use these methods (and this language) in their schools can see each other, learn from each other, and therefore, provide a model for all schools to look towards. Forbes and Martin also pointed out that with little but descriptive literature to identify these commonalities, more empirical research is needed, at the very least so that other schools and local constituencies can learn from what it is that these more holistically-minded schools do, what they say, how they say it, and, more importantly, how they subtly perceive change in their schools.

What’s more, is that even where holistic principles and its related language are being used, and particularly where ideals like ‘community’ are being touted in school missions and vision statements, the question remains whether or not principles like this are actually part of the culture of these schools, and whether or not this language is being perceived in a way that coincides with the administration’s purposes in promoting them. Even our Blue Ribbon Schools of Excellence must be honestly and humbly researched from within, providing real and authentic spaces for reflection and an ethic of care. As Palmer (2009) noted, all educators live in the “tragic gap”, and the willingness and ability for all parties involved to “stand in the tragic gap” would provide the spiritual awareness

needed to transcend it, and to transform the system that creates it. In educational circles and schools (K.I.P.P. schools in particular, following the work of Angela Duckworth at the University of Pennsylvania), this resilience has been coined as ‘grit’, yet like the trends that Dewey witnessed in 1902, this movement may be quickly replaced by another without any real consideration of its value in reform. Why is it that we need a new term for a value that all educators might agree upon? Again, this is why language is important to study, and semiotics may provide the analytical venue that could tell us much more about how our perceptions create our reality, and especially the reality that must be carefully understood before instituting any ‘top-down’ reform.

Another very necessary part of understanding how reform, whether it be NCLB or the Common Core or the ‘grit’ trend, is to really work or nevertheless succeed, is to also understand how students perceive change in their schools. They are the most important of stakeholder groups/members of the school congregation. They are the very vehicles by which any policy, pedagogy or curriculum we create is carried out. If they, of all people, are not feeling a sense of ‘buy-in’, at the very least, then any reform effort is destined to fail. They are too often forgotten in studies like these, likely because it is so complicated and difficult to include them. We must work harder to do this, and trust them in their wisdom. They are not born empty, and they are not simply ‘blank slates’, but rather, as holistic theorist Parker Palmer (2009) attested, here to offer us all their birthrights talents. We have ignored them all too long, even though our reform efforts have claimed that they are all about them. Simply put, perceptions of our youth need to change. We can start by simply listening, and by trusting them as real, authentic beings,



rather than fragile, empty children whose test score defines them. Their voice matters, too.

On a more pragmatic level, the results of this study show that when reform is made, it must be done consciously and carefully. If and when the language, and the implementation, of a reform come from the ‘top-down’, then the chances of that reform are not good. As aforementioned, this needs to be more carefully studied. Similarly, even when there is ‘buy-in’, a reform cannot sustain itself without an accompanying sense of *purpose* not from the ‘top-down’, or even ‘bottom-up’, but from the ‘inside-out’. While major programmatic change in schools takes time to determine its relative efficacy, and while ‘buying-in’ does seem to be the key in those first years of reform, what happens when stakeholders are no longer ‘bought in’? Like a consumer base or an interested stockholding party, ‘buying-in’ can only sustain any organization for a limited time, leading to the inevitable decision to either make another major, systemic, ‘top-down’ change, or to ‘sell-out’. In either case, and in a school, then the school community must be ‘sold’, once again, leading to more-of-the-same without any real, authentic, lasting change. This is when it starts to look like that Sisyphusian trend that Dewey spoke of in this study’s opening quotation. Therefore, in our research on schools, we must also, as Koetting and Combs (2005) called for, consciously return to *philosophy*, even though it may not pragmatically support the anxieties of a ‘high-stakes’ culture based on the promise of accountability, one that expects immediate and measurable results. Philosophy may, in fact, provide for us a new way to perceive our schools, and to see possibilities for change that go beyond what we often assume is a systemic problem. We must investigate what this could look like from the ‘bottom-up’, from the

philosophical core of who we are as stakeholders in education. More research must be done that begins to better understand how different groups philosophically see as their ‘purpose’ in education; fear may certainly rear its ugly head, as it had in many of this study’s interviews, but so might hope, acceptance, joy and love, as this study’s interviews also revealed. These are philosophical matters – in fact, ‘philosophy’ literally means ‘the study of love’. In many ways, the interviews of this study revealed that this was, in many ways, a ‘study of love’. So, while the days of Dewey and Thorndike seem to have passed – days when schools were really being examined on a philosophical level – this willingness to look at the core of schooling must be returned to with openness, willingness, and most of all, humility. This is the level where perception works, and where perception can be quite damaging when it is based on fear and ego. And if we don’t peel the proverbial onion on how and why we think and feel about our schooling, we won’t ever get to the core, and any change (especially that which is experienced as ‘top-down’) will not work. There must be schools out there that value this kind of honesty, risk, and humility. We must identify these schools, look carefully at how they talk and thus perceive their purpose, and then consciously learn from them. They can teach us, as can our inner-selves that simply, as Heidi put it, “knows best”.

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## Appendix A

### Questions for State Legislators:

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1.) How did you first learn about NCLB?
- 2.) Tell me about an experience you have had in incorporating it into your state's educational plan?
- 3.) Finish this sentence: NCLB is like a \_\_\_\_\_. (Start with a practice question/sample, such as: A teacher is like a BRIDGE, BOOK, OWL, BOX OF CHOCOLATES, etc., etc.)

### Probing/Follow-up questions:

- \_\_\_\_\_ -What kinds of documents, websites, or other resources have you used to learn about NCLB?
- How did you feel about it when you first learned about it?
- How do you think it has affected your role as a state legislator?
- How do you think it has affected education in your state and/or constituency?
- How influential do you think it is today on education as it was when it was first enacted?
- What do you think your constituents think or feel about NCLB?

### Questions for Superintendents and Administrators:

- 1.) How did you first learn about NCLB?
- 2.) Tell me about an experience when you put it into action at your school or in your district.
- 3.) Finish this sentence: NCLB is like a \_\_\_\_\_. (Start with a practice question/sample, such as: A teacher is like a BRIDGE, BOOK, OWL, BOX OF CHOCOLATES, etc., etc.)

### Probing/Follow-up questions:

- What kinds of documents, websites, or other resources have you used to learn about NCLB?
- How did you feel about NCLB when you first learned about it?
- How do you think it has affected your school/district?
- What specific policies have you enacted that come from NCLB?
- How do you feel about the role it has played in your school/district?
- How influential do you believe NCLB is today compared to when it was first enacted in 2001?
- What do you think your teachers and staff would say about NCLB?

### Questions for Teachers:

- 1.) Tell me about an experience that you have had with NCLB?
- 2.) How did you first learn about it, and when have you been asked to use it in your teaching?

- 3.) Finish this sentence: NCLB is like a \_\_\_\_\_. (Start with a practice question/sample, such as: A vice-principal is like a BRIDGE, FOX, TRUMPET, BUICK, etc., etc.

Probing/Follow-up questions:

- What kinds of documents, websites, or other resources have you used to learn about NCLB?
- How did you feel about it when you first learned about it?
- How do you think it has affected your teaching or your classroom environment?
- Who do you think NCLB affects the most in your school, and how so?
- How much do you think about NCLB when planning and teaching lessons?
- Who do you believe is most responsible for NCLB in your school?
- How influential do you believe NCLB has been in the culture of your school?
- What do you think your students and their parents would say about NCLB?

Questions for Parents:

- 1.) Tell me about an experience you have had with NCLB?
- 2.) What did you learn about it?
- 3.) Finish this sentence: NCLB is like a \_\_\_\_\_. (Start with a practice question/sample, such as: A school is like a BRIDGE, TREE, OCEAN, MELTING-POT, etc.)

Probing/Follow-up questions:

- What kinds of documents, websites, or other resources have used to learn about NCLB?
- How do you feel it has affected your students' educational experience?
- How educated do you think the other parents in your community are in relation to NCLB?
- What kinds of conversations do you have with other parents about it? With your children?
- What do you think your child would say about it, if asked?

## Appendix B

