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## There are no winners here: Teacher thinking and student underachievement in the 6th grade

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THERE ARE NO WINNERS HERE: TEACHER THINKING  
AND STUDENT UNDERACHIEVEMENT  
IN THE 6<sup>TH</sup> GRADE

A Dissertation  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

Approved:

  
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December 2006

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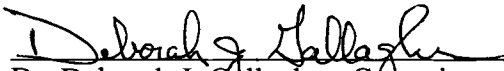
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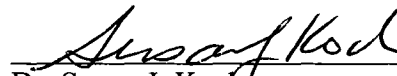
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Approved:

  
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Sue L. Pettit  
University of Northern Iowa  
December 2006

## ABSTRACT

The following ethnographic study was conducted with 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers in a middle school that has been stigmatized by the public as a failing school and cited by the government as a School in Need of Assistance according to the No Child Left Behind Act. The purpose of the study was to examine what teachers believe about persistent underachievement in order to shed light on whether teacher beliefs inform teachers' efforts to ameliorate underachievement. As my study progressed, my research data suggested that teachers use a faulty testing curriculum that guarantees poor student performance and only serves to confirm mistaken assumptions about student ability. In an act of self-preservation, teachers in my study blamed students for poor performance in order to deflect professional blame away from themselves. This blaming game supports a culture of failure that locates both students and teachers in a losing or *no-win* situation.

This work is dedicated to my husband, Rick, and my daughters Sarah and Alyce,  
who have contributed so much to my understanding of God's purpose for my life.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Rosemary Meany, my best friend, for believing in me and supporting me with persistent encouragement, technical and library help, and financial support. Your prayers and belief that I could complete this goal carried me through to the end.

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Mom and Dad, your social consciousness and desire for justice created a sensitivity and restless heart in my soul for those who have no voice. Grandpa, thank you for spending the time to talk to me about integrity and balance in life. Grandma, your passionate compassion for those around you has made a difference in how I perceive the world. I miss all of you so much.

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Dr. Amy Staples, I will never forget how often you have celebrated my differences, my abilities, and the contributions I have made to the teaching program at UNI. You have also demonstrated to me the importance of having fun while you work and the significance that collegial collaboration plays in building strong scholarship. Dr.



Christi Hendrickson, thank you for taking an interest in my field work and the writing process throughout my study, but especially during the bereavement of my father. You gave me hope in a time when I felt physically and emotionally unable to proceed. Dr. Roberta Davilla, you have taught me so much about the importance of kindness and the consideration for others in teaching, learning, and research. You have greatly enlightened my understanding of how to empower and nurture students.

Dr. Leander Brown, you encouraged me to approach themes of race and prejudice in my data, in spite of my self-consciousness and fear of unraveling my own white privilege and personal biases. Dr. Phil Hodkinson, thank you for pointing me towards the writings of Wolcott and Clandinin and Connelly. Those suggestions greatly informed my understanding of field work and the sophisticated culture of teaching.

In closing, Lucy, thank you for your insight and boldness in telling me that I could go to college if I wanted to, and for sending me a keychain (invitation) from Morningside College. Your suggestion that I could have access to higher education and a world outside of my neighborhood, developed into a life-long love of learning and quest for choice.

“Do not forsake wisdom and she will protect you; love her and she will watch over you...though it cost all you have, get understanding” (Proverbs 4: 6-7).

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In the initial proposal for my dissertation study, I set out to examine what 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers at Tressell-Sinclair Middle School (T-Sinclair) believe about underachievement, and how those beliefs (understandings) contribute to poor student performance. Initially it appeared as if my participants were blaming academic underachievement on student and neighborhood socio-cultural differences. However, in a closer examination of my research, I additionally found that the 6<sup>th</sup> grade students were being subjected to a weak standardized test-driven curriculum, and that my participants tacitly work to negotiate and shift the blame for testing failure onto their students in order to protect themselves from professional suspicion. This *blaming game* supports an ideology of failure and places both students and teachers at T-Sinclair in a long-term losing or *no win* situation.

In the following chapter I will first describe T-Sinclair as a study setting, and then explain how I became interested in the topic of teacher beliefs as they intersect with student underachievement.

#### Tressell Sinclair Middle School—A West Side Neighborhood School

T-Sinclair Middle School is located in the community of Hasting and rests in the central part of the country (the proper names used to describe the participants and the setting of my study have been changed and replaced with pseudonyms for the sake of anonymity). Hasting has often been penned as a factory city; a community developed around industry and the production of goods (Riley, 1988). The factory and industry

managerial class have historically lived on the east side of the city. That side of town is home to higher-end homes, most of the communities' retail and consumer services, and the largest number of both public and private schools in Hasting.

Families who are part of the factory work force typically live on the west side of the tracks, in older, smaller homes near their work where the cost of living is less expensive. The *West Side* families are often dependent on a blue-collar lifestyle and the ups and downs of an often fragile, industrial economy. The working poor of Hasting consistently face the threat of unemployment and many have to work more than one minimum wage job to make ends meet.

There are social-economic differences between the east and west sides of Hasting and these disparities also appear to run true in the schools. According to district reports about the school, 85% of the students are eligible for free and reduced meals and other federal assistance, compared to the district average of 55%. While discussing this discrepancy, a T-Sinclair counselor explained to me that T-Sinclair students have the largest number of single parents and parents labeled as economically disadvantaged in the school district. During my study, many of my participants referred to their student population as being "poor or economically needy."

Although there is no proof that this economic disparity is connected to the lack of teaching expertise at T-Sinclair, the average level of teaching experience is only 5.6 years, which is the lowest mean of teacher work experience in all Hasting Schools.<sup>1</sup> In addition, half of the T-Sinclair academic staff has four years or less of teaching

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<sup>1</sup> The average work experience of teachers in the Hastings Schools is 12 years, while the average work experience of teachers in nearby Lake Falls Schools is 13 years.

experience. I was surprised to learn from district administrators that out of 30 teachers at T-Sinclair, all but two were hired after 1997. One of the administrators at the school mentioned to me that it is not unusual to have up to a dozen or so new teachers at T-Sinclair each school year. In 2002, the year before this study, there were 13 new teacher hires at T-Sinclair. I have long wondered how schools in the same community could be so different, and how those differences actually play out in students' lives. It is irregularities like this that have spurred on my questions about teachers, students, and learning at T-Sinclair.

The social-economic demarcation of the Hasting community was strengthened in the early 1900s when African American workers migrated from the South to take jobs with the local coal company. Unfortunately, this mainly Eurocentric community responded to new workers and their families with racial prejudice and the enforcement of restrictive housing covenants. The land around the coal fields was targeted as unattractive and the newcomers were forced to live in this restricted area (Riley, 1988). Economically and ethnically, the west side of the tracks became labeled as the poor and *Black* side of town. (The east and west sides of the tracks make up one incorporated and governed community, but are referred to by residents as distinct and separate locations—the East Side or West Side of the tracks).

Today, housing regulations have disappeared and the city has become more economically and socially integrated; however, the *West Side* and its schools are heavily segregated racially. Sixty percent of the student population at T-Sinclair is African American, while African American's comprise only 18% of the city's entire population.

In addition, the schools located on the west side of the tracks often have fewer resources and are plagued with negative racial and social connotations because of their location (Brantlinger, 2003; Kozol, 1991; Rist, 1973). Like other industrial cities in the nation, Hasting is a community of *haves* and *have-nots*.

The social-geographic demarcations of the East and West Side schools in Hasting remind me of the picture book, “The Sneetches,” by Dr. Seuss (1961). This story is about an elite community of beings called Star-Belly Sneetches who have picnics and parties on beaches because they belong to the Star-Belly clan (a parallel to living on the East Side of Hastings). In the story, plain-belly Sneetches are “never invited” (p.7) to parties and are excluded from spending any social time with the elite Sneetches. According to the author,

The Star-Belly Sneetches  
 Had bellies with stars  
 The Plain-Belly Sneetches  
 Had none upon thars  
 Those stars weren't so big. They were really so small  
 You might think such a thing wouldn't matter at all.  
 But, because they had stars, all the Star-Belly Sneetches  
 Would brag, 'We're the best kind of Sneetch on the beaches.'  
 With their snoots in the air, they would sniff and they'd snort,  
 'We'll have nothing to do with the Plain-Belly sort!'

This story goes on to explain that the Star-Belly Sneetches live a life of glamour and privilege because they have stars on their stomachs, while the Plain-Belly Sneetches are *star-less* and excluded from social privileges. Hasting has a similarly divided social story. Social class determines which Hasting school students will attend. This information brought me to the following questions: What price is paid by students at T-Sinclair for living in a West side neighborhood? How does social status impact learning experience?

### T-Sinclair Middle School—A School in Need of Improvement

Tressell-Sinclair Middle School is bordered by a few small ranch style homes, and the coal yards. It is located on a busy highway and near an intersection that leads to the main West Side industrial park. At 7:30 A.M. each morning, one can hear the laughter and voices of children, intermingled with the resonance of railway cars, morning work traffic, and double-bedded freight trucks.

The school was built in the late 1950s, and its physical structure is modern compared to other schools in the city. Its three-story brick construction is twice as wide as it is tall, and stretches almost a city block in length. One of the most outstanding visual features of the building is the large number of windows wrapped around each floor. While school is in session, lights from individual classrooms ribbon around the building as if to remind the neighborhood that a world of its own lies behind the brick walls of the school. There are three rather stately front entrances less than 100 feet off of the busy state highway, a flagpole, and a contemporary electronic marquee that is designed in the shape of a diamond.

While the school has a long history of being labeled by locals as an underachieving school, for the fourth year in a row it has been formally registered by the government as a School in Need of Assistance (SINA) in accordance with No Child Left Behind Act. Schools placed on this list must demonstrate annual student growth with measured proficiency in math and reading percentages on standardized tests, or expect government disapproval and action. T-Sinclair has already faced two sanctions as a consequence of poor test performance.

The first sanction required the school to make an announcement to the community that it was being watched and put on notice by the government as a result of low standardized test scores. The second sanction required the district to inform T-Sinclair families that their children had the option of transferring to another school in the district—perhaps a school on the East Side where students are more likely to “have stars upon thars” (Seuss, 1961, p. 3). Both of these sanctions placed the teachers and school in a bad light publicly. According to government standards at the time of this study, after three years of being on the SINA list, educators in SINA schools are at-risk of being moved to other schools or fired (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001).

School officials describe T-Sinclair as a “struggling school.” During the time of this study, 422 students attended T-Sinclair. Thirty percent of the students were scoring in the bottom 10<sup>th</sup> percentile rank of the state standardized reading measure. Eighty percent of the students were scoring approximately two grade levels behind on a district reading comprehension measure. Additionally, 104 students, or one out of every four students were in special education. Sixty-three percent of the students in special education were African Americans. These are very distressing statistics considering the research that shows students who enter high school below grade level are at a higher risk of failing and dropping out of school (Fine, 1991; Kozol, 1991; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996; Oakes, 1985).

In 2003, the governor of the state noted academic problems at T-Sinclair and appointed an African American task force to study the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students in the community. The task force came up with a 16-point plan



that focused on parental involvement, teacher training in cultural competency, and after school programming (initiatives that were not fully implemented at the time of this study). The local newspaper quoted the governor as stating, “In our state there are still too many youngsters who don’t get quality education simply because where they live happens to be a minority neighborhood.” This statement made it clear that the governor and his educational officers believe that there is inequality of educational opportunity in the T-Sinclair neighborhood and school.

It is important to note the historical symbolism behind the diamond-shaped marquee in front of the school. While reading through school records pertaining to long-term teaching goals and objectives, I found that in the fall of 2001, staff members had selected the symbol as a motivational theme. The school literature described the students as diamonds in the rough that had been marred by negative life experience and garbage thinking. The educators suggested that their students were a little rough around the edges and needed to let go of their present way of thinking in order to succeed.

While I generated ideas for my research proposal and study, I thought about the governor’s statement, about the social disparity in my community, about the job the T-Sinclair teachers had in front of them, and about the students with *garbage thinking*. What is teaching and learning like at T-Sinclair? How do teachers come to believe that students are covered with dirt and garbage thinking? Are T-Sinclair students stigmatized like the Plain-Belly Sneetches in the Seuss (1961) book?

### My Interest in Underachievement at T-Sinclair

I am familiar with underachievement at T-Sinclair on several levels.<sup>2</sup> I attended the school when I was in junior high in the mid-sixties and lived in the T-Sinclair neighborhood for a majority of my life. I also developed relationships with the T-Sinclair staff while I taught at another Hasting middle school for close to twenty years. Long before I read about inequality in schools located in poor neighborhoods, as a young woman and student, I recognized that T-Sinclair was reputed as an underachieving and tough school (Kozol, 1991, 2005). This knowledge has been confirmed to me many times in informal and formal conversations in the community. One ongoing example of this prejudice is the frequent instances that I have been approached about which schools I attended.<sup>3</sup> “Did you go to school on the West Side?” (This question is often directed to me in a suspicious and condescending air and has also been phrased with the words “bad side or Black side of town.”)

Most recently, I was asked this question by a professor of education at one of the universities in my state. When I answered that I had attended T-Sinclair and West High School, the professor looked down at the floor, patted my shoulder in support, and then quipped, “Well (pause), you can’t help what kind of education you’ve received!” This statement made me feel *plain-bellied* and I wondered if I had the “*star*” and ability needed to succeed in my educational goals. As a young student and as an adult, I have

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<sup>2</sup> As far as district officials and the public are concerned, “underachievement” at T-Sinclair is analogous to low performance on state mandated achievement tests.

<sup>3</sup> The prejudice I am describing here can be equated to “an air of superiority and ideology that West side schools are inferior because of the presence of poor and minority students”.

long wondered about educational inequities and why T-Sinclair is characterized as a struggling school.

I began to take a formal interest in the topic of academic underachievement at T-Sinclair about eight years ago when Hasting school officials planned an after school workshop for all district middle school teachers on the topic of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. It was the first time in several years in my school district that all local middle school teachers were given an opportunity to talk to each other about their profession and their students. I had been a middle school educator in the district for several years, and I, along with other teachers in the school district, was eager to become more familiar with the learning culture (student abilities and behaviors) and atmosphere in each other's schools. In addition, my own social history and gossip about the school made me curious.

The administrator in charge of the 504 Meeting gave us information about our legal responsibilities for protecting the learning rights of students—those that needed added accommodations but were not eligible for special education. The teachers in attendance were then asked to get into small groups to discuss some of the accommodations that they were currently making in their instruction to meet the needs of their low achieving students. It became apparent through the comments of T-Sinclair teachers that they were making more student accommodations (modifications) than the rest of us, and that T-Sinclair had many more students with 504 Plans. Additionally, these frustrated T-Sinclair teachers complained that there were so many “needy and at-risk” students at their school that they could not begin to meet their vast social and academic

needs. One teacher said wearily, “We have tried all this stuff (that which was being suggested at the 504 meeting) and we have worked and worked and worked to get our students where they need to be.” The students in this school were being represented as Plain-Belly Sneetches (Seuss, 1961), indeed.

I will never forget the degree of desperation in the T-Sinclair teachers’ voices as they shared horror stories of students who could not read or did not attend school. They placed the blame for student underachievement onto the students themselves, which confirmed what I had already experienced and heard as gossip in the community—T-Sinclair is a tough school and the neighborhood students come to school unprepared for learning and prone to underachievement.<sup>4</sup> I started to think more deeply about what was happening in the school and the impact teacher beliefs have on school culture (values, traditions, and the overall pedagogical atmosphere). What was it about the neighborhood students that made learning so difficult at this school? Most importantly, how different were the learning experiences at T-Sinclair?

#### Teacher Beliefs About Underachieving Students

As I read the literature on socially and ethnically segregated schools, I found that the students who attend these schools are more likely to be at risk for school failure because of where they live (Brantlinger, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Rist, 1973). Jonathan Kozol (2005), in a national study of over 60 schools and 30 school districts, found that schools in America have become deeply re-segregated and that the students who attend these schools are at high risk of academic failure and have very little hope of

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<sup>4</sup> For the sake of this study, “blaming students” means holding the students totally responsible for their own underachievement and academic shortcomings.

financial security. T-Sinclair is not as racially segregated as the schools that Kozol found in large urban districts; however, the students who attend T-Sinclair are socially and ethnically segregated and according to test data, performing less well than their East Side counterparts.

The students Kozol interviewed during his study testified to the fact that they feel isolated from mainstream America and equal academic opportunity. A 16 year-old student named Isabel, whom Kozol (2005) interviewed in the Bronx, explained that she felt that students in her segregated school were placed there in an effort to forget that they existed. She said, "It's like we're being hidden...as if you have been put in a garage where, if they don't have room for something but aren't sure if they should throw it out, they put it here where they don't need to think of it again" (p.28). It is obvious from this statement that Isabel felt set aside, and that her future in education is grim.

Ray Rist (1973) ascertained in his study titled, "The Urban School: A Factory of Failure," found that a high proportion of schools in poor neighborhoods are failing schools (low performing). Students who attend these schools fail because they are often socially segregated by neighborhood first, and then by leveling hierarchies within the school. They are stigmatized by myths associated with poverty and are then placed in low-ability groups where they never escape the stigma of the placement. In similar studies, Oakes (1985) and Fine (1991) found that students labeled as low in ability are more prone to unhappiness in school, behavior problems, and are likely to drop out. In Brantlinger's (1994) study of student perspectives about social class in school she explains that, school is not a socially neutral setting. Low grades, tracking, special

education placements, and humiliating interactions with teachers make school a source of stress for low-income participants. Conversely, for high-income adolescents, school is not always a privileging experience. Rist suggests that teachers inherently create winners and losers in the classroom as a result of tacit but formidable attitudes towards their non-elite students.

Delpit (1995) explains that teachers judge students (their values and their families) through the teacher's cultural mind's eye. She describes it this way,

They [middle class teachers] do not wish to damage children; indeed, they likely see themselves as wanting to help. Yet they are totally unable to perceive those different from themselves except through their own culturally clouded vision.... We all carry worlds in our heads, and those worlds are decidedly different (p.8).

Since teachers are often only tacitly aware of their own biases, Delpit has found that codes of power exist in classrooms that better serve students representing the culture of the teacher (often middle class). For example, teachers may look more fondly on and ascribe more academic acumen to students who speak and dress as they do. As a result, students who are culturally unlike their teacher are often stigmatized and punished because the teacher measures students by how closely they enact her values and behaviors. Rist (1973) states, "Schools reward some students in such a manner that these students are able to reap the benefits of American society while simultaneously punishing others in such a way that they find themselves unable to partake of the American feast" (p.3). As a result, these children are victims of an unfair and poor quality education. What is the reason for persistent underachievement at T-Sinclair, and what do the teachers at the school think about their students?

### Overview of the Study

For several years, T-Sinclair has been characterized as a failing school. Most recently, the federal government and the Governor have listed the school as a School in Need of Improvement. I propose that the research of Brantlinger (1994, 2003, 2004), Delpit (1995), Kozol (1991, 2005), Oakes (1985), Rist (1973), and others may offer some insight into the current problem of persistent underachievement at T-Sinclair. In the following study, I will examine the question, “What do teacher’s believe about underachievement at T-Sinclair?” in an effort to shed light on how T-Sinclair students have become understood as underachievers, victims of injustice, and *diamonds covered with dirt and garbage thinking*.

In Chapter 2, I will discuss my study methodology. In Chapter 3 and 4, I will show that teachers believe that their students are prone to underachievement and lacking the skills to successfully perform at grade level. In Chapter 5, I will describe the weak and erroneous test-driven curriculum and illustrate how persistent testing and low-test scores only serve to confirm the misguided assertion that students are low in ability. In Chapter 6, I will explain the blaming ideology and two practices that teachers engage in to deflect blame for underachievement away from themselves—blaming that leads to student bribing and exclusion.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

My objective for this study was to gather data that would shed light on what teachers think about underachieving students and to examine whether their beliefs about their students similarly intersect with the critical literature about failing schools, such as the studies done by Kozol (1991, 2005) and Rist (1973). In order to choose which methodology I should use to accomplish this goal, I had to decide how to most effectively capture the essence of what teachers think and believe in their practice.

#### Selecting and Using an Ethnographic Methodology

From the very beginning of my study, I found the idea of examining teacher beliefs somewhat elusive considering the fact that human thought is largely indefinable and dependent on context and time. However, I found help in reading literature associated with using teacher narratives for qualitative research (Carter, 1993; Fine, 1991; Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). Clandinin and Connelly (1996) explained that researchers can closely examine what teachers believe about their work (students) through examining their narrative-stories and by noting where those stories are told. As a result, I decided to select a methodology for my study that centered on collecting participant stories and the contextual data that support those stories—ethnography (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Eisner, 1998; Gallagher, 1995; Glesne, 1999; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Macmillan & Schumacher, 2001; Thomas, 1993; Wolcott, 1999).



In an ethnographic study, the researcher enters the selected field of study for prolonged periods of time to observe and understand things from the participant's cultural point of view (Glesne, 1999, Wolcott, 1999). I visited the classrooms of my participants on a weekly basis from February of 2004 until February of 2005. I was able to observe and informally speak to my participants two or three days a week, with up to four hours of research and interaction per visit.

According to Wolcott (1999), the ethnographer seeks data collection and analysis methods that "offer a thoughtful way to approach the question, 'What is going on here?'" (p.279). I collected data from my participants through open-ended interviews, informal observations, and the collection of classroom artifacts. I also used descriptive note taking and reflection with an ongoing analysis of the data. In sync with Eisner's suggestions on how to approach qualitative research in schools, I studied my data intently in order to "see, rather than look" (p.1). I attempted to look beyond the surface of every day school experience. As Wolcott suggests, I sought to find out "what was going on" that normally escapes the attention of those in the school.

At the beginning of my data collection I was overwhelmed by the number of ideas my participants addressed pertaining to underachievement. As my study evolved, I decided to note *specifically* and analyze data that intersected with decisions concerning current NCLB curriculum reform at T-Sinclair. At the time of the study, the new curriculum reform was almost complete in reading and had just started in math. As a result, a majority of my analysis particularly relates to reading reform and the impact of this reform on the teachers and their students.

Because of the immense reform efforts at the school, my participants found it difficult to schedule time for research interviews. In order to maintain my good rapport with the teachers, I had to be flexible in obtaining them. I was able to conduct 30 interviews during my study with the number of interviews conducted with each participant varying (I interviewed most of my participants three or five times).

Each interview took place during teacher planning time, before or after school, or during teacher-parent conferences. Occasionally, students, staff, or family members interrupted the sessions. In a few instances, the teachers asked me to turn off the tape recorder to give me information off of the record. When this happened, I listened to their comment and if the information was not public, I did not add the information to my data. As a whole, the teachers appeared to relax and enjoy the interviews, even though the sessions infringed on their professional or personal time. All interviews were conducted in a space selected by the teacher and were generally located in the teachers' classrooms.

I began each interview by giving the teacher a topic or small list of pre-written questions to talk about as they wished. The questions were developed from ideas that I constructed after analyzing data from previous experiences in the school and from my reading of the literature on urban schools. Before each session started, I reminded my participants that they could feel free to deviate from my questions at any time in order to clarify what they know about underachievement at the school. All in all, my interview sessions offered the teachers an opportunity to speak what was on their mind about underachievement. Eisner (1998) states,

It is surprising how much people are willing to say to those whom they believe are really willing to listen. The aim is for the interviewer to put the person at ease,

to have some sense of what he or she wants to know, but not to be either rigid or mechanical in method (p.183).

I let the teachers know that they were knowledgeable and that they had much to share on the subject of student performance.

Part of making sense out of underachievement at T-Sinclair was collecting artifacts. During teacher observations and interviews, I collected documents and samples of curriculum that the teachers would use or tell me about. This involved specific instructional worksheets, or in the cases of Ms Dean (the reading teacher) and Ms Key (the reading specialist), graphs and reports depicting current test results. During data collection and analysis, I also collected public brochures sent out by the Hasting School System, community newspaper clippings having to do with T-Sinclair, and information from the T-Sinclair or other relevant websites. I also collected historic and demographic data from the Hasting community. These documents were very helpful in helping me to understand and depict the professional landscape of T-Sinclair.

After spending about a year and a half in the field, I started the writing of this ethnography. In retrospect, my inexperience as a field worker and the complexities of this topic overwhelmed me. During the writing of this dissertation, I have realized that there are some things I could have done differently to improve on my study; however, I am confident that my findings have clarified some of “what was going on” in the school at that time. The process and findings have personally inspired me to invest in future study in other schools on this same topic.

### The Study Setting

I started the pilot work for my study during the fall of 2003.<sup>5</sup> At that time, the administrative leadership at T-Sinclair was two principals who managed the school in a co-leadership management style. I explained my research interest and methodology to the co-principals and the associate superintendent of the Hasting School District (district and Human Participants Review Committee protocol), and they invited me to begin my pilot. I received formal permission from my dissertation committee and the school superintendent in August of 2004. As an additional requirement, the University of Northern Iowa Human Participants Review Committee reviewed my study design and gave me permission to conduct my study as described (Human Participants Application V061202, 2004).

When I approached the co-principals at T-Sinclair about my research interest, they informed me that the 6<sup>th</sup> grade team of teachers was highly collaborative and organized their work and students in such a way that I should have multiple opportunities to listen to teacher conversations about student underachievement and instructional problem-solving. During this meeting it was implied that the 6<sup>th</sup> grade team is highly successful in meeting individual student needs and that a study involving them would render many opportunities to observe teachers acting for the good of students. I considered the principals' suggestions and decided to move forward in using 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers as my study participants.

T-Sinclair Middle School is structured around the middle school delivery model.

This model was presented to the staff in the form of professional development in 1995

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<sup>5</sup> By the time of my formal study, I had visited T-Sinclair multiple times because of collegial work within the district, graduate work assignments, and professional and personal relationships.

and provides student-centered instruction that takes the unique and specific developmental needs of middle school students into consideration (physical, social, emotional, and intellectual).

Average class size at T-Sinclair varies according to teacher allocation as dictated by the school board and administrative policy. In the community of Hasting, the average class size in middle school has been set at 24.4 students per class. The 6<sup>th</sup> grade team at T-Sinclair consists of 130 students shared by six general education teachers, three special education teachers, and an expanded learning teacher. The general education classes typically hold 20 to 25 students per class period, and the special education classroom I observed holds about 10 students per class period. Yet, several of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers repeatedly made note of the fact that their class sizes often went over 30 students. I never witnessed 30 or more students in a class during my study.

It is significant to note that all students attend two classes every day outside of their team schedule. Most of the classes are required but band, choir, and orchestra are taken by choice. The required curriculum includes a quarter each of art, physical education, guidance and character education, computer technology, industrial technology, and family and consumer services. In order to manage such a variety of schedules, students are also assigned to a varied amount of *enrichment* or study halls. Enrichment gives students an opportunity to receive extra academic help. While the 6<sup>th</sup> grade students are in exploratory and enrichment classes, teachers are released for planning and team meetings. The teachers and students at T-Sinclair are organized and scheduled into grade

level teams (sometimes referred to as school families), which appear to be a healthy place for students to learn.

### The Study Participants

I will briefly introduce the 6<sup>th</sup> grade staff members who accepted the invitation to participate in my study:

#### Ms. Phillips (Special Education)

Ms Phillips is one of four 6<sup>th</sup> grade special education teachers at T-Sinclair. She is caucasian and in her mid-thirties, a mother of twin boys, and drives to school each day from the neighboring city of Lake Falls. Although she has worked at T-Sinclair for four years, she was quick to clarify that prior to working as a special education teacher at T-Sinclair, she worked briefly as a special education consultant. She did not like consulting because she wanted to work directly with students. She currently has 10 students assigned to her roster who spend at least two or more periods a day in regular education classrooms.

#### Ms Thorndike (Science)

Ms. Thorndike teaches science at T-Sinclair. She has been at T-Sinclair longer than any other teacher in the building and has taught in the Hasting Schools for 31 years. She is caucasian female in her mid-fifties who has lived across the street from the school for almost 30 years. She is married to an African American man who teaches physical education at T-Sinclair. She and her husband have two adult sons who at one time attended T-Sinclair.

She became interested in teaching as a college student because she did not like things that had happened to her as an elementary student. For example, when she was in kindergarten, she and two other male students were misbehaving on the school steps. She was the only student out of the three who was punished. She blames her punishment on the fact that she was a girl. She said, "I remember thinking, why did I have to come sit over here, while they (the two boys) got to go back to their seats?" She let me know that that was her first lesson in "gender inequity." Ever since her decision to become a teacher, she has been very conscious of fair and equal treatment. She added, "I also thought I could make learning exciting so that kids would want to learn." She considers herself an advocate for all T-Sinclair students.

Ms. Craig (Social Studies)

Ms. Craig is caucasian and in her early twenties. She graduated from the university in the neighboring city of Lake Falls in 2003. Her husband is currently going to the same university and is also going to be a teacher. She had only been at T-Sinclair for four months when this study began and the "transition teacher" on the 6<sup>th</sup> grade team. The transition teacher teaches all the academic subjects except for science, in order to reduce class sizes for other teachers on the team. Period one through five, Ms. Craig teaches reading, language arts, math, and two social studies classes. Like the other teachers, she spends period 6 and 7 planning and supporting students in an enrichment class.

She quickly admitted to me, as if she was ashamed of her lack of teaching experience, that the year of our interview was only her second year of teaching. She had

worked one year in a parochial elementary school nearby and she seriously added, “That didn’t work out well because I wasn’t Catholic (pause).” She quickly announced in a giddy voice, “I got this job two days before the school year started! She also explained that she had grown up in Hasting and had attended an East Side School.

Ms. Dean (Reading)

Ms. Dean is caucasian and lives in Lake Falls with her husband and four children. She is a busy mom, often speaking of her family and recent adventures at home. She is dedicated to serving her team and the students at T-Sinclair. She told me that she loves people and she believes that teachers are *born*. She explained,

I like people, I think it’s just the essence of who I am. I think there are just natural teachers out there. It’s just in you and whether you end up in the teaching field or not, you are just a natural teacher.

Ms. Dean teaches reading all periods of the day, which is important to note because reading is the current focus of school reform due to government testing mandates associated with the No Child Left Behind legislation. During my observations of the teachers meeting together, conversations about underachievement centered mainly on low performance in reading. Ms Dean feels the pressure of her subject matter, “I like T-Sinclair but it has been a very stressful year. I’m the one who is responsible for student reading levels. When they look at test scores, they are going to be looking at me, the reading teacher.”

Ms. Samson (Math)

Ms. Samson is caucasian and in her mid-thirties. She has taught at T-Sinclair for seven years and told me that as a young girl, she always insisted on *being* the teacher.



She explains, "I mean in the summer times, I would get old books from the middle school...they would sell them and I would buy those and use them so I could have a little school and teach."

The math curriculum at T-Sinclair will soon become more focused on current reform efforts to raise test scores. She has her master's degree in math and loves teaching her subject material. "I like doing math every day. That's all I have to do is math because I know math and I don't have to [plan]...I have so many other stresses." Ms. Samson often takes leadership for math initiatives in the building and I observed her taking care of many team responsibilities that involved data and data analysis.

Mr. Roman (Social Studies) and Ms. Kent (Math)

I will introduce the next two teachers together because Ms. Kent replaced Mr. Roman towards the end of my study experience at T-Sinclair.

Mr. Roman is a caucasian male in his early fifties who went into teaching later in his working career. Although he was only a third year teacher at the time of this study, he and his wife (the Hasting School's Secondary Curriculum Administrator) had spent several years in schools around the world. Most recently and before he came to T-Sinclair, he had taught 2nd grade in the neighboring city of Lake Falls. He shared that he came to T-Sinclair because he wants to teach where there is more diversity in the school.

Mr. Roman teaches social studies all academic periods. He expressed admiration for his teaching team. He explained, "I really like the people that are on the team. They are really interactive with the students and want to improve the students as a whole." When asking him about the frequent staff changes, he stated that the newer teachers

coming into T-Sinclair bring a fresh and energetic spirit to the school and team. “Each new teacher brings new and exciting things. You learn from that, and then you pick up and you share.”

Ms. Kent (Math)

Ms. Kent is an African American female in her early twenties. She is currently the only African American *female* regular education teacher at T-Sinclair. She is unique from my other participants in the fact that she has lived and attended school on the West side of Hasting. She grew up in the T-Sinclair neighborhood but her school experience was different than one might expect for a West side student. Her parents enrolled her in a parochial school.

Ms. Keys (Reading Specialist)

Before completing my introductions, it is important to note that the reading specialist in the school is Ms. Keys. Although she is not a regular member of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade teaching team, she monitors the reading scores of the team and makes many observations about student underachievement in the sixth grade and about the school as a whole.

Ms. Keys is a caucasian female in her late forties. She left the business world to come into teaching. She has a professional reading endorsement and was asked to be a specialist in 2001. Reading specialists in Hasting are teachers that have additional graduate hours in reading and have been given informal administrative status in order to direct school reading programs.

## CHAPTER 3

### TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT THE NEIGHBORHOOD

In my initial proposal for my dissertation study, I set out to examine what 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers believe about underachievement at T-Sinclair and to clarify whether those beliefs contribute in any way to poor student performance. My initial interview data suggested that my participants blamed academic underachievement at the school on student and neighborhood socio-cultural differences.

As I noted in my first chapter, I sensed strong and definite social boundaries in the community. As a result, I realized the importance of showing what my participants believe about social and ethnic demarcations in the school and neighborhood. However, as the study progressed, I found these attitudes difficult to unravel because of my own connection to the West side, my *White-middle classness*, and my inexperience as a researcher. I believe that segregation in the city and ideas about T-Sinclair as a tough school are due to civil rights issues and that racial fears in the community contribute to the negative stigma of the school as it relates to school failure. This suspicion deserves more attention than I was able to produce in this study. I think that the readers of this chapter will, however, get a sense that being African American in Hasting makes a difference in where you live and how you learn in this community.

#### T-Sinclair is a Different World

Ms. Dean explained to me that the students at T-Sinclair are “different” than other Hasting Middle School students because the T-Sinclair neighborhood is a very different

world from the world that she and the other teachers live in and travel from each day. She described her discovery of the T-Sinclair neighborhood-world to me in this manner,

I have come to realize that it's easy to get trapped in our own lives. And I'm starting to realize myself that I have a very small world that I live in. And that coming *over here* to T-Sinclair has really opened my eyes. And even in the community of Hasting and my community of Lake Falls, there are two different worlds.

Ms. Dean made the observation that there is a huge disparity between the working class neighborhood where T-Sinclair is located and the nearby, more middle class community of Lake Falls where she lives. She believes that the T-Sinclair world is a bigger world than her own world, and that her small, perhaps safer world is very different than the school world where she works with T-Sinclair students.

In order to compare her world to the T-Sinclair world, she used the nearby T-Sinclair neighborhood grocery store as an example. She described the differences this way,

You walk into the grocery store in Lake Falls and then you walk into the T-Sinclair neighborhood grocery store. And I'm sorry, it's two different worlds. And by that I mean, even the physical appearance of the store<sup>6</sup>. And then the prices, and the type of customers; the way they are clothed. And the way that the products are paid for [referring to the use of food stamps]. The diversity of skin that works maybe at T-Sinclair compared to the diversity that works at, over at Lake Falls. It's just two different worlds, two very different worlds.

Ms. Dean can clearly see the distinction between her middle class neighborhood store and the working class, "diverse" neighborhood store near the school. She suggests that she is

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<sup>6</sup> The store in the T-Sinclair neighborhood is over forty years old and considered out of date, not clean, and poorly stocked by many. My husband and I have lived three blocks from the store for twenty-three years and residents in our neighborhood have often complained that they have to leave the neighborhood to find the grocery items that they want. This store is also often been labeled by caucasians inside the neighborhood as the "Black" grocery store in town because the store management stocks the store with ethnic foods.

sorry for bringing the differences up, but gingerly states that the T-Sinclair neighborhood store is inferior to her grocery store—the physical appearance of the store, prices, customers and the way they are clothed, and the way the manner in which they are purchased. These worlds are stark in their contrast to each other, and this other, very “different world” is where her students live and come from. As I suggested in Chapter 1 and now demonstrate by sharing teacher stories, the T-Sinclair neighborhood is a dissimilar world compared to bordering communities, and the students who attend the school are considered by their teachers to be different too.

Ms. Dean emphasizes the gap of the two worlds by explaining how her daughter feels about coming over into the T-Sinclair school world from her own world. She explains,

And I brought my daughter here to school while I worked. And even from Lake Falls Middle School to here. That’s only 10 miles apart. It was a way different world for her. And she liked it but there was a lot of diversity here compared to what she would receive at her own school, even though her middle school has more diversity than some in the Lake Falls community. And my children don’t understand. I don’t understand the differences. I just think we get sucked into our own world and that we would be more compassionate, more different, more educated, more understanding people if we would be exposed to more things.

Ms. Dean adds weight to her observation by explaining that her daughter, who attends a Lake Falls school, has even noticed the contrast and is confused by how the two worlds could be so close geographically, yet so culturally and socially different. She comments, “My children don’t understand” and “I don’t understand the differences.” This suggests that Ms. Dean is teaching in a difficult to understand world—one that is “diverse” in her way of thinking. She also emphasizes, that those in her world should become more compassionate towards the different world.

### The Different Parent World

Part of the reason that the T-Sinclair world is considered different from my participants' worlds is because of how parents of the T-Sinclair students are perceived by school staff. All of my participants made it evident during the study that they believed that the T-Sinclair parents are a major reason that students are not achieving. It was their overall consensus that the parents are not capable of helping their children to succeed in school because they do not have time to help, or value their children's education.

In her book, *Learning While Black: Creating Educational Excellence for African American Children*, Janice Hale (2001) describes the difficulty she has had as a Black parent in trying to support her son in school. She suggests that many educational officials do not value or support the input of Black or other minority parents. She proposes that researchers and schools need to develop a model for helping parents navigate school policies and language so that they can be informed advocates for their children and the schools.

### Giving Students Help at Home

Ms. Samson, the 6<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher believes that her students do not thrive in math because parents are not doing their parental job and helping students at home. She said,

I think that many of our students go home at night and don't study and it's the *parent* that is working or the *parent* that is so busy that they can't get to helping their children. They don't sit with them and see to it that they learn them [the basic facts]...not as much as maybe another school. A lot of our kids are in single-family homes where they don't have someone to say, "let's go say your flash cards."

I think the fact is that a lot of them are single-parent families and they are working. They are not on their children as much. They say, "You need to get out

of my hair. I've had a hard day at work. Get out and play!" Where it's not as much of get started with your homework. "Get going!"

Ms. Samson believes that her students are prone to underachievement because their parents do not have the time for responsible parenting. They are either working in the evenings or tired from working and unable to attend to the needs of their children. According to her, single parents are more likely to neglect this parenting responsibility.

Ms. Phillips, the special education teacher, believes that academic success for her students is dependent on home "support systems" and that her students do not have that support. As she expressed it,

Being able to succeed is dependent on your support system out of school. And a lot of our kids don't have those support systems. They don't have. You know, parents might be working second shift. Maybe parents don't read any better than their child does. There might be lots of siblings and other issues going on that they just don't have the time it takes, you know? Where the parents at another school have a different philosophy in education.

She blames student underachievement on the lack of parent support and cites parent work schedules and poor values towards education as the problem. She also believes that the parents of her students are not capable of helping their children. Principally, she feels that parent support is missing in her students' homes and without parent support, her students are prone to underachievement and will continue to fail in their schoolwork.

Similarly, Ms. Thorndike believes that T-Sinclair parents neglect to help their children with homework, but she emphasizes that the T-Sinclair parents are loving and attentive parents. She describes parents this way,

Our parents are no less loving and supportive than any other parent in this city! I'll put them on the block with parents from all the other schools. What they don't have is *time*. They are busy making a living. Sometimes it is a single parent, sometimes a mom working late at night. She is there for her kids when she can be.

Sometimes it is a dad. I've seen more dads now with kids by themselves lately. And as a result, the students are left on their own to learn things sooner which doesn't mean they learn it well. So they are looked upon as maybe not being concerned. I think that is very wrong. I keep hearing that T-Sinclair parents are not involved. They are involved, but they are involved in a way that they are comfortable—that may mean buying clothes, that may mean something else, and that may not mean school.

Ms. Thorndike, who lives in the T-Sinclair neighborhood, knows that her students are not getting homework help from their parents. However, she believes that the parents should not be blamed for student failure because they are doing what is “comfortable for them in their situation.”

These study participants blame student underachievement on the lack of parental involvement and homework. Ms. Samson is not from the T-Sinclair neighborhood and suggests that the lack of help at students' homes is a sign of neglect and a result of single parenting. Ms. Philips is not from the neighborhood and suggests that some of the T-Sinclair parents do not even have the aptitude to help their children with homework. Ms. Thorndike, on the other hand, has lived in the neighborhood for more than 30 years and has frequent contact with the parents outside of the school day. She suggests that the T-Sinclair parents are attentive to their children, but are scarce on time to help them with their studies because of work responsibilities. Without parental help, these teachers suppose that little can be done to recover student achievement. My participants suggest that students will continue to fail and their parents are partially to blame.

#### T-Sinclair Parents Do Not Enrich Their Children's Academic Lives

Mr. Roman believes that his students have difficulty in school because their parents do not value education or know how to enrich their children's academic lives. In



fact, he doesn't have much faith in the T-Sinclair parents. He says, "And these students struggle in school because they don't have that person at home that they can go to and ask for help with their homework." He role-played as he explained, "Mom, can you give me a hand?" Switching roles he answered, "Well, Mom isn't there and if their grandparent is raising them, it's been 50 years since they've been to school and school has changed a lot!" He paused and then said with sadness in his voice, "And then all of a sudden, whom do they go to? You know?" Mr. Roman believes that his students are out of luck as far as getting academic support at home.

He also told me that his students lose so much of what they have learned during the school year, that he hopes the district will eventually consider making T-Sinclair a year-round school. He explained that his students are different than students from other schools because their home lives are non-supportive. He stated,

I think we need a year round school because the students who are in this immediate neighborhood, the ones that we service, do not need the down time that summer provides. Because the students that we service in this neighborhood, do not get the experiences away from school that the students in other schools get. Like the families in other schools will go on big vacations and go away and while they are gone they will be picking up information that our students do not get. We have a large number of single parent families or students that are being raised by their grand parent, or they have a mom or dad in prison. Their parent is rarely involved in school activities and they aren't taking their child to the library either. I mean, even to just go to the library, that isn't a part of their family make-up. They don't have the generational background and knowledge that "*this* is what we do in our off time." They watch TV and play video games and there's not that reading going on and there's not that continually building of just things that they need to know.

Mr. Roman believes that his students live in home environments that are oppositional to continued learning. He stereotypes the T-Sinclair families by grouping them under the label "they" and by charging that they have poor educational values. He claims that they

do not take “big” vacations and that their children do not “get the information that other students get” on their big vacations. He assumes that “big vacation” experiences are a building block for 6<sup>th</sup> grade learning. He ends his criticism by charging that the T-Sinclair families spend all of their recreational time in front of the TV.

Ms. Dean similarly aligns with Roman’s view and explains that the parents of T-Sinclair students are in a “different” world.

I think that if education is not a value in the home, then it’s not something that is going to be passed along to the child. I think that this is the world [a world that does not value education] that these parents live in. And I think for some people it is hard to get outside this world. And a lot of kids we have at T-Sinclair are single-parent families or families that work at more than one job. They value education but yet, they don’t always see the value *in education*. They get stuck in their own world and they don’t see the big picture. I think our parents think education is important, but sometimes I just don’t think they realize, oh, my goodness, “if your child really applies themselves, they could get scholarships.” And I wonder if their parents see life that way because of some of their inability to be exposed to a lot of the different worlds. And I’m not saying that I’m worldly by any means, but I see so much more. And I just wonder if these parents see that.

Ms. Dean comments that the T-Sinclair families lack educational vision for their children. She says that they are in a world that is different from the school world and that it is hard for T-Sinclair parents to see out of their small world into the world of higher education and upward mobility. She also portrays this world as something hard to escape or leave. The literature agrees, it is difficult to escape the bonds of social and economic stratification and injustice (Fine, 1991; Rist, 1973).

#### T-Sinclair: A Diverse World

Ms. Thorndike is the only 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher that lives in the T-Sinclair neighborhood. Because she grew up on the West Side and married an African American, one of only two Black male teachers at T-Sinclair, she seems to be more comfortable and

willing to speak to me about issues relating to ethnicity and the school. She describes her knowledge of the school and neighborhood this way,

First of all, my sons have gone through here. We chose to live in this area of town—right across the street from T-Sinclair Middle School, which also has to do with the fact that my husband is African American and is also a teacher here at T-Sinclair. When we first met, we were in Lake Falls and we often talked about the feeling we would get there because we were a mixed couple and when we were out in public, people would stare at us. I don't think it is quite that way anymore but I've made myself *comfortable* where we are and that's in a more diverse part of Hasting. And we want our sons to go to school and meet people that are more like them.

Ms. Thorndike describes the T-Sinclair neighborhood as distinct from the Lake Falls community. She suggests that it is a more “diverse” world and an African American neighborhood-world. It is a more comfortable, safer place for her and her family to be, even if bi-racial couples are not as unique in the community as they once were—“it is not quite that way anymore.” This would suggest to me that some families who send their children to T-Sinclair might be working to shield their children from prejudice in the community.

She and my other study participants often associated the term “diverse” as a label to indicate the presence of African Americans in the neighborhood and school. Ms. Thorndike and her husband have chosen to live in the T-Sinclair neighborhood because her husband is African American, and because she wanted her sons to attend school with other African American children. As noted in Seuss's (1961) book, the Sneetches without stars were forced to stay with their own belly-types. Ms. Thorndike felt it was significant to let me know that her husband taught her sons that they were *Black* because “if they have any African American blood at all, that's the way the South, the world [the other

worlds] sees them” (Black, 2003; Ogbu, 1994). They were taught that they were “Black,” and Ms. Thorndike believes that they are more comfortable living in a “Black” part of the community.

Ms. Thorndike also told me that within the last five years, the minority population has grown on the West Side and that caucasian students see T-Sinclair as a Black and different school. She explained, “There are enough students who come into the school that have a feeling that Black is different.” She stopped and corrected her statement in an effort to become more politically correct, “This feeling does not mean lesser, just different.” According to this statement, Black students are considered to be different and there is a stigma at the school associated with race and the neighborhood. Perhaps this stigma (prejudice) dates back to when the first African American families were forced into specific neighborhoods and schools.

Ms. Thorndike also let me know that parents often refer to the school as “that” school. As noted in Chapter 1, I have found this to be true myself. Ms. Thorndike believes that the parents define T-Sinclair is a “Black” school because 60% of the students are Black. She explains, “The White parents want their kids to go to East Side schools (the other side of the tracks) or to someplace else like Lake Falls. The Black parents also say, “I want my kids to go somewhere else, too.” She explained, “The Black parents might feel that there are too many kids here of one ethnic group and if they are able to go someplace else, they might be treated different and better.” This comment suggests that some West Side parents fear that their children may be stigmatized as inferior because they are going to a *Black* school and that they would be better off in

schools outside of the neighborhood—like the East Side or *the different world* of Lake Falls (where they have stars upon thars).

During one of my observations in Ms. Dean's room, I heard a parent explain that she believed the school, itself, negatively influenced her daughter's school achievement. As I approached the classroom, I could hear a conversation that Ms. Dean was having with a caucasian parent and her daughter. As I peeked into the room, I could see that the mother was upset. She was wearing what appeared to be factory work clothes—a pair of frayed and soiled jeans and a worn t-shirt with the words, "7-Up" on the back. She looked tired and frazzled. As I entered, I quietly took a seat in the rear of the room. The mother briefly made eye contact with me but didn't seem to care that a stranger had entered the room. She looked sternly at the teacher and in a raised voice exclaimed, "I ain't happy with Chelsea's grades in here! It ain't right."

Ms. Dean responded to the mother in a steady and unflappable professionalism, "I know you must be upset, but Chelsea is misbehaving and socializing all the time I am teaching and giving instructions."

Chelsea's mom tapped a pointed finger on the teacher's desk and charged, "She changed since she's come to this school." Then she paused as if she was waiting for a comment from Ms. Dean. Ms. Dean sat across from the parent in her *different world* mindset. She firmly stared back across the table without saying a word. The student had a black-hooded sweatshirt pulled like a tent over her head and eyes and appeared to be looking down at the floor. The mom charged, "I feel as if she's got an 'I'm this and that'

attitude since she's come to this school! She talks and acts different than she did (pause), at home too." Both Ms. Dean and Ms. Davis began to direct their eyes towards Chelsea.

This alarmed parent connected her daughter's "new" behaviors to the negative T-Sinclair persona. Ms. Dean may have forgotten that she had previously shared with me that the folks in this neighborhood behave differently too. However, in this context where the quality of her workplace is being called into question, she emphasized that the problem Chelsea is having is Chelsea's problem and not that of the *different* world. Chelsea's eyes remained hidden, but most likely, she understood that her mother was calling the school a troublemaker in her daughter's life.

At the end of the evening, I asked Ms. Dean about the mother's charges. At first she excused the accusation by describing the situation as typical of 6<sup>th</sup> grade parents. Then I asked her about what she thought the mother meant by the words, "her daughter had changed since coming *here*." She said, "The media leaves a sour taste in people's mouths. The community never gives T-Sinclair the benefit of the doubt." She continued to lament, "When things go wrong at T-Sinclair, the public often blames the neighborhood and the school because it is socially and culturally, a different world." I wondered if she meant a *Black world*. Is this media and public information that she is referring to simply confirming what Ms. Dean already believes to be true herself, that T-Sinclair is different and somewhat inferior socially and ethnically?

#### T-Sinclair and Cultural Differences

Ms. Keys describes the diversity at T-Sinclair as a cultural difference. She informed me that this was a sore subject for her, and that some of her teachers in fact, do

blame the differences on race. She made a distinction that, "Culture is not ethnicity!" She added, "Culture is what you think, what you feel, and how you react." Ms. Keys believes that the African American students in the building are different than their caucasian counterparts, but not because of race. They are different because of their thinking, feelings and behaviors. She complained, "I get really ticked off when anybody tries to tell me our problems in the building are because of ethnicity." She put forth great effort in this conversation to not de-value Black students or their families because of their *differences*.

It is important to note that culture cannot be separated from ethnicity (Gee, 1989; Ogbu, 1994). The way that students think, feel, and react to learning has a lot to do with ethnicity and the social-historical traditions in Hasting and the nation (Hale-Benson, 1982). Hale-Benson explains that African American children come to American schools with their "own distinct culture... therefore need an educational system that recognizes their strengths, their abilities, and that incorporates them into the learning process" (p.4).

The T-Sinclair teachers' recognize the distinctness of their student body and their parents and want to identify and define the difference; however; they find it difficult to articulate those differences. Was this hesitation fear? Was this hesitation discomfort? Regardless of the reason for their beliefs, most of the T-Sinclair teachers come from a different world, the middle class world, and as a result are struggling with their understanding of racial and cultural differences in the T-Sinclair neighborhood and school. The teacher stories I have recounted demonstrate that staff members of the school

feel more comfortable in communities like Lake Falls. Conversely, Ms. Thorndike and her *Black* family members are more comfortable in the T-Sinclair neighborhood.

### The Negative Stigma of a “Bad” School

Ms. Keys suggests that there is a negative stigma associated with the school and that students in the past have underachieved because of the idea that T-Sinclair is a “bad” building. She did not clarify what this negativity is due to. She states,

I think a lot of our issues lie in how students think about the building. If our kids come in assuming it’s a bad building, they believe they can be bad kids and that they don’t have to work very hard and achieve, after all, “this is a bad building and I don’t have to achieve because it is a bad building.”

I also find it amusing that our students consider this a really tough building and I’ve been to all of the buildings. I’ve decided that our kids are really no tougher than anyone else’s. In fact, not as tough as some I’ve worked with. But believe me; you don’t want to tell them that because that is a big part of *who they think they are*. They get really hostile when you say, “You know, this is not any tougher than anywhere else. It is different, not tougher.”

Our students are starting to achieve at higher levels. But for the longest time the culture was that you’re at T-Sinclair. You not only don’t achieve, you can’t achieve. “So don’t worry about it.”

Ms. Keys believes that underachievement and other problems in the building are related to the fact that students buy into a negative mindset about the school—the school is bad and “we will continue to underachieve because we are also bad.” This idea has had a long history in the building and most likely dates back to the way African American families were first segregated in the community.

Ms. Craig and Ms. Kent both voiced their childhood fears about the school and its reputation for violence. Ms. Craig stated,

I went to the schools on the other side of town. As a student I was afraid, we were afraid to come over here for games or anything. We dreaded it. It’s just ridiculous. The community and the newspaper are so negative toward anything on this side of town.



She explained that she was fearful of the school because of how the school was negatively portrayed by the community and the newspaper. When I asked her if she was still afraid of the school, she assured me that she isn't, but that the negative feelings towards the school are still prevalent. This is corroborated by the fact that my husband and I have as recently as two years ago been asked by our peers if we live "over there" or on "the bad side of town." She explained that many people refer to the school as "the school over there" instead of T-Sinclair. She is offended by this and feels sad that the school is so stigmatized by the public.

Ms. Kent's parents enrolled her in a parochial school near T-Sinclair when she was a middle school student. Although she was not willing to admit that her parents did not want her to attend T-Sinclair, she described her youthful fears about the school,

When I was growing up, T-Sinclair was the middle school that you just did not want to go to. For example, we always heard about all of the fights there. So when I was approached to become a teacher here, the stigma comes to your head and you think, "Well, T-Sinclair." You know? I knew that they were having a hard time education-wise—just the students as a whole. So at first I was a little like, can I do it? But then I thought, you know, it will be good for them to see an African American teacher because this school is majority African American.

Ms. Kent is well aware of T-Sinclair's negative stigma. Before coming to T-Sinclair as a teacher, she had heard that there was a lot of fighting in the school and that the students were "having trouble education-wise." This caused her to question if she could do the job; however, she decided to teach at the school because of her ethnicity and perceived connection to the African American population in the school. I asked her if her fears were warranted on the matter of fights at the middle school. She assured me that there are few fights, and that she has loved her work at T-Sinclair. I spent close to 200 hours

researching in the school and I never witnessed a fight in a classroom or in the hallway. I personally had been so brainwashed by the *fight* gossip prevalent in Hasting, that I was shocked when I did not witness any fights during my first few visits to campus.

Mr. Roman explained that the pernicious stigma towards the school is a real problem for students because they are influenced by what they hear outside the school. I found his concern about the stigma very interesting on account of his negative biases towards the neighborhood families. He explained the stigma this way,

The students from one of our feeder schools came in at the end of the school year for an orientation. I guess this particular feeder school is pretty strict and they wear uniforms and their school follows a disciplined approach. But, when we had them here for the day, they were the most misbehaved students at lunch.

When I asked Mr. Roman why he thought that was so, he responded that he believes that the students have heard “bad” things about T-Sinclair and that they think that they can come in and act any way they want. He stated, “This directly impacts student learning.” He became rather animated when he explained to me that the 5<sup>th</sup> graders probably have older siblings that have attended T-Sinclair. He mimicked, “Wait til you get to T-Sinclair, you can do anything you want!” Then he added, “It’s getting rid of that image.” This stigma casts a dark shadow on the school and this mistaken image intersects with student behavior and underachievement.

Mr. Roman had a startling suggestion when I asked him if he thought there was anything that could be done to change this image and the negative student behaviors that correspond with the stigma. He explained,

We really need to work at changing our image. I don’t know--if we could just take a pressure hose and just white wash the school inside and out and just start over. I

think if we could do that and get a different image, and just build a dome on top with gold or something to really make a change.

This comment suggests that Mr. Roman believes that only a sweeping change could change how students and the public view the school. His description implies that the school is covered with such a dirty film of negative stigma (diamonds with the dirt of negative life experiences) that only a pressure hose could get it off. Mr. Roman suggests that something of value should be placed on the top of the school, like a gold dome, in order to draw positive instead of negative attention. I suggest that the term “white wash” was unconscious; nonetheless, poignant in the face of my previous discussion in this chapter.

I taught in the Hasting Schools for close to 20 years and during that time I was privy to much prejudicial gossip about underachieving students from the West Side. Although the statements were not made directly towards T-Sinclair students, the attitudes behind the statements give a clear indication of the potentially degrading beliefs and attitudes culturally naive teachers can have towards their underachieving students. I remember the specific individuals who made these statements and some of them are still working with children in the Hasting Schools.

They [students] don't want to be in school anyway.  
 They come to school late on purpose.  
 They have no social skills.  
 Their parents are lazy and don't want to work.  
 They live on welfare while we support them.  
 Have you seen what they buy with food stamps?  
 Their mothers go gambling with shoe money.  
 They don't have telephones on purpose so we can't get a hold of them.  
 She'll be pregnant before you know it.  
 They are inbred just like rabbits.  
 They get pregnant so that they can get more government money.

They all live under one roof like animals.  
 They carry weapons and have drug paraphernalia on their dressers.  
 I have more Black males in my class than you do, that will have to be changed.  
 They are freaks and should be sterilized.  
 They smell like the family dog.  
 They steal fundraiser money and anything else they can get their hands on.  
 They don't respect school property or any property for that matter.  
 Did you see his tennis shoes? They must be stolen.  
 Their parents don't care about them, or anything to do with education.  
 They are naturally unable to learn. Look at their parents.  
 They are a waste of my time, what a waste of skin.  
 Have you seen how her name is spelled, where do they get those names?  
 We'll end up paying their way.  
 They always use the race card, be careful.  
 I had his parents, they were dumber than a doorknob.  
 He's going to end up in prison or shot.  
 They don't belong in a regular classroom; they belong in special education.  
 They are a bunch of ass holes as far as I'm concerned.  
 This isn't what I was trained for. I'm not a social worker.  
 It isn't my fault these kids aren't getting it, you know?

#### Summary

My research implies that my participants, students, and some of their parents perceive T-Sinclair as a different and somewhat inferior world. As a result, and as noted by Ms. Thorndike, attending the school is not considered a prize. This is significant information that can easily be missed by those who are not closely involved with the school and damaging to those who attend the school. It also suggests that my participants believe T-Sinclair to be an underachieving school because of the social-economic differences in its neighborhood. As the study progressed, I sought to clarify whether this belief and negative stigma about the neighborhood and the T-Sinclair students makes a difference in student performance.

## CHAPTER 4

### TEACHER BELIEFS AND STUDENT ABILITY

At the beginning of my study it became apparent to me that my participants blamed academic underachievement at T-Sinclair on student and neighborhood socio-cultural differences. After a deeper look, I found that my participants convolute student difference with low performance and as a result perniciously believe that their students are prone to underachievement on account of their socio-cultural background.

#### Students at T-Sinclair Are Incapable of 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Work

During my classroom visits to T-Sinclair, several of my participants suggested that their students lack standard background knowledge or what they referred to as the “schema” necessary for learning at grade level. They describe schema as the basics that students should already have in order to “catch,” recognize, or understand the T-Sinclair, grade level curriculum.

One afternoon as I observed Ms. Craig with her enrichment class, she was preparing her students to reread a story that had been introduced the day before. She asked her students to reread the story because they had performed poorly on the oral comprehension questions that accompanied the assignment. She started by explaining to the class why she was having them redo the assignment, “Schema is important and you have trouble connecting your schema to this story about Papa because you haven’t driven yet. I’ve been in these situations [pause] but your schema is not sticky enough to grab it.”

Her explanation for their failure to understand the text, according to the questions, made no mention of the quality of the text or the questions that they were asked to complete. Instead, she blamed the students for their lack of experience and suggested to them that they were missing necessary tools for the task.<sup>7</sup>

At this point the students became defensive and quickly responded with a single, “We do too drive!” Ms. Craig blushed and smiled, and then quickly looked at me while she sarcastically asked the class, “Do you park beside me at the grocery store or in the school parking lot?” The students all laughed and looked back and forth at each other as if they were waiting for one of their peers to admit that they do drive to school and the store! She was working at proving her point to them. They had failed with the story because they had not developed driving (sticky) schema.

During one of our interviews, she explained missing schema to me this way,

These students are just *so low*, just reading levels and math levels. I’m not talking about how they are a couple of grade levels behind. I’m talking that they are *very, very low* and there are just so many of them that are *low*. It is important to teach them connections between what they know and the text. When one of their vocabulary words comes up, I try to relate it to their every day life and just bring in real life examples.

Ms. Craig believed that her students have knowledge deficits, and on account of these, are failing in their ability to accomplish 6<sup>th</sup> grade reading tasks. She described the students to me as “very low.” This perspective that the students at T-Sinclair are at fault for what they do not know did not make sense to me. As I looked over my data, I asked myself these questions: “What is going on here?”(Wolcott, 1999). Why did this

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<sup>7</sup> One of the common motives for reading a book or text is so that readers can identify with the story’s characters and have new experiences (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

professional fail to examine her own instructional choices and behavior, and why is she labeling her students as *low*?

Ms. Keys , Reading Reform, and Low Student Ability

Ms. Key's office was next to the school guidance counselor on the 6<sup>th</sup> grade floor. Her office was placed in this location so that she could be close to the teachers and accessible to parents who would come to her for matters related to individual reading progress. I was acquainted with Ms. Keys before my study because I had previously been the reading specialist at another middle school in town. After the No Child Left Behind Legislation (2001) was passed, she was moved from a teaching position to the specialist appointment. This change in assignment transpired because the principals believed that she would be helpful in raising reading scores on district assessments. She was studying to be a media specialist at the time; however, she sensed that it could be a long time before a position would become available at the school, so she accepted the job. She was relieved of her teaching duties and given her own office and a copy of the current federal Title One guidelines for poverty schools.

Each month, she attended curriculum meetings with other similar specialists and was expected to report on the progress of building reading initiatives; this progress was shared in the form of test data. In addition, she met bi-monthly with upper-level administrators to demonstrate how she thought her curricular initiatives were working as measured by test scores. In past conversations with me, she admitted that these meetings were intimidating because she has minimal hours of training in reading—only those needed for a state reading endorsement and no formal curriculum or administrative

training. The decisions she once made in the confines of her own classroom were now having school-wide implications.

Ms. Keys's job experience as a reading specialist has been greatly influenced by the fact that T-Sinclair has been on the SINA list longer than any other school in the community (four years at the time of this study).<sup>8</sup> The governor has taken notice of the poor testing and district and state education officials are currently supervising her efforts. If reading scores do not increase, she will be held accountable for not making progress in this area. So far this accountability has taken the form of verbal chastisement. Before the study, she called me once, near tears about such a meeting where she had undergone a professional scolding by her principal. She has threatened to quit her job twice but reconsidered after another building administrator encouraged her to stay. Ms. Keys is not the captain of the ship; nevertheless she has been assigned to be the navigator of curriculum in her school and will be blamed (held responsible) if the ship does not stay afloat.

According to state standardized test results, Ms. Keys reports that T-Sinclair students have *low* reading skills and leave the school at least two grade levels behind. It is her responsibility to assist teachers in changing this trend. She explained,

Teachers must teach to the test and show our students how to take tests. High stakes are for tomatoes, but if that's what we're doing, we should be teaching

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<sup>8</sup> The School in Need of Improvement list is based on state test results; specifically, the reading comprehension subtest. In 2003, 34.1% of the 6<sup>th</sup> graders at T-Sinclair scored proficient in reading comprehension on the state test. This score was 15% below the national average. According to the data from this subtest, the average reading grade level of 6<sup>th</sup> graders was 4.7. Thirty-one percent of 7<sup>th</sup> graders tested proficient, while only 26% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders tested proficient on the test. According to this test, the average 7<sup>th</sup> grader was reading at fifth grade level and the average 8<sup>th</sup> grader was reading close to a 6<sup>th</sup> grade level. This is the information that Ms. Keys uses to generalize that T-Sinclair students are reading about two grade levels below grade level.



what we are testing. Teach to the same objectives that the students have to know for the test. I'm big on assessing what is covered. If I were going to teach you how to build a birdhouse, I would not test you over how to build an airplane. I would test you on how to build a birdhouse.

Ms. Keys must find a way to assist teachers to raise test scores in order to meet the demands of her job. She uses the "birdhouse" metaphor to show how closely she believes the curriculum should align with student assessments. Presumably, this alignment will raise the odds that students can succeed on tests.

#### Ms. Keys and Staff Development

Ms. Keys explained that her overall plan is "to assist teachers in the implementation of data-driven initiatives." I recognized very quickly by that statement that all of her curricular efforts must be aligned with testing results and that she must show an increase in these test scores. She explained,

My goal is to help develop the staff into a highly qualified and professional team capable of giving T-Sinclair students the skills they require to succeed in reading on high stakes tests. Our students do not have the same experiences as other students (background knowledge) and so I want to spend more time in classrooms working with and helping with the coaching of the teachers, because that's where the big stuff happens and that's who needs my time. And so my big focus for this year is to not let the other needs of my job like working with numbers and preparing for reports, eat up my time.

Ms. Keys is under serious pressure to raise reading test scores at T-Sinclair and as a result, her curricular decisions are passionately focused in that direction—helping the teachers in the building so that she will be successful in her work. Although she consented to step into this position, she was obviously naive about that decision. She is troubled about not meeting the expectations of administrators, and has already considered resigning.

During my interviews with her, I sensed that she is both proud of her teachers and affectionate towards them. However, I did not miss the implication of her deeper concern—her own professional failure. She has to make sure that the teachers are teaching to the test and that test scores show improvement. If they do not, she will share the blame for student underachievement with the teachers and students. As the reading specialist, Ms. Keys walks through classrooms and watches for evidence that the reading teachers are using the prescribed and reformed reading curriculum—curricula that will assist students in increasing test scores. (I observed one of her reading teachers, Ms. Craig using this curriculum in her classroom). She makes appointments to formally observe all T-Sinclair teachers a couple times each semester in order to give them feedback on how well they are doing with their prescribed instruction. During my interviews with her, she was hesitant to show me any of her anecdotal notes pertaining to these observations, citing confidentiality issues. She finally conceded to share one of her observations with me when I assured her that I was only interested in how the teachers think about underachievement.

During my analysis of her feedback to this anonymous teacher, I was thinking about Ms. Craig and the driving story. I made a personal assumption that Ms. Keys would not be very happy with Ms. Craig's performance as a teacher, due to the fact that her students were not able to answer comprehension questions about their reading assignment. I suggest that it was more comfortable for Ms. Craig to blame her students for their difficulties than to examine her own short comings.

Ms. Keys leafed through a set of papers on the corner of her desk. She showed me the following notation after observing reading instruction in one particular classroom,

Good job asking questions and searching for answers before, during, and after reading the content. You are building their brain up. You know the students are asking good questions when they have to dig for the answer. They are exercising their brain.

After an analysis of Ms. Keys's notes, I realized that she was encouraging the anonymous teacher to send the students back into their reading in order to find the *one* correct answer. She recognizes that good reading instruction encourages students to self-question while reading; but on the other hand her comments about finding answers and building up the brain, shows a lack of understanding of current reading pedagogy (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Good literacy instruction involves meaningful reading experiences and consequential tasks. Answering questions about short reading texts, especially if they are poor or low-level questions, is not a valid measurement of reading performance (Shannon, 1995). Ms. Keys also tacitly views her students as lacking in ability. She demonstrates this by commenting that the T-Sinclair students need brain building/training. She is a conscientious curriculum administrator that is making uninformed decisions in order to be successful in her new position.

I asked Ms. Keys about how teachers build up the brains of their students. She told me that she creates packets of comprehension questions designed to look like items on the standardized tests (this is similar to the curriculum that Ms. Craig was using during my visit to her classroom). The teachers have been mandated to use these packets during enrichment class, so that students learn to "dig for information and exercise their brain as

often as we can schedule it in.” She seemed very pleased by the fact that she had developed this system for her teachers to use.<sup>9</sup>

Ms. Phillips, the special education resource teacher described the testing practice with her students this way,

I teach the skills. We go over it. They have questions to answer over it. They bomb the questions. But at least if anybody comes in and says are you doing this? I can say, “Yep, here’s the data! “ That’s what they want me to do.

Ms. Phillips conforms to school policy every day and practices reading-test exercises during enrichment, in spite of the fact that her students are failing them. She believes the practice exercises are irrelevant and defeating to her students, yet she demonstrates her tacit agreement with school policies by conforming to the curriculum directive. As a result, her students get an extra dose of *testing and bombing* practice each day during enrichment as directed by school officials.

Lous Heshusius (1984), in a theoretical examination of senseless curriculum and repetitive testing, describes the day that one of her students broke a pencil and threw it across the room and exclaimed, “I know I’m retarded, but I won’t take those damn tests anymore.” Heshusius makes the point that her students sense when curriculum is weak and irrelevant. She suggests that teachers examine what they are teaching and why they are doing it.

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<sup>9</sup> All of my participants are also responsible to develop a short “comprehension check” (CC) first thing, each morning during their homeroom time. This CC has been developed in conjunction with a short current events news program shown on all classroom televisions sets each morning. The students watch the program and take notes. Immediately after the program, the teachers give the students four or five teacher-generated comprehension questions to answer on a small sheet of paper. The papers are graded and in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, the points are added to their science grade. This exercise contributes to a reading reform goal that suggests that grade level teams add more reading minutes to their schedules each day.

She went to her principal about her choice not to use a series of tests required by her school and found that her principal not only understood her dilemma but had never used them either! Blomgren (1992), in her research on special education testing, found that students who are repeatedly tested often express that they have increased anxiety about school, lose their confidence, and blame themselves for performing poorly. I suggest that regular education students most likely feel the same way. Testing success is the focus of curriculum at T-Sinclair to such an extent that all academic teachers are expected to comply with new reading reform policies despite the fact that it might be damaging to their students.

My participants all voiced their displeasure about these test-practice packets at one of their team meetings. They complained that students are not getting enough time to work on other content assignments. Mr. Roman, the social studies teacher cited, "And it's not like our students don't need the time to work on homework!" Ms. Thorndike commented that some of the reading excerpts in the packet are not relevant to the lives of the T-Sinclair students. She complained, "I can't even tell with some test items which one of the answers is correct!" Heads nodded affirmatively across the room. The complaining teachers were told that they must do their best to continue to use the packets because the students are as Ms. Keys stated, "In dire cognitive need."

The teachers sensed the futility of the packet exercise but Ms. Keys insisted on continuing their use to demonstrate that teachers are passionately preparing students to perform better on reading tests. Mr. Roman seemed to waiver in his opinions about the

school reform; however, I believe that his position may have been unique on account of the fact that his wife is the district curriculum administrator. He stated,

The critical issue at T-Sinclair is improving scores on the standardized test, getting off of the SINA and getting everybody on the same page as far as how important this is. So we are all going for the same goal and the same page.

Reading and practice testing is the T-Sinclair mantra, so to speak, and all staff members are expected to be on the testing improvement bandwagon—even during homeroom and enrichment, classes that are traditionally structured for other uses.

#### Ms. Key's and Brain Training

Ms. Keys was also proud to tell me that she has instituted a school-wide, web-based phonics program in order to boost background knowledge as it intersects with reading fluency. She describes the process as “brain training.” Her eyes twinkle as she explained that T-Sinclair students are missing what she calls “brain connections” to the basic elements of learning how to read. She seems proud of her knowledge as she explained the fact that students are behind in reading because they have underdeveloped brain connections.

In order to help students build these brain connections, she explained that she has arranged for all middle school students at T-Sinclair to take the 12-week computer course. Some students are scheduled to take the course twice if they do not show improvement. She suggests that some students need more than one cycle of the *brain training*. She said,

Students need brain training in order to read and say words correctly. They might have missed those sounds [background knowledge] for a number of reasons—maybe the kind of language used at home. It's like gardening. We are preparing the soil. I didn't believe it at first, but then I tried to learn a Bosnian word. There

are sounds in the Bosnian language that I just don't get. So that kind of let me know that, yes, students do need to have all those sounds and learning connections in order to achieve.

My future goals for this program are to see how it helps and to get rid of the stigma attached to it. I spend a lot of time just convincing the kids that they are not in here because they are stupid. They are not in there as a punishment. That this is something to help them process better, help them to think better, and to make them more successful. In looking at last year's data, some kids improved and it sort of lit a fire under them. Some of the kids actually showed a drop, although it may not have been the program. Progress generally does not show up for three to six months, which is why I'm still kind of not sure about it. The jury is still out on this one.

Ms. Keys believes that *brain training* is critical in learning words. However, during the time of this study, the data associated with this innovation was not positive or proving to work very quickly. The fact that this program is not showing quick results could be very complicated for her professionally because the computer program is expensive for the district. It also removes students from other coursework for prolonged periods of time. If the program does not begin to show reading improvement soon, administrators will surely lose faith in her decision-making and leadership skills.

#### Students Destined to Struggle in High School

During a separate interview, Ms Keys talked to me about the current 8<sup>th</sup> grade students and their lack of reading progress during their three years at T-Sinclair. She stated, "Some of our students are going to have some real problems in high school." She said in a lowered and strained voice—"I'll be honest, I'd say about half of them are going to have some reading difficulties." This is a morbid forecast and I felt dread in the pit of my stomach at the thought of it. She shook her head as she spoke,

Partially because they don't put the effort in, and because I just don't think their ability level is quite high enough for them to be successful in high school. And some of the students believe that they are good readers, or at least are an adequate

reader when they are actually several grades below grade level. But, they are the best reader in their family!

In her previous comment on page 52, Ms. Keys explained that she spends a lot of time “convincing” her students that they are not “stupid.” However, in this last statement, she contradicts herself and it looks as if she, like them, believes that at least half of the 8<sup>th</sup> graders are not very *smart*. She suggests that the students are in denial about their own lack of ability in reading. They are fooling themselves, so to speak. She believes they have not put enough effort into their reading performance and that “their ability level is not quite high enough.” Simply put, the students are misguided in their thinking about their own abilities, prone to fail in future school endeavors, and it is their own fault that they are inadequate.

In a seeming effort to position the dilemma that the students will face as highschoolers into a more positive light, she informed me that there is some good news for these students. She explained that the high school has a remedial reading course that the T-Sinclair students can take to help support them in their deficit. She stated in a chipper voice, “And I really do think that the course will help pull some of ours up because they will figure out how important it is then.” Again, she implied that it is the students’ faults if they are not successful at T-Sinclair because “they don’t put the effort in.”

In addition, she admitted to me that she has recently had problems with students cheating on the placement test so that they will not be placed in the remedial course. In hearing this, I realized that the T-Sinclair students are intelligent when it comes to surviving in a tracked system. They do not want to be placed in a remedial course in high



school—a course that may not help them any more than the three years of reading at T-Sinclair had and a course that will certainly track them for the remainder of their high school career.

### The Disappearing Boy Project

I want to share another alarming story told to me by a temporary administrator at the school. The administrator is an African American educator that has been placed into the high schools to connect with young African American males and to support them in completing school. He was temporarily placed at T-Sinclair at the beginning of my study and as a result of this availability, I had an opportunity to talk to him about underachievement and student success.

He shared that it is not unusual for T-Sinclair students to disappear from the academic radar after middle school. For example, he related that only one out of five African American males graduate from West High. A few years ago, he along with a community advocacy group, studied the progress of fifteen 7<sup>th</sup> grade African American males as they progressed through middle and high school. Half of those students were T-Sinclair students. By their graduation year, five males graduated with average grades (he described them as “so, so grades”). One of the students died in a gang related death, and the rest had “just simply disappeared.” He looked grim as he recounted this study to me, yet it slipped out of his mouth like butter; “they just simply disappeared” from the educational radar. I asked him what happened to the study. He explained that the community agency in charge of the study lost interest in the “project.” Fifteen boys were a *project* and many of the participants simply disappeared.

I couldn't help but think of Kozol's (2005) study, and Isabel's comment. "It's as if you have been put in a garage where, if they don't have room for something but aren't sure if they should throw it out, they put it there where they don't need to think of it again" (p. 28). Through my almost twenty years of teaching in middle school, I watched many African American boys pass through my courses. I had no idea that it was likely many of them did not graduate and some of them just *disappeared*. This is a heartbreaking realization and during my study I became conscious of the fact that I may have contributed to their failures, unaware of my own uninformed practices.

#### Ms. Thorndike and Her Beliefs about Underachieving Students

Ms. Thorndike lives across the street from T-Sinclair. I have often observed her walking across the street at the end of day as I returned from my own work and back into the T-Sinclair neighborhood. She is the most senior teacher at T-Sinclair and she and her husband have many social connections on the West Side of town. She has taught multiple generations of students and told me that she is now teaching the grandchildren of her first students. She was very pleased to tell me that her sons both attended T-Sinclair. As we spoke, she often sat in a relaxed pose on a stool in front of her classroom even when her students were not in the room. During the study, she appeared to strongly identify with the neighborhood, the school, and her students.

She told me that she has deep concerns about how students come into the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. She explained that her students have a hard time making the "brain connections" that are necessary to test well and succeed on their academic work. She said, "I don't think they have enough connections yet to get to the point where they can be successful."

This statement confirmed to me, that in various degrees, the 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers are blaming their students (holding them responsible) for their own underachievement. All newcomers to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade are already considered underachievers and according to Ms. Key's and in this teacher's point of view, "disconnected."

In order to help students develop the brain connections that they need to be successful at T-Sinclair, she has developed a series of assignments around what she calls "brainteasers." She has developed the assignments out of old gifted education curriculum so that her students can refer to what they have learned about using their brain, while testing. She explained, "The practice brainteasers are what they do to prepare for the test. They don't have background knowledge to see relationships, like "sun is to moon, or sun is to day as moon is to night."

I observed Ms. Thorndike's science class one day when she was using the brainteasers to "make connections and help students with testing." Sitting on her stool and with her arms crossed tight across her chest, she asked the students to get out their brainteaser worksheets. Like a wave, the students began to open their notebooks.

"Let's look at number 11," she said. The worksheet was titled "Vocabulary Calendar" and consisted of a May 1981 calendar filled with word analogies. I couldn't help but notice that this science teacher recycles! The students were instructed to read the first word group comparison and fill in the blank for the second word analogy. For example, Friday, May 1<sup>st</sup> on the calendar, read as follows, "Fruit is to orchard as fish is to \_\_\_\_\_." The correct answer was "sea." As the students looked at the items, Ms. Thorndike began to speak to the class about the goal of the brainteaser assignment. "I

gave you these sheets because they give you these kinds of questions on IQ tests to find out how smart they think you are in 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> grade.”

I personally doubted that the students took an intelligence test in all of those grades, so later I asked the guidance counselor about the types of tests given to 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> graders. She let me know that Ms. Thorndike was referring to a cognitive abilities test that has been used in the past at T-Sinclair to track students according to math ability. She also noted that it has not been used for two years because of the amount of testing that is being done for the curriculum reform.

It appeared that Ms. Thorndike was trying to help her students demonstrate a good showing on the tests. Ms. Thorndike commented,

I want them to become comfortable with doing this type of thinking and seeing these kinds of papers so that when they are tested on it I can say, “Oh, this is exactly what you have done. You know how to do it.”

She assured me that her own sons did well on these tests and as a result, were placed in advanced classes while they were at T-Sinclair. During this study, I did not include data reflecting student perspectives; however, I couldn't help but wonder how students felt about the unending testing preparation in all of their courses.

During one of our interviews, she admitted to me that some of the students do not do well because of “just where they are,” while others “don't test well because of test anxiety.” She was building a case for her somewhat, disjointed testing curriculum.

She continued to coach the class,

So you guys, the tests are set up to be easy to hard. And don't get flustered by that. Just go ahead. When you have your gut reaction... it means your brain is click, clicking, thinking, thinking, “I kind of know it. Why I know it, I don't know.” But that's okay to guess with that.

In this comment, Ms. Thorndike appears to be well meaning in her effort to help her students become more familiar with the testing and thinking format. She described it as a process where the brain “clicks” into thinking in a sort of metacognitive-intuitive state. Her metaphor infers that the process is natural and that the brain is almost mechanical and autonomous in nature. She coaches the students to trust their “gut reaction” by guessing the right answer. She gives them permission to guess on test items. I wondered if that advice has an impact on how the 6<sup>th</sup> grade students approach their school-wide tests. After all, their teacher—a person of authority, is giving “guessing” advice to them.

Then Ms. Thorndike sounded the academic alarm. “Do you know what an idiot is? Moron?” She paused to scan the class with her eyes. The students all stopped what they were doing and looked at their teacher in silence. I sensed a widening of eyes in some of the students. I know mine opened wide. Where could she be going with this like of questioning? Students use these terms to belittle each other, so I knew that hearing them from a teacher would generate a lot of interest and concern. The classroom was completely quiet, waiting for a verdict from their teacher. Ms. Phillips sat at the computer and it appeared that she was intentionally burying her eyes in cyberspace. I personally connected to this fear as I thought of the feelings of inadequacy that I have long struggled with because of my attendance in West Side schools (Where did you attend school in Hasting?).

Ms. Thorndike continued with her story, “Sometimes in the past, students were labeled...” At that moment she turned to Ms. Phillips, the special education teacher who appeared to be quite surprised that she was being drawn into this uncomfortable

conversation, "What are the numbers for an idiot on the IQ test?" Ms. Phillips stood up quickly from the computer in order to play her current role as a specialist in IQ. She walked over to the side of the room where her students were sitting as if she was identifying with them and pondering the question. Everyone waited for her answer and after a few brief moments she admitted that she didn't know and would check into the number right away.

I looked over at the special education students who were intentionally seated close to each other. I'm sure they understood the danger of being associated with her during this particular discussion about intelligence. (They are structurally and personally *connected* to Ms. Phillips and Ms. Phillips specializes in "low IQs). All across the room, students' faces grew red and I became conscious that the room felt much warmer than usual. Everyone in the room seemed subject to blame for underachievement on "IQ tests" but especially those who were assigned to Ms. Phillips.

Ms. Thorndike looked out at her captivated and growingly self-conscience audience. It appeared that she finally sensed that her dialogue had hit a sensitive cord with the students. She became somewhat apologetic that her banter about being smart was so alarming. She quit looking her students in the eyes. Her narrative seemed to rattle on in a high pitch as she told them that she didn't think that IQ tests were an accurate measure of the intelligence of a person. Then she quipped as if to justify her intention, "But that is how it is done!"

A student in front of her asked, "Does idiot mean dumb or retarded...or can't do anything?" I wondered if the student was performing a self-check. Ms. Thorndike barely

acknowledged the student but slightly nodded and went on with her dramaturgy. “I’m trying to help you be more comfortable with these kinds of questions so that you will not answer wrong on the tests.” She placed the blame for the discussion on her students. She appeared to think that she was a noble teacher for trying to help them out of their *brain disconnection hell*. Perhaps she was attempting to threaten them into taking the tests more seriously.

Ms. Thorndike has taught at T-Sinclair for over 30 years and has most likely had many similar conversations with her students. She believes that the 6<sup>th</sup> grade students come to T-Sinclair without the schematic development they need to achieve. They have the wrong kind of thinking and are disconnected with the testing curriculum. I have known Ms. Thorndike for almost twenty years. She is a kind educator who sent her own sons to this school (they were in gifted education) and has committed her lifework to T-Sinclair. Why would she place her students into such a negative frame of mind? I would suggest that she tacitly and unconsciously sees her students as incapable and sees herself as a conduit for helping students overcome their background deficit—a martyr of sorts.

#### Ms. Samson’s Beliefs about Underachieving Students

During personal interviews, Ms. Samson mentioned to me several times that many of her students are “low” in their basic understanding of math because they don’t know their basic math facts—a dilemma that she blames on students, their families, and on previous teachers. She let me know that she has completed her master’s degree in mathematics, an accomplishment that has positioned her in the school as knowledgeable in her field. I heard a sense of loss in her voice as she explained to me that she has not

been able to put her “master” knowledge to good use yet “because my students don’t know their basic math facts. They go home at night and don’t study or use their flash cards.” She repeated her complaint that parents do not help their children learn these skills and informed me that she has heard rumors that students do not have to memorize their math facts in elementary school. As a result, her students come to her unprepared for 6<sup>th</sup> grade instruction. They come to a “master” teacher without the *basics* in math.

Ms Samson was careful not to point her finger too strongly at elementary teachers, but told me that she has been “disgusted” by the rumor that “some third graders are able to use their multiplication charts during math class.” In her opinion, letting students use graphic supports such as a basic facts chart, encourages them to remain dependent on their charts. She added with an aggravated tone, “Why learn them if you’ve got the charts?” I occasionally observed her students cautiously peeking at time’s tables printed inside their notebooks, a practice that she dislikes, but told me she allows for students labeled as special education students.

Ms. Samson explained *that the high T-Sinclair* students are not as high in their math skills as students from other schools and communities. “Our students have not had the exposure to higher levels of math and they aren’t nearly as high as other teachers’ high students.” She believes that her students (and their parents and previous teachers) are to blame and that her hands are tied. As a result, there is a *basic facts impasse* of sorts in the sixth grade math program at T-Sinclair.

This view puzzled me. I taught math at another middle school in town for eight years. Many of my 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade students struggled with the memorization of the basic



math facts. I found that not knowing the basic facts did slow down student computation skills and often resulted in a lack of student self-confidence. However, I also found that my students were eager to learn their basic facts in middle school and could engage in critical math concepts while still struggling with their facts.

I often let my middle school students use calculators to support their higher-level computations and integrated the reciting and learning of basic facts during transitional moments of each class period. Perhaps Ms. Samson fears that good instruction will result in low-test scores for her students and that she will be blamed for poor teaching. Standardized math tests are narrow in what they measure, and mainly focus on low-level math computations (Oakes, 1985; Sacks, 2000). She may be fearful of investing her teaching on higher-level skills, because her efforts may not be rewarded or noted in the test results. As long as the students do not know their facts, testing failure is inevitable and can be blamed on the students; they are solely responsible (along with their T-Sinclair neighborhood parents) for their deficit.

#### Ms. Kent's Beliefs about Underachieving Students

Ms. Kent is the second math teacher on the team. It is her first year of teaching. As a first year teacher, she heavily relies on Ms. Samson for advisement; consequently, it didn't surprise me when she also blamed underachievement in math on student inability to learn *basic math facts*. She stated, "I have a student who is low and has a hard time doing the basic facts. And it's hard because it's like, well, half of the kids don't know their basic facts." She explained that this has a real impact on her instruction too, "You can only spend so much time on something before you have to go on." I heard faint

echoes of Ms. Samson's voice as Ms. Kent explained, "Half of our students are not with the program."

I asked Ms. Kent if she viewed half of her students as underachievers. She shook her head, "No," and became very hesitant about labeling her students as if they were not capable. In fact, she used an optimistic term to describe underachieving students. She called them students who could be "there" a little more. She explained, "I really don't consider any of my kids underachievers. "They are my 'they're there" students. *They're there*, but they could be *there* a little bit more." In using the "there" label, she was pointing out that all of her students are evolving in their ability to perform and will get there—the "there" they need to be at, to be successful at T-Sinclair.

Ms. Kent explained very optimistically that she is assigned to teach the only section of advanced math students in the 6th grade. They are labeled as advanced because the curriculum that is used for this section of math comes from the 7<sup>th</sup> grade math book. She uses the grade level textbooks as a measurement for how students are achieving—how they get "there." She admitted to me that some of her advanced math students (24 students) would be better off in the regular math class and in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade math book because they are "not there yet." Nevertheless, she lets these students stay in advanced math because they are trying so hard to get *there*. She explained,

A lot of people think that kids in advanced math, they just get it [snaps her fingers]. But some students bring reality to the fact that a student knows they can do this, but it's just not coming as quickly as it does for some others. They've got to have that extra push. For example, Tomicka got sent into my class by accident but I have to let her stay because she works hard. Like if you want to compare Tomicka to Jaclynn. Jaclynn will say, "I know it already." While Tomicka will say, "Ms. Kent, explain this a little bit more."

Tomicka is not there yet because she needs further instructional support. In fact, she would be better in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade math book. Jaclynn, nonetheless, already knows the math concepts in the textbook so she is already there.

According to her narrative, half of her students are “not with the program” and do not know their facts—they are not there yet in math. Yet, she explained that she is not clear about how to group her “there and not there students.” If a student is accidentally placed in advanced math and is willing to work towards getting there, she lets them stay with the “they are already there” achievers.

I thought about what Rist (1973) suggested in his research about tracking and that schools unfairly create winners and losers. As a result, I probed Ms. Kent about why there are so few African American students in her advanced math class. I did not want to suggest that she is responsible, so I was ready to drop the subject if she appeared to be too uncomfortable with it. During my observations, there were 19 students attending this particular class and only four of the students appeared to be African American (21%). Proportionally, according to race demographics at T-Sinclair, 60% of the class should be African American.

This question bothered Ms. Kent and she began counting students on her fingers to figure out just how many Black students she did have in the class. She got to five names and then stated, “You can research; the African American students *are not going to be good* in math and science.” She lifted her fingers again and found one more name that she wanted to add to the count. She said, “Trisha was gone this week.” She went on, “That’s how it is. It would be nice to see more African American students in advanced

math, but for the minorities that I do see in here, I am glad to see them. You know?" Ms. Kent blames the low representation of African American students in her advanced math class onto the students themselves. African American students are not present in the class because they are not good in math and science, according to research she could not cite for me. They are not part of the "already there group." However, she was happy for those who are good at math and are already there. Jaclynn, fortunately, is an unusual African American female according to her assumptions.

I asked her if African American students are generally *not there* in math. She answered,

I mean, math just does not come easy to *some* people. If you didn't even look at the tests, then the majority of this class would probably be African American. I mean, my African American students in other classes are on fire in math. I honestly think they could do the work.

I recalled the fact that Ms. Thorndike works to help students improve their scores on this placement test. The literature shows that the testing that is used to level students into academic tracks often place minority students at a disadvantage (Oakes, 1985, Patton, 1998; Rist, 1973; Singham, 1995). Sixth grade students are tracked for math, and African American students are less likely to be placed in advanced placements; a fact that Ms. Kent apparently had not thought much about prior to this interview and study.

During my review of literature written on the topic of math, science, and African American children, I found evidence that some educational researchers believe that African American students perform lower in math because of language and learning style differences (Hale-Benson, 1982; Orr, 1987). Delpit (1995) suggests that while language and learning preference might become a barrier in math for some Black students, "It is

important to critique this position in order that the failure of those responsible for teaching mathematics and science to poor and Black students not be attributed to the students themselves, that is, so that the victims are not blamed” (p. 64). Students are being blamed for their own underachievement at T-Sinclair and my participants believe that their Black students are not as capable as other students taking advanced math.

#### Ms. Dean’s Beliefs about Underachieving Students

Ms. Dean is the team’s main reading teacher and has a very energetic presence on the team. She told me that it is hard for her to decide if her students come to T-Sinclair with “holes in their education or if they just have low ability.” Regardless of the reason, she told me that a majority of her students are not at grade level when they enter 6<sup>th</sup> grade. During one of our interviews, her conversation about reading focused on the idea that many of her students come to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade with a diminished vocabulary,

I think some of the students are *just* low in ability. You know, it’s hard to tell. Studies show that if you are from a poverty home, your vocabulary is like 40,000 words or less by a certain age. If you come from a blue-collar home, it like 80,000 or less by a certain age. If you come from a professional home where the parents have a 4-year degree, it’s up to 120,000 words by a certain age. So you’re looking at shoot, an eight thousand word difference just from the home you come from. Kids at T-Sinclair are starting behind before they even reach kindergarten. And that’s a huge thing.

According to this statement, Ms. Dean doesn’t know what to believe about some of her students. Some are just *low* in ability, while others come to school with *holes* in their education. However, the results are the same. Ms. Dean considers both types of students as low and behind and doesn’t appear to consider why the students are behind. She uses the label “low” to describe the students who have a low middle class vocabulary. During this interview, she quoted misguided research in order to position herself as

knowledgeable about the deficit she finds, and I would assert, creates in her students. She explained that some of her students are already behind in their vocabulary in kindergarten and once they start behind, they never able to catch up.

Ms Dean also believes that a large percentage of her students come to middle school behind because they are dyslexic—what she calls a “real disability and a real difference in the brain.” Although she didn’t give a basis for her diagnosis, she said the following,

About 25% of our students are dyslexic. It’s hard to really know because in order to get diagnosed you have to go spend lots of money to go to a specialist. That’s expensive. And our state doesn’t recognize it as a disability [she said in an aggravated tone]. The state won’t use the term. Instead, they label it is as a ‘reading disability’ and dyslexia is an actual physical difference in their brain. So students actually need to be taught differently. So I think some of our kids...and if you don’t have the resources to get them tested, you’re right back at where you were. I think that it is prominent on our team.

According to this, she believes that one out of four of her students have a physical difference in their brain that makes them prone to reading failure. She is disgusted by state guidelines and the fact that educational officials don’t have the *legal right* in her state to label T-Sinclair students as dyslexic. In her mind, if the state would allow students to be tested, they could be more easily treated for their disorder. On the other hand, her response might suggest that she is looking for ways to legitimate more blame onto the students. If she can show that one out of four of her students has brain pathologies, it will be easier to explain why so many of her students are not performing well on reading tests.

### Summary

According to my study data, Ms. Craig, Ms. Keys, Ms. Thorndike, Ms. Samson, Ms. Kent, and Ms. Dean all believe that their students are “missing” important grade level skills when they come to T-Sinclair as 6<sup>th</sup> graders. They are missing their “stars” so to speak (Seuss, 1961). This is a significant finding because it strongly suggests that these teachers approach their students as if they are critically behind and unable to catch up (inferior middle school students). When students are approached as if they are less capable than their peers, they receive inferior learning experiences and ultimately achieve less, drop out of school more, or as Isabel and the principal in this chapter suggested, simply disappear (Delpit, 1995; Fine 1991; Kozol, 1991; Oakes, 1985; Rist, 1973).

## CHAPTER 5

### A FAULTY CURRICULUM

The data and analysis in Chapter 4 demonstrates that my participants believe that their students come to middle school with deeply troubling cognitive deficits that position them to be prone to academic underachievement. In light of this misguided understanding and blame towards their students, the 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers have failed to examine the context of failure at T-Sinclair and their own participation in providing a somewhat well intended but disengaging curriculum that reinforces underachievement. In this chapter I will describe my participants' beliefs about their underachieving students in the context of a high-stakes reading curriculum that is prescribed and only serves to confirm the belief that students at T-Sinclair are academically defective.

#### Teaching to the Test at T-Sinclair

From the beginning of my study and data collection, it was apparent to me that the locus of administrative and curricular attention at T-Sinclair, not unlike many schools across the nation, have focused on raising test scores, especially in reading, to satisfy the government's current No Child Left Behind school reform (Brantlinger, 2004; Sacks, 2000). Linda McNeil (2000) has visited many classrooms in Texas where the current curricular policies are rooted, and found that standardized test scores dominate educational policy—a policy that compromises teaching and learning as well as negates what research says about quality learning.

McNeil (2000) notes that in Texas schools “substantial class time is spent bubbling in answers and learning to recognize wrong answers” (p.730). Although she



has observed that some teachers try “juggling” both a meaningful and test-driven curricula, the time that teachers spend on meaningful learning and critical thinking has been greatly reduced, if not eliminated in many cases. She explains that teacher-student interactions in these classrooms are completely focused on helping students pass their state curricular and testing requirements. She also suggests that quality teaching has been equated with a teacher’s ability to raise student test scores and teach to the test—a classroom phenomenon that also holds true at T-Sinclair Middle School. This attention to *teaching to the test* is identifiable in my data at both the administrative and classroom level. Beginning with reform in the curricular area of reading, teachers at T-Sinclair are expected to use the *testing* curriculum in hopes of raising test scores on standardized tests.

#### Production Workers and the Canned Testing Curriculum

The curriculum reform at T-Sinclair has been put into place in order to meet the demands of the No Child Left Behind legislation. However, the movement towards curricular reorganization in Hasting was already in motion before T-Sinclair was placed on the SINA list. In response to the federal government’s Goals 2000: Reforming Education to Improve Student Achievement (1998), the Hasting schools requested a Phi Delta Kappan Curriculum Management Audit, in order to assess the strength of their curriculum. The audit results suggested that the Hasting school curriculum was weak and that efforts should be made to increase academic rigor. District officials called for curricular reform aimed at increasing accountability and standardization.

The district superintendent confirmed this commitment by explaining in local school media that he welcomed the focus that the No Child Left Behind legislation has brought to local schools. He also made the promise that staff members would receive adequate professional development in order to make sure all students in the district continue to improve their achievement levels.

In response to the NCLB mandates and to the curriculum audit, administrators in Hasting met to design a district-wide reading curriculum that would align to the state standardized testing measure. However as the data from my study has shown, the main objective for the district is to increase test scores in order to remove Hasting Schools from the SINA list. As a result, district leaders developed a curriculum focused on helping students prepare for the state mandated performance test: the Hasting Reading Curriculum (HRC). They also purchased a series of formative assessments to evaluate testing progress frequently.

The supplemental reading assessments for the curriculum guide were purchased from Evans Newton Incorporated (ENI). According to the company website, the organization was founded in 1973 by Lloyd Ferguson, the developer of the first automated system to scan and score performance tests on site. Evans Newton, Inc. (2004) boasts that their program of testing meets the government standards of No Child Left Behind and “aligns district curriculums to state standards so that teachers can re-teach and re-test until all students have achieved proficiency” (p. 1-2). ENI suggests that most schools are not teaching the information that is tested on standardized tests and that this

lack of thoroughness is especially damaging for students from lower social-economic backgrounds. ENI states,

Students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds ...have much more limited exposure to outside sources of informal education. Their test scores nearly always reflect this disparity...by working with schools to align what is being taught with what is being tested; students will experience marked academic advancements. The schools we've worked with usually show a 200% improvement in one year" (p. 1)

The ENI Company promises that teachers can lead their underachieving students to "safety" and a more equal standing with students who score well on standardized tests.

These promises are potentially attractive to the T-Sinclair teachers because they are anxious to be taken off the governments list, and as I have previously noted, they believe that their students are "disadvantaged" and prone to underachievement.

In June of 2003, the school board adopted the HRC and accompanying curriculum guides, and all district teachers were given professional development so that they could implement them according to policy. In order to demonstrate to teachers the importance of the testing curriculum, the curriculum guide specifically explains that the curriculum guides provide comprehensive teacher direction that will answer what, how, and when to teach all reading lessons.

The HRC curriculum guides are organized in quarterly schedules to align with the ENI assessments. Each quarterly schedule lists specific reading objectives and mandated reading comprehension lessons (practice testing) that teach students how to take and be successful on reading performance tests. The guide lists a schedule of dates to remember for mandated testing preparation, testing review, and data analysis. Some teachers have shown concern that the curriculum guide is teaching to the test. However, the secondary

curriculum administrator explained in a curriculum meeting that I attended, "We are not teaching to the test, we are teaching beyond the test." The Hasting Schools' administrators believe that they have implemented school reform that will enrich the curriculum and remove the school from the SINA list.

Ms. Keys, explained the use of the HRC materials this way,

The HRC and the tests put out by Evans Newton are based on high stakes testing 'kind' of objectives. It has some canned lessons for the teachers to use during their reading classes and every quarter we test over the objectives that were to be covered that quarter. I also look at the ENI assessments as practice. If we're going to be doing these high stakes tests and that's what you are testing, it should be what we're teaching. You know? Teach to the same objectives that they have to know for the test. I'm a big person on that; assessing what's being covered. I think we need to get the kids to where this is no big deal. If this is what they are going to be judged on, we need to train them to do well on it. And it's almost an accountability piece for them as well. You were to cover those objectives during the quarter. And if nobody got it, you may need to go back and re-teach. The "I don't believe in using assessments to drive the curriculum," well, let's go on with our lives. You take the test. You analyze it a little bit. Decide what it is you need to do next to get the kids where you need them to be.

Ms. Keys believes strongly in using the HRC curriculum because it explicitly teaches to the test and heightens the chances that test scores will increase. (Chapter 3 notes that this has become her primary goal in order to preserve her professional position in the building). In addition, she states that the material is "almost an accountability piece." In making this statement, she infers that if the students don't learn how to perform better on tests, they will shoulder the blame for their own failures because they have been taught the material. Simply stated, the curriculum has a utilitarian function and can be used as a mechanism for shifting blame (responsibility) for student failure onto the students.

Ms. Keys calls the HRC curriculum "canned curriculum" that will get the kids where they need to be." She has been directed by the district to set and reinforce

instructional objectives for teachers that will relieve the district of public embarrassment and NCLB sanctions. If the students succeed, she will have succeeded. In addition according to my study data, she and my other study participants believe that the T-Sinclair students are in need of *brain training* to overcome their skill and cultural deficits.

#### Ms. Dean and the Canned Testing Curriculum

Ms. Dean uses the “canned curriculum” in a direct instruction format every Wednesday; the rest of her academic week she teaches novels within small, tracked reading groups according to the directives of the HRC guide. Ms. Dean admires district reform efforts and described her feelings about the Hasting Reading Curriculum this way,

I think the curriculum reforms have made us more aware of how students are doing on the tests. It just can't be that you know something; you have to know it through the data. You have to teach them how to test well. And so I think that I am a better teacher in saying, “I know you guys know this, but we've got to somehow figure out how we're going to put it down on paper.” This curriculum is giving students the resources for being successful in college because they will have to take tests like this if they want to attend college. You need to show the students a different world, a world that they do not know. “You'd make a good teacher. Boy, I hope you keep this up. Because if you don't know how to read, I'm not sure I'd want you to be a doctor.” I do think you need to teach the underachiever how to be a good tester.

She equates the testing curriculum with “knowing something” and is well intentioned in her quest to help students succeed in the curriculum that she has been given to implement. She appreciates the curriculum reform because she believes that her students are underachievers and not in the “know.” She tacitly accepts what she has been told by her administrators—testing practice increases test scores for underachievers and has positioned her efforts and ideology as honorable by associating them with helping her

students out of the T-Sinclair world into a *different* world—the college and professional world.

### Canned Mini-Lessons

Teach-to-the-test mini-lessons for 6<sup>th</sup> grade have been published in a yellow testing practice book. The practice test lessons have been collected from multiple reading trade books and often look like passages out of an individual reading inventory—each page or two presents a small reading passage and a half a dozen or so reading comprehension questions. As noted, these lessons have been selected based on the ENI testing curriculum and the state standardized testing objectives. According to a district reading document, the focus for the practice book is to address reading score weaknesses found on yearly state performance tests.

One example of a reading selection from the practice-testing curriculum is a three-paragraph narrative about tapping trees for maple syrup. In paragraph three, the text describes the exact size of a tap hole. One of the comprehension questions asks for the size of the hole and gives four choices. To correctly answer this item, the reader has to skim the brief narrative and locate the exact number quoted in the sentence mentioning drilling and trees—the only numeral listed in the article. This question does not require students to use their inference skills. Secondly, based on my teaching experiences, 6<sup>th</sup> grade students would have little difficulty skimming for the number of inches needed for drilling, even if they could not read the text fluently. I would suggest that this representative item is neither challenging nor useful in helping students become more successful in meaningful reading tasks.

I used the practice testing in the pilot stage of curriculum development while still teaching in another middle school. Although we were not on the SINA list or required to use the lessons so often, many of my colleagues and I became disillusioned about them. We found the lessons to be uninteresting to students and irrelevant to the rest of the school curriculum. As a reading teacher, I found them to be rote and ineffective in encouraging students to think or read better. As a direct result, the implementation of the new reading curriculum in Hasting played a large part in my decision to leave my teaching position of almost twenty years. As McNeil (2000) noted in her observations of teachers using a rote testing curriculum, teaching becomes an exercise of helping students recognize right and wrong answers rather than teaching students how to read critically or enjoy reading.

I observed Ms. Dean twice as she directed her students through the short testing examples. Ms. Dean used overhead transparencies and a direct teaching style as she methodically led students through the short text readings and brief comprehension questions—a common and expected practice with this curriculum. As noted by Peter Sacks (2000) in *The Case Against Standardized Testing: Raising the Scores, Ruining the Schools* and as Ms. Keys remarked, Ms. Dean indeed worked “like a *production worker* using a *canned* testing curriculum.” There was very little instruction or critical learning taking place during these two practice test sessions. Furthermore, most of the students appeared detached from the event and completely uninterested. I found my own mind wandering off as Ms. Dean stoically directed the students to read the short text and then answer each question as directed by the *canned* lesson.

It is important to note that Ms. Dean was delivering reading instruction as she had been prompted to do. In an interview with the reading curriculum director, Ms. Keys stated,

These are focused lessons that are taught all year long. The teachers are getting the kids used to doing the test. *The skills must be explicitly taught through direct instruction. They are doing this on purpose in order to prepare students to be successful on these mandated tests.*

Administrators have directed Ms. Dean to present *canned* test lessons to her students in order to prepare them to think the way that they need to—to succeed on the yearly state performance test. School officials and Ms. Dean tacitly believe that the T-Sinclair students are *low* in ability and that the practice testing will help. As the ENI (2004) promotional material suggests, the ENI resources will meet government standards of the No Child Left Behind legislation and “align district curricula to state standards so that teachers can re-teach and re-test until all students have achieved proficiency” (p. 1-2).

#### Lesson Difficulty

During my observations of Ms. Dean using the practice testing, sometimes the students answered the multiple-choice answers correctly and sometimes they did not. The whole event went very quickly—the teacher read the short excerpt from the overhead or asked the students to read a section of the text independently, and then selected students to read and answer the six or seven comprehension questions. When students selected the correct choice for a test item, the teacher was jubilant and praised the students for good reading. When the students could not figure out the correct answer, she would direct them back into the text and make every effort to point out the correct text evidence for the test



item. In this case, I observed that the students frequently became engaged in a guessing game. Each round became easier as question distracters were eliminated (McNeil, 2000).

In one of our conversations about the practice curriculum, I asked Ms. Dean if she thought the HRC was too easy for her students. To the contrary and in alignment with her tacit beliefs that her students are *low* in ability, she replied that the HRC mini-lessons are at times too difficult. She believes that the correct answers for the test questions are challenging to distinguish from the item distracters.

During one building staff meeting where the HRC data collection was being discussed, Ms. Dean looked at her colleagues and explained with frustration, “It is tough to do these exercises with my students. Today on two of the seven questions for the story, it wasn’t easy to tell the right answers (her eyebrows and the pitch of her voice raised). Sometimes, I have to guess with the students” (chuckles were heard from the rest of the group).

Ms. Dean complained to her colleagues that the testing curriculum is too hard and confusing for her students and at times, confusing to her. During my two observations of testing practice, I witnessed students incorrectly answering test items; however, I suggest that these incorrect responses were not a case for believing that students are unable to read or complete the practice test items. In my own experience in using the practice material, I found that the test items are poorly constructed and many times neglect to target the meaningful portions of the readings.

My conjecture about the difficulty of the practice curriculum was strengthened in one of my interviews with Ms. Keys. During most of the study, she ascertained that

teachers must improve student test scores through instructional repetition and a *canned* curriculum. However, during one interview she contradicted her own assertion that T-Sinclair students need *brain training*. When I asked her if the T-Sinclair reading curriculum was too hard for students, she stated,

Our students have a lot of trouble with paper and pencil tests because they don't agree with the best answer. Actually, they read the question. They read the passage. They understand the passage; they understand the question. They just don't agree with the available answers and they're not going to put down an answer they don't agree with. We keep saying we want them to think. Well, they're thinking. And thinking people don't necessarily see everything as this is wrong; this is right.

According to this contradictory comment, she believes that testing practice is not too hard for students. In an obvious credit to her and the students, she seems to understand that the curriculum is to blame for underachievement and inappropriate for T-Sinclair students. She suggests that the *canned* curriculum is not a thinking curriculum and when the students try to think during practice sessions, they become confused by the low-level questions and item distracters. She says, "They just don't agree with the available answers and they're not going to put down an answer they don't agree with." She infers that the curriculum is weak and that the students refuse to participate in selecting distracters that are faulty.

According to the interview data that I presented in Chapter 4, Ms. Dean believes that her students are dyslexic and/or low in ability. She frames her students as underachievers incapable of testing well. In effect, she blames the incorrect item responses on *low* student ability. However, in closer examination of the actual curriculum, Ms. Keys's contradictory comments about student thinking and of my

participants' belief systems about their students, I suggest that the canned testing curriculum is mundane and repetitious. As a result, the students over think the item distracters and cannot locate a deep and meaningful answer. According to Ms. Keys, higher-level thinking actually places the T-Sinclair students in jeopardy as they respond to the test-taking practice. To succeed with this curriculum, the students must not think very much or, not at all.

### Small Group Instruction

The rest of Ms. Dean's curriculum is also directed by the district and consists of four-leveled reading groups. According to her statements, she has a high reading group, two average reading groups, and a low group.<sup>10</sup> Individualized reading inventories and student testing histories determine reading placement. She meets with two of the reading groups each day, except on Wednesdays— testing practice day—and leads the groups through reading leveled novels. During the following narrative, I was visiting the classroom during Group D's Reader's Workshop.

The day that I observed the teaching of this group, there were three African American and three caucasian males at the table. They were all sitting with their spirals open (the spirals were where the students kept their written answers to the comprehension questions over the reading assignment) and a book titled, *Flipped* (Van Draanen, 2001). Ms. Dean whispered to me on the way to the reading table, "The book these students are reading is written at about a 4th to 5th grade reading level." Her secret message was

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<sup>10</sup> The HRC reading curriculum gives specific teacher direction for how to implement Reader's Workshop. The teachers are directed to group students according to level. Ms. Dean told me that she groups students according to scores from individual reading inventories, anecdotal records from informal observations, and according to quarterly ENI testing scores.

intended to let me know that Group D students read from one to two grade levels below grade level.

Ms. Dean sat down at the table with her students, took a deep breath, and then presented comprehension question *number one*, “Who do you like telling the story in the book better, Julie or Bryce?” The students looked down at their spirals and then at each other. Ms. Dean patiently waited and after a minute or so, a couple of the boys started giving out short answers—“Julie, Bryce.” Ms. Dean smiled. During the small group time, she appeared to enjoy being with them and they with her. She is an upbeat, cheery teacher who seems to love her work. The students answered the binary question and waited for a response from her.

Then one of the boys in the group said, “I liked it told by Bryce. It helped me to see what is in a boy’s mind.” He waited for Ms. Dean to respond to his answer as if he was unsure it was an okay response. I was intrigued by the answer and anxiously awaited more of the young man’s thoughts.

Ms Dean responded by giving him an affirmative head nod and by repeating what he said as if the other boys in the group hadn’t heard the answer. She also let him know that no one had ever shared that response with her before. “I think that is a good one!” she said. I wondered what she meant by “a good one.” However, the boy seemed to understand that he had answered the question well. He smiled and looked proudly down at his book. The teacher liked his short response. It was a good answer, as far as short answers go. Ms. Dean turned away from the boy and looked across the classroom in a matter-of-fact way. All the students were working. I became impatient with her

distraction because I hoped to hear more about what the young man who just answered was thinking. I soon realized that Ms. Dean had moved on as if the boy's answer was complete and there could be no more to say about "Bryce's perspective."

Ms. Dean's praise encouraged one of the other students who had already answered with a simple "Bryce," to add to his answer. He said, "I think Bryce is more organized in how he thinks, than Julie is..." I began to wonder why these students have a history of "low" reading behavior. These answers seemed promising to me. Ms. Dean smiled and giggled and then said, "Oh, do you think he thinks more like you do?" The student smiled shyly and nodded. I was not convinced by his nod that he really understood what his teacher was getting at, but he appeared to understand that his teacher's comment meant that he was finished and had done a good job at reading group.

I noticed a pattern emerging here. The students were expected to come up with responses to the questions being asked; however, they were not encouraged to think very deeply about their ideas. Although Ms. Dean seemed genuinely interested in the participants, their responses, and the book itself, group time was mainly about reading the assignment and then answering questions with semi-thoughtful answers. I wondered if this format was an unconscious result of the testing practice format on Wednesdays, or if the teacher was so convinced that her students were *low*, that she was not aware that her students had the ability to think deeply.

A third student chimed in, "I think that Bryce talks about a lot more different things, while Julie just thinks more about herself." Ms. Dean again, seemed very impressed by that answer and responded, "I think that could be very possible." She

paused and did not probe for more. These comprehension questions were very similar to the testing practice questions and seemed to be designed to briefly check on whether students were reading the book. The discussion on each topic was brief and the teacher predictably had the last and concluding word after each question.

It was time for the next question. Ms. Dean started leafing through her book. She told the students that she wanted them to turn to page 182 while she read. Before she started reading, she lifted her eyes to check on the rest of her class. All of the other students not involved with Ms. Dean's reading group instruction were reading group novels, writing out answers to questions about their reading, or working on word find exercises focused on practicing story vocabulary. She looked over at a female African American student in the third row and said, "Makeesha, what are you working on?" The girl looked up from her paper and reported, "a word find." She lifted her paper a bit off of the table to prove what she had said was true. Dean said, "Good." During one of my conversations with Ms. Dean, she told me that the word find exercises are used to "strengthen story vocabulary and reading comprehension." I couldn't help but wonder if word find exercises are considered *brain training*.

Then Ms. Dean started reading, "And before Mrs. McClure could say, in the name of Boosters! What are you doing, they started rolling on the floor [fighting]" (Van Draanen, 2001, p.182). She looked at the students and asked question *number two*, "What if this happened in our lunch room? One student quietly spoke, "I don't know." The rest of the boys excitedly started speaking as if their ideas exploded onto the table. They explained that the story characters would be grabbed and rushed to the principal's office

by the principal (they used the T-Sinclair principal's name in their explanation). Spontaneously, all of Group D started giggling about the idea of a rumble in the lunchroom. Two of the boys jumped up from their chairs and used their hands to form a double high-five. The sound of their palms meeting above the reading table cracked across the room. Many students stopped what they were doing to look up to the front of the room. There were smiles all around. For a brief moment, the students in the room and especially in Group D celebrated what they had found in their reading.

Ms. Dean quickly checked the class with her eyes and told the boys to settle down. She looked at me and blandly smiled at the explosive laughter. She seemed slightly self-conscious that I was watching the group instruction and I wondered if she was afraid to have fun with the boys because I was observing. Then she looked down at her notes so that she could be ready for the next question. The reading group instruction looked very similar to testing practice; the students read the text and then they were asked questions so that they could demonstrate that in fact, they were *good readers*.

Then Ms. Dean directed the students to another page in the story where the character, Julie, refused to forgive the character, Bryce. She stated question *number three*, "Can you start over with a person?" One student said, "Well, you can shake hands." Ms. Dean nodded in agreement and then paused as if waiting for more responses. When she didn't get any, she made an offering, "Well in my family, we try to go on after a conflict. What is done is done." There was a brief moment of silence at the group as the boys looked back and forth at each other, and then one of the students responded to her personal comment with conviction, "Some peoples is more forgiving than others," a

comment that revealed some cultural dissonance. The other students looked as if they agreed with this statement. The discussion waned and students appeared to lose interest. They were beginning to play with their pencils, their spirals, and their hair. I couldn't help but wonder what these young men were thinking about forgiveness and if they would someday forgive their teachers for tracking them and defining them as "low."

By this time, a few students outside of the group were visiting with each other. Ms. Dean stood up at her place and without walking away from the table said, "It is important that you work quietly at your seat while this group is working. When it is your group time, this group will respect your right to learn." The classroom got quiet again.

Ms. Dean quickly got back into the rhythm of her questioning. She asked the students question *number four*," Julie has been waiting her whole life for Bryce. Why did she just walk away?" The students in the group lost interest in the lesson and appeared as if they had completed their quota of questions for the day. They all peered down into their books and waited. I wondered if they had lost their desire to play the question-response game. Ms. Dean had demonstrated over and over again that that she would eventually answer her own questions. The students remained silent.

She patiently smiled as she looked around the circle of students. I wondered if she thought that this question was too difficult for Group D. Then she willingly spoke up, "Maybe he pushed her too hard." She turned to the student next to her who was obviously distracted in his own thinking. When he caught her looking at him, he quickly looked back down at the text. Another student regained interest and responded, "The timing



might have been bad.” Her eyes lit up. She said, “Yes, that is very possible, or maybe he was just caught off guard.”

I thought about her last question, and wondered how it would appear if it had been written for the Wednesday testing practice. It might have looked something like this,

In the above excerpt, why did Julie walk away from Bryce? Was she

1. Afraid he would follow her home again?
2. Caught off guard by the fight in the lunchroom?
3. More interested in Steve?
4. Was she in a hurry to go home and feed her chickens?
5. All of the above

Number one would have been the most accurate answer here—an answer that offers choices but negates many rich possibilities in thinking and good student discussions. The students were asked to read the chapter assignment and answer teacher questions so that Ms. Dean could be assured that students were reading and understanding the basic story line of the text. This description of group time suggests that instruction during my observation was repetitive and reductive in nature. The comprehension questions were *canned* and systematically encouraged shallow and *low* ability thinking, very much like the Wednesday test practice sessions.

After the small group session, I asked Ms. Dean about how she felt about the reading curriculum and group work. She stated,

I do most of my teaching through Reader’s Workshop through chapter books or mini-lessons. I am able to teach the HRC objectives all year long [reading comprehension and drawing inferences]. It’s a lot of repetition. I think kids need to hear it, I don’t know. There’s a study out there that you need to hear it ‘x-

amount' of times before it actually sinks in. So you just want to keep bringing it up and bringing it up and bringing it up.

According to the literature, Reader's Workshop is a student-centered reading format that strengthens meaningful reading skills and learning habits (Atwell, 1998). Conversely, this leveled-reading group instruction was mostly focused on raising test scores and involved a counterfeit and meaningless reading experience. McNeil (2000) suggests that this often happens when teachers are trying to juggle both a meaningful and test-driven curriculum. Ms. Dean has been encouraged to believe that reading instruction is about repetition and letting things "sink in" in order to meet school testing goals and escape from the SINA list. She was looking for a "good one" and little more. As a result, the reading instruction for Group D and other 6<sup>th</sup> grade students is aimed at providing a factual and narrow reading experience—an experience that only reinforces the idea that T-Sinclair students are unskilled in their reading and to blame for their own underachievement.

#### Keeping Track of Failing Test Data

Student progress with the *canned* reading curriculum in Hasting is measured according to the scores from yearly, high-stakes testing and the HRC practice testing—a comprehensive pre and post test along with quarterly summative testing. As I have shown in this chapter, the performance tests drive the *canned* reading curriculum. I would further suggest that the weak and *canned* curriculum drives and confirms a persistent understanding by Ms. Dean and other school officials that the 6<sup>th</sup> grade students are academically weak in reading.

The data from the homeroom and enrichment class test practice is collected and reported to T-Sinclair officials on a weekly basis. The data from the HRC is collected six times a year and must be reported to both T-Sinclair officials and administrative officials “down town.” The students take a state-directed, high-stakes performance test twice a year. The fall high-stakes testing is considered a practice test. The spring high-stakes test is the *real deal* and these scores must be reported publicly and to state education officials. If students practice test a minimum of three times a week (on Wednesdays and for two enrichment classes for 36 weeks) and are present for all formal tests (six ENI tests and two high-stakes tests), they are tested in reading a minimum of 116 times a year.<sup>11</sup>

That is, in anyone’s estimation, a lot of testing. The data from the HRC shows that a majority of T-Sinclair students are non-proficient in reading at grade level. So it is possible, according to the statements made by my participants, students score in the non-proficient range about 116 times a school year, just in reading. All of these tests frame T-Sinclair as a testing school, a failing school, and a school where the students are *low*. This testing curriculum serves to reinforce negative perspectives towards the school and students, and further disillusionment in both the students and the teaching staff.

Even after using the ENI testing materials and the HRC reforms, in the spring of 2004, only 51% of the students were considered proficient and on grade level in reading—just a little over half of the students. This contradicts the optimism shown by Ms. Keys and Ms. Dean about the HRC curriculum and further contradicts the promises made by ENI—that the ENI curriculum “aligns district curriculums to state standards so

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<sup>11</sup> I didn’t include the testing in homeroom in this number on account of the fact that the news programs are not always available to the school because of poor weather and bad satellite reception.

that teachers can re-teach and re-test until all students have achieved proficiency” (2004, p. 1-2).

Ms. Keys explained in the beginning of this chapter that performance testing is based on standardized test objectives and is used to keep track of student-reading progress. Near the end of my study she described the comprehensive testing this way,

It is a very comprehensive curriculum with repeated testing and is developed specifically to help students practice for the test. We give a pre- test right at the beginning of the year; actually, in the first ten days of school. And then they [the students] will get it again at the end of the year. We want to see where they started and where they end up. In the fall, we tested 424 kids at “T.” So 27.4 of the kids were proficient when they got here. And on the latest test [second quarterly], 45% of the students were proficient [as measured by the entire T-Sinclair population].

The HRC test data keeps track of student test underachievement—“where students end up.” Ms. Keys frames student achievement and reading success at T-Sinclair through the lens of the HRC test scores. According to this data, educational officials label the students as *low* and the testing curriculum functions to confirm this failing ideology. The students are blamed for their own academic failures and the testing curriculum is used to anchor that blame in such a way that there is scientific proof that this failure exists.

#### Summary

According to Ms. Dean, the goal of the HRC reading program is to “look for growth” and “get 70% of the students, 70% or better on the HRC tests”; however she explains that this goal is not met and shows that she believes that hopes for getting 70% of the students to succeed on the curriculum is only a pipe dream—it would be nice, but a small improvement is better than nothing. She states,

When I gave the test in the fall, about 22% of the students walked in to T-Sinclair proficient. Our tests were very low. That would be 112 of them [students]. So in

the spring we gave it and an average of 51% were proficient. So these children improved almost 30%. Granted, we would like 70% of them to be proficient, but a 30% improvement is not anything to push away.

Ms. Dean and Ms. Keys categorize their students at the beginning of each year by how they test on the beginning HRC tests. Students come into the school as non-proficient and need “catching up” in order to be on grade level. However, as shown by this data, the curriculum is weak and designed in a way so that students cannot catch up. Even after three quarters of testing practice, only about one-half of the students have increased their test scores or reading proficiency. And as stated in Chapter 4, most students come to T-Sinclair one or two grades levels below in reading and leave the school one or two grade levels below in reading. This high rate of non-proficiency on these tests confirms to my participants that students are “low, very low.” They enter the school with academic deficiencies the teachers at T-Sinclair believe they have nothing to do with, and even after much teacher effort to comply to curriculum policy, the students continue to do poorly. Ms. Dean confirms her own belief that there is little she can do to help students succeed when she stated, “What can teachers do to help these students increase their reading scores, what can we do?”

The data from this chapter demonstrates that curriculum reform in reading is centered on a weak, test-driven pedagogy. Education officials and my participants have not examined the consequences of using such a curriculum or considered the fact that the testing data grossly misrepresents the competencies of their students. Furthermore, the preliminary test data that is collected from the repetitive practice serves to further confirm what they already mistakenly believe about their students. Students at T-Sinclair

are thought to come to T-Sinclair *low* in reading ability and unable to *catch up*. As a result, students are blamed and poor district and school policies are never examined or held suspect.

## CHAPTER 6

### STUDENT BLAME: BRIBING AND EXCLUSION

From the analysis of this data, I have arrived at the conclusion that a strong case can be made that my participants believe their students are cognitively *low* and prone to academic underachievement as measured by state-mandated performance tests. In accordance to school district policy designed to raise test scores, T-Sinclair teachers use a weak but mandated testing curriculum that they have been coerced to believe is effective in helping underachievers succeed on standardized tests. Despite this curricular reform, their students continue to score below what is expected of them on tests, which serves to further confirm that T-Sinclair students come to T-Sinclair *low* in academic performance and are hard to teach.

In order to preserve their professional image and support their troubling but seemingly inevitable belief about *low* student ability, Ms. Dean and her colleagues have developed a type of pedagogical mythology that deflects blame and responsibility away from the teachers and onto their students. I suggest that this practice of *blaming* further exacerbates student failure and only serves to affirm misguided understandings of student ability. In this chapter, I will explain how blaming results in two exclusionary practices—blaming that leads to student coercion and blaming that leads to labeling and special education referral.

#### Self-Preservation and Student Blame

Ms. Dean teaches reading in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and as a result of her position, shoulders more than her share of pressure from state and district officials for increasing test scores.

According to Ms. Dean, “I am the reading teacher in the building, so I am the one they are going to be looking at if students *do not* succeed on tests.” This statement reveals how deeply Ms. Dean shoulders concern over low test scores at T-Sinclair. If reading scores do not increase, she has been led to believe that it is her fault.

During a discussion about critical teaching concerns, Ms. Dean shared her fears of professional failure,

The most critical issue in my work is the responsibility that the teacher has in regard to standardized tests. If students don't do very well, we have been told that it will affect the teacher's pay. And teachers are the lowest paying job and I owe on student loans and have to continue to pay for my education. You know, there are a lot of other opportunities out there that you could get out of debt much more quickly. I think it is critical if you look at our government emphasizing testing and it just *puts a sick feeling in my stomach*.

Also, a part of me thinks that I need to watch out also for me. It's been a struggle and I have four children at home and I want a little bit of me left over at the end of the day to give to my children. And I can only give so much at school and I already give 150% And at the beginning of the year they give us all the things we have to do to raise test scores and when they are saying, “well you need to [pause],” and I have nothing left to give. I even emailed the superintendent and told him, “I've given you 150% and if you want any more you will have to find someone else, because this is all I have.”

This data shows that Ms. Dean feels tired and anxious in her job. She believes she is working harder than she should be, to no avail. She states that she has given 150% to her job and that she has no more to give—a situation that keeps her weary and unable to meet the needs of her own children at home. In addition, she is fearful about the loss of financial security, which makes her “sick to her stomach.” This shows that Ms. Dean feels in fact, victimized by her professional predicament. She is not succeeding with her students and this continued failure is leaving her tired and at risk of professional failure.



In describing the details of her tiring job, she pointed out that district and state officials are heavily monitoring her compliance to district policy and her progress in raising test scores. She described the paperwork for reporting to officials this way,

I constantly have to present data to the administrators. “Add this data and then add this data...” And then they give you another form... And then you’ve got to rewrite it into this form... And then you’ve got to rewrite it on this form...

Ms. Dean has not been able to demonstrate that she is capable of raising test scores with a curriculum that purports to be foolproof in raising test scores (ENI, 2004). She sounds weary in this conversation and suggests that her teaching world is consumed by reporting data—a job that is made more frustrating because she has to report *non-proficient and inferior* data. This pattern of defeat reinforces the belief that her students are consistently not able to succeed in reading and her own fears of self-incrimination and public humiliation in reporting low scores.

Ms. Dean also dreads sharing low-test data with other teachers and district officials. After a quarterly test in January, in which only three students out of 115 tested proficient, she said, “I will share the test results with my team today. Let them know how I handled it and what downtown will see. It’s not something I am proud of sending down [to the district].” She reiterates that she is ashamed and not proud of the testing results. She has to “handle it” and tell her teammates how she is “handling it.” The low-test data reporting is naturally defeating to her and to her colleagues and tough to face up to as a professional. She feels as if she works harder than most on her team but her efforts will nevertheless result in professional embarrassment.

Ms. Dean is concerned about her job and what the district officials think. She confirmed this by telling her principal the following: “the district is not going to think that we’re doing anything.” She continued to lament, “After this last quarterly test, only three of my 115 students scored proficient. At first, I was really depressed about it and asked what are we doing wrong? What am I doing wrong?”

In addition to the weariness she feels related to the district’s monitoring, she also has to face a yearly visit by state education officials. She referred to state officials as “The Federal Bureau of Education” in one of our interviews.

When the Federal Education Bureau comes in today, my concern is all they’re using is the state performance test to look at our school. Personally, I feel that it is just a political show and that it’s just them showing up and saying, “Hey, we went around to the schools to hold them accountable.” I’m not trying to be negative or nothing but you know, there are some serious issues with this No Child Left Behind thing. And if they would allow me to spend as much time on my curriculum and going in depth and working with children, or if they would take the money that it costs these people to go around and put it into hiring another teacher for us. If they are really that concerned, then where’s the money to support and educational system?

In coining the title “Federal Bureau” and describing their visits as a “political show,” Ms. Dean conveys both a sense of trepidation and skepticism. This suggests that she feels that government officials are not only out of touch with reality when it comes to the NCLB policies and their expectations of T-Sinclair teachers and their performance with students, but also that these officials resort to tactics of intimidation. She also believes that officials are more focused on how things “appear” rather than how well students are really doing in school. She states that she could perform much better as a teacher if she could use the government money granted for the “Federal Bureau’s” visits on curriculum and teacher resources. She did not give details about how she would change her current

instruction but according to this study data, my participants would likely use any additional resources they receive on more testing curriculum (and soft promises).

I found that Ms. Dean is concerned about self-preservation to such a point that she rarely has the courage to expose the fact that she knows her students cannot succeed with district curriculum. However, she was so disillusioned after the third quarter results, she admitted the following:

Well like, when you are looking at the state performance test...I took a statistics class, which I didn't do very well in. But I did understand the fact that you've got to have a *bottom* 50% and you've got to have a top 50%. So somebody's always going to have to be at the *bottom*. Somebody's always going to be [pause]... not everybody's going to be [pause]... somebody's always going to have to be at the *bottom*. That's just the way it is. Somebody's going to have the lowest grade. Somebody is. And if you're putting that into a thing like this state test, somebody's always going to be at the *bottom*.

This data demonstrates that Ms. Dean knows that her students cannot succeed because, by virtue of the distribution of the bell curve, some students must be distributed in the lower percentiles. Her students, because they started out behind, will inevitably be designated losers of this forced normal distribution. She is quite correct in making this observation regarding standardized achievement tests; yet it is a point that is rarely discussed. In my own experience, officials and teachers are so convinced that testing is a measure of intelligence, they refuse to believe that the *forced* curve exists, even when presented with it.

Ms. Dean also reported to Ms. Keys that the quarterly tests she gives are not valid measures of achievement. She said,

It's a district curriculum that was created by a group of teachers and administrators. We have a student booklet and it has short excerpts from both fiction and non-fiction stories. At the end of each lesson, there's about a three-to-

four question quiz over the story they have read. And four times a year they take the incremental test. We just got back our 3rd incremental test and our test results were very low. There were six objectives and in order to get an objective right, you have to get both questions right on each objective. In order to get 70% or better, you had to get five objectives right. So if you look at two stories question wise, they have to get at least 10 out of 12 questions right. You know, I feel we were kind of set up for failure. I think that is very high. And I spoke with Ms. Keys about it yesterday and next year there will be 24 questions and students will be able to miss one question per objective.

Ms. Dean is well aware that her students have little chance of performing up to district expectations. She states that she and the students are “set up for failure.” However, she feels so much pressure to strive for success and to live up to the expectations of the state and district that her fears for self-preservation triumph over common sense. She must blame the students or suffer repercussions. She and her students are in a no-win situation.

#### Other 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Teachers and Bureaucratic Pressure

As noted in Chapter 3, I found that my other participants are also convinced that T-Sinclair students come to T-Sinclair unprepared to succeed with the curriculum. During the time of this study, district officials were just beginning the reform process with the math curriculum. Ms. Samson explained,

I am on the curriculum committee right now and we are aligning the curriculum, just like what they did for reading. We are working on this right now and a lot of our objectives will be coming from what is on the standardized test. Then we are going to decide what we need to teach to meet those objectives in order to be ready for the test. Then we will be looking at new materials and what materials we are going to need to teach that curriculum.

“The reading curriculum was first and now math is second,” according to my participants. When I asked Ms. Samson how she felt about the reform efforts at T-Sinclair, she let me know that reform is good but the amount of reform in the building is daunting. She said, “Do they think we can be superheroes or super people here and just

whatever they ask, we can do? Here's one new thing to do and then here's another." The reforms are not completely in place for math, yet her tone demonstrates that she already feels overwhelmed by the reform involving reading at T-Sinclair. She may also be unhappy because she has expressed the desire to teach math all day, and because of the reform has been forced to teach reading comprehension in her homeroom and enrichment classes. I suggest that as the school curriculum grows more rigid and aligned to the testing curriculum, the incidence of teacher frustration and fear about professional embarrassment will grow. The reform is not working and as a result, more teachers at T-Sinclair will fall under close scrutiny by the "Federal Bureau." The other participants will feel increased pressure to deflect the blame for persistently low-test scores onto their students.

During this study, I was distressed by how fearful my participants were of failing to increase test scores. This was evidenced by the fact that the 6th grade teachers referred to state officials visiting the school as the "Federal Bureau." In reality, the visiting officers were state curriculum officials checking on the district's adherence to federal SINA mandates. These visits and the idea of the visits were threatening and most likely the impetus for many of the misguided explanations for student underachievement.

I think it is important to note that the teachers may be driven to view students in a negative light out of a desire for exoneration (to escape blame). However, it is also the case that they simply lack knowledge and insight that might lead them to alternative understandings of student underachievement. Thus, their tendency to blame students also appears inescapable to them. The data in this study has shown that they did want to see

the students as competent and worthy of hopeful aspiration. They simply could not escape the conclusion that the students are inadequate.

### Blame that Leads to Student Bribing

Ms. Dean fears for her professional safety. In order to protect herself or district officials from being blamed for low-test scores, she positions students to take the blame. She has supported her blaming ideology by creating a *low-effort* explanation for test failure that places the blame and full responsibility for testing failure onto the fact that students are not trying hard enough to succeed.

### Student Blame and Low -Effort

After each quarterly test, Ms. Dean reports test data to her students and uses *low-effort* blaming against them (students are told that they are responsible for poor test scores because of their low effort in taking the test). For example, after the second quarterly test in January she told me the following,

I will go over the test-taking strategies with the students and then I will ask, 'Where did we make our mistakes at? How do you get the best answer?' Be honest with the students. Let them [students] know. We didn't make our goal. We went backwards. You know? And at the same time, don't blame the test. Don't get them to where they're blaming the test. I think that's what you have to do, teach the kids—"You learn from mistakes. No, maybe its not the best test, but this is what you've been given and this is what you have to do. And there is going to be times in your life you're given a job that you don't really care for, but it's your job and you've got to do it. So you do it and you do it with the best pride and integrity that you have." That's what we're going to do.

This blaming statement shows that despite the fact that Ms. Dean knows that the assessment is flawed, she places the full burden for testing improvement onto student effort. She teaches her students, "to not blame the test" because it is "what they have been given." She suggests that students must rise above the flawed system. She also states,

“They must do what they have to do” to succeed. I would further suggest that she knows what she must do to succeed—she has no control over the curriculum and current system of reform so she must find some way to legitimize persistently low test scores. It’s as if she is playing the children’s game of Hot Potato (the potato being the blame—responsibility, for low test scores) and she has thrown the potato back into the students’ hands.<sup>12</sup>

Ms. Dean explains that she uses bribing in an effort to raise student test scores,

We’re doing Target Teach testing today, the first day of testing. *Now I have to, I do bribe my children.* I show them the first 45 minutes of a movie. And then I don’t show them the rest of the movie. I set a 10% goal [of improvement] for the class—if they get 10% higher as a class than last time. And if so many of them are proficient on the test, then they get to finish watching the rest of the movie in class. And then the class that improves the most gets brownies or suckers with their movies. It doesn’t cost a whole lot, but you know it helps motivate them. And I know some people are against that and I used to be. But if you think about it, we’re all externally motivated to some degree. I mean, obviously our paycheck gets us up every morning to a certain degree. And last year they [district officials] told me that I only had two students at the end of the year proficient in reading. I’m sorry! That’s not right. I can tell you right now, if you were to put 100 bucks out in front of each of them, what do you think your test would have been like? I mean, you need to think about that. You know, we put all of these incentives out there in the work place. Reach a goal and you get a bonus. Reach a goal, we’ll plan a trip as a company. Reach a goal, and we’ll do this. And what do we put out there for these kids? Nothing for them that is tangible for them to have any interest in.

In this narrative, Ms. Dean explains that she must use bribery to increase effort and *get the job done*. She justifies her position by comparing student testing to the adult work-world and the external motivation of a paycheck—a paycheck she infers she gets up for

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<sup>12</sup> *Hot Potato* is a children’s circle game where participants sit in a circle on the floor and pretend they are passing a very hot potato around the circle. The potato passes very quickly between participants and if it is dropped or if a participant gets caught with it in their hands when the timer goes off, they are automatically out of the game. The object of the game is to stay in the circle as long as one can and to never get caught with the potato.

every morning. She explains that it would only take 100 bucks per student to raise test scores. In order to legitimate her blaming and bribing practice, she compares her students to *adults on the job*. She suggests that if the school could offer big enough bribes, she could eliminate the no effort pathology and that students at T-Sinclair would all be in the proficient range on reading tests. In developing this system of rewards, she makes it appear as if she is doing all that she can to get students where they need to be.

She repeated the idea that students will not work unless they are motivated to do so in another metaphor about selling hams,

I used to be a sales rep at a food warehouse. If I sold "X" amount of hams, I'd get like a 2000 dollar bonus. If I had to sell 200 hams and I only made it to 199, I didn't get my bonus and it didn't matter how close I was. So I think you have to explain the way life really is to them and how goals work.

Jonathan Kozol (2005) found that *low* student effort is common in failing schools. He has observed that schools across the nation require their students, in a form of motivation, to take part in daily cheers so that students will become more focused on succeeding in school. At Seattle's Thurgood Marshall School, the students are led in a recitation of the words, "I have confidence that I can learn," 30 times each morning.

On the surface, it appears that Ms. Dean is working with students that need external motivation. However, at a deeper level, she may be aware that her teaching efforts are not resulting in the success that is expected, and that she feels pressured to find a way to explain why students are not testing proficient under her tutelage. In order to get her own "bonus" so to speak, she has to seduce the students to marshal the effort necessary to succeed. She throws the potato back to them in hopes that they will be the



ones caught with it. It comes down to survival and coping and sensible reason seems to have nothing to do with the dilemma of underachievement at this school.

She describes students who possess the low-effort pathology as “passive aggressive.” She said “passive aggressives” are students who work really hard at “not doing [their work and practice testing].” She infers that she has failed to raise test scores because her students do not try on the tests and have a *desire* to fail. They have failed to pass the *hot potato*. She related a story about a young man in her class, who has this *disorder*,

So he came in this morning and he was working hard. [She slowed down before thoughtfully going on]. Either that, or he’s faking it really good. He was the last child to get done with the test. He sits over in front of my desk and there’s nobody else for him to cheat off of.

It was obvious that Ms. Dean believed that the story she was relating about this young man might be looked upon as suspicious. In fact, I suspect that she was struggling to believe it herself. She does not appear to believe that he can be successful with the test on his own. After all, according to the data, she believes that her students are prone to underachievement and that tests actually set her students up for failure.

She went on with this story in order to get her main point across—that bribing is a necessary part of her testing curriculum because her students choose to fail. She explained,

They did 12 questions today, which is two stories. And then they’ll do their big story tomorrow. He got 9 out of 12, which is 75%. Which isn’t outstanding but once again, he’s passive, aggressive. For some reason he took his time, read the story and answered the questions. Now, it will be interesting if he comes back in tomorrow the same way, or if he has an *off day* tomorrow. Is it the movie? Because if it’s the movie, maybe I could find something more external to get him motivated. Because really you have to externally motivate somebody before it

becomes internal. Very rarely does an internal motivation come before an external motivation in my philosophy. I don't have anything in Bloom's Taxonomy to prove that or anything.

According to Ms. Dean, this young man worked differently this particular day because of her promise that he would get to watch the second part of the movie. According to her logic, a movie was a big enough bribe to trigger his desire and ability to succeed. Perhaps she was working hard to demonstrate her willingness to coerce students into trying harder and positioning herself to prove to her superiors that she is doing her best with students who are uniquely troublesome when it comes to testing.

She gave the following example of another student she labeled as *passive aggressive*,

I have a young boy in my first period class [the class period in which all Special Education students are funneled] who this is his second time in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. He was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade last year. I wouldn't say he is, you know, top-notch. School is easy for him, but he is definitely capable of reading. And last year I had him and he was failing. And I gave him a testing procedure and said, "If you get 80% or better on this, I'll let you be on the computers tomorrow and play Oregon Trail." Well, he did it in four minutes and had 100%! So right there, I motivated him. Now today we have the child back in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. He's gone through several disciplinary programs.

Ms. Dean explains that some of her students work very hard at putting in *no effort*. The young man in this narrative was able to finish the test quickly and with 100% accuracy because of her bribing strategy. She explains, "So right there, I motivated him!" In keeping with her assertion that bribing is making a difference for him, she may even believe that he didn't pass 6<sup>th</sup> grade the first time because he didn't receive enough reward for working hard. In a previous statement she admitted, "some people are against that [bribing] and I used to be." However, she has adjusted her convictions in order to

meet the demands of her job and to look like a better teacher to her staff, her principal, and to the “Federal Bureau.” I would go as far as to say that she had decided to abandon her values in order to feel successful as a teacher.

Ms. Samson, like her colleagues, is concerned about low performance in her subject area (math<sup>13</sup>). As a result, she uses a “tally” system to motivate her students to complete worksheets and math pages. She commented, “Some of them don’t care.” She described her system of rewards this way,

At the beginning of the year, I have a discussion with them about what their job is. And I start off by describing my old job at the grocery store. I was evaluated every 6 months. And every six months my boss would look and see if I can do this or if I was doing that. So if I got a good evaluation, what happened? I got a raise. You know? “So this is your job. What is your job in this classroom?”

Ms. Samson believes that some of her students will not perform well without some type of reward system. At the beginning of the year, she tells them that they will be externally rewarded for doing what she expects them to do. She lets them know that they are on the “job” in math and students who have the no-effort pathology will not receive their reward. She described her system of external rewards this way,

And so if they’re doing a really good job of listening and working for that day, maybe I’ll say, “You guys did a great today—give yourselves extra credit points.” So they will put extra credit points down. They also all start out with five tallies each student per week. Then at the end of the week, they figure out their percent of tallies for the week. I count these as 5% of their grade. It works, it works really good. They buy into it pretty well. If I warn them that I am going to take away a tally, then that’s it, they respond. I don’t sit here and go “tally, tally, tally.” I don’t have to take them away very often.

According to Ms. Samson, some of her students do not care about performing in school unless they are coerced through the use of tally sheets and grading. Although this form of

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<sup>13</sup> Ms. Samson noted that she believes that 75% of her math students test below grade level in math.

coercion is indirectly related to testing, it does suggest that my participants generally deflect all the blame for no-effort onto their students. In addition, they justify the use of coercion as a curricular tool that will increase achievement. It is conceivable, as the math curriculum becomes more closely monitored and Ms. Samson becomes more concerned about her job, that she will also use the low-effort pathology to deflect blame for testing failure away from herself.

#### Coercion—a Tool of Blame and Conformity to School Policy

It is important before leaving this section on coercion that I relate that I also observed parents and one of the building principals using student blame and coercion during a parent conference. Each week, my participants met with various parents who expressed concerns for the achievement of their children. During one weekly team meeting, my participants performed a “round robin litany” of blame against a 6<sup>th</sup> grader named Corey. Ms. Thorndike started with, “Nothing is ever his fault.” Ms. Craig said, “He doesn’t respect the teachers.” Ms. Samson said, “He refuses to do work in my class.” The parents sat motionless and their demeanor still seemed pleasant in spite of the bad news they were hearing. Ms. Dean emphasized, “It is not his ability, and he is intelligent.”

When Corey walked into the room to greet his teachers and parents, he looked reluctant and worried. The father grabbed a folding chair and slapped his hand down on the seat as if to let Corey know that he must sit down immediately. Corey sat down, put his hands together, and hung his head down low. The teachers boldly repeated their complaints. The principal sat there attentively. He had one hand cupped around his chin

as if he was thinking deeply about how to respond to this situation. It was difficult to watch Corey's face as each indictment was rendered. I wondered what this did to his trust with his teachers.

His father erupted (angry that the boy was not doing well in school), "I can't even get it down. I mean it. I don't play!" He paused as if to catch a breath. The father's eyes scanned the principal's face and the faces of all of the teachers. He said, "I know history has changed how we can do things, but we created him, he didn't create us!" This comment brought a slight giggle and some affirmative nods from some of the teachers. He looked at principal and the staff and then went on with his defense,

We know how this works. Corey is the 4th child we put through school and this is how things are going to be done. We will not tolerate disrespect, poor language, peer pressure, or anything that will keep him from doing his job. This boy is intelligent. This boy is intelligent. This boy is not, not capable. He repeated again, "He is intelligent."

I was glad Corey received this good news about his intelligence; however, I began to wonder why his father felt the need to repeat it so often.

At that moment, the principal waved his hand towards the door and looked at Corey's dad. He said, "My office is open. You can go to my office, shut the door, and take care of business."

Before you knew it, the boy's father had jumped up and he and his son were on their way down the stairs to the principal's office. They were gone about 10 minutes. When he returned with his father, I was relieved to see that there were no visible signs of "business" and I hoped that this was merely a verbal ritual. I started to think of my own ethical responsibilities towards the young man whom I had never met before.

When Corey went to sit down by his parents, the principal called him over to his chair. He looked sternly into the boy's eyes and said,

You have a choice, you either start doing your job, or I can give you the end of the year test. If you get 100% and you don't even miss one, I will send you to 7<sup>th</sup> grade. However, if you even miss one, I will call your elementary school and send you back right now. Which is it going to be?

The boy's eyes widened and he sullenly agreed to do all that his teachers and parents suggested. This data shows that student blame and coercion is common to the student experience at T-Sinclair. Corey was blamed for all of his school problems and the adults in his life failed to explore any alternate reasons for his undesirable behaviors. Verbal threats, a walk to a closed room with an angry father, and an end of the year test and retention were all used to threaten and intimidate Corey into doing what he was supposed to do. During this study I found that my participants and this building principal consistently used student blame and bribery to achieve their professional goals. Perhaps teachers at T-Sinclair struggle to carry out their professional duties, they tend to blame their students in order to save professional face. As a result, coercion is a natural feature of the testing curriculum and is being used by Ms. Dean in order to appear as if she is doing that all she can to follow district policy and testing goals. Corey and his fellow 6<sup>th</sup> graders are not consulted and their perspectives are not elicited. For all intents and purposes, they are the silent pawns in the process.

#### Blame that Leads to Student Exclusion

I have gone to great lengths in this dissertation to demonstrate that my participants believe that their students are prone to underachievement. Earlier in this work, I demonstrated that Ms. Keys and Ms. Dean both fear professional failure, a

condition that may have an impact on the professional lives of all of my participants as the current curricular reform gathers momentum. This fear and pressure to meet administrative expectations results in a blaming ideology that is used to deflect responsibility for underachievement onto the students themselves and away from teachers—a no win situation.

In the first part of this chapter, I explained how the blaming ideology leads to student coercion. Perhaps the teachers use coercion in hopes of pressuring students to perform and conform to school goals. Coercion is also symbolic that teachers are indeed trying to do something about underachievement. In Part 2, I will suggest that the blaming ideology also leads to the labeling of students and for some, imminent exclusion from the general education population. My participants seem to believe that they cannot help students who are *very low* and that these students should be removed from their classrooms so that specialized teachers can concentrate on helping those students who are incapable in the regular classroom.

#### Sorting Special Education Students: Where Do They Belong?

Tracking does not increase student performance but, in contrast, increases the potential for school failure and dropout (Fine, 1991; Oakes, 1985; Rist, 1973). During my study of teacher beliefs about underachievement at T-Sinclair, I found several ways in which students were tracked and sorted according to “ability.” I noted one example of this in Chapter 4 when I explained that Ms. Kent has the only advanced math class in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Students that are not able to work proficiently out of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade math text are *excluded* from the advanced class because they are not “there yet.” In addition, most

African American students at T-Sinclair are excluded from advanced math for reasons that Ms. Kent is still attempting to clarify for herself.

I observed another example of this forced tracking in Ms. Samson's math class. All of her special education students and some additional students who are *low* but not yet placed in special education have been tracked together in order to bring them up to speed with current math goals. These "special needs" students were also scheduled for math two consecutive periods a day. Ms. Samson explained, "It is better that they are altogether so I, and the special education teacher, can walk around and kind of see what they should be doing so we don't lose them." These students have been pulled out of mainstream math and have been placed in a math class just for "students who might get lost." Perhaps they are already lost, in this placement. Ms. Samson calls these students, "my special needs," as if it is a term of endearment, and at one point in our conversation let me know that this is an arrangement she is not thrilled about but lives with in order to give this special group *a special kind of instruction* (review and repetition). She explained in a weary voice,

It's exhausting, especially when you have so many kids that are in need. Fifteen of my students are low, low. That is more than half of my class. Regular kids are hard. But having special needs with behavior problems trying to sit there and behave for two hours is, you know. It's not fun for me. Most of the low students are not doing well because they don't know their facts. And I would say that at most, those who are extremely low are because of division. They don't want to do division; they don't know how to do multiplication. And I'm like, if these kids still even like me towards the end of this semester, I will be surprised. Because it just seems like I'm on them so much more than I have to be with other kids.

Regular T-Sinclair students are "hard" to teach but special education students are beyond *hard*, and as a result are excluded from the regular math experience into an alternate



general/special setting, an experience that the teacher finds “exhausting.” Perhaps this exclusionary practice or *special* arrangement serves two purposes for my participants: it confirms the assertion that some students are naturally *low* and unlikely to succeed with the prescribed curriculum and on standardized testing. Secondly it operates as a smoke screen that communicates the image that teachers are sacrificing and working hard to make a difference in student performance at the school.

Ms. Dean tracks her students for reading groups, and also believes in excluding Special Education students from the mainstream reading class. She explained,

I’m a little bit concerned about what position the children are coming to us in. For example, you know, when we have a 6th grader coming in at a 3rd grade reading level and the folder says no concerns at this time, I’m sorry. We have some serious issues prior to this that were not addressed. And I have kids that have IEP’s that are still being placed in whole reading classes. I don’t have a problem with kids with IEP’s, but if they’re already at a 3rd grade reading level with and IEP, why in the world are we keeping them in a whole class with 25-30 kids when their teacher at that point in time is teaching with 2-3 kids?

Ms. Dean is frustrated that she cannot exclude her special education students from her class. This is not surprising considering the data that shows she is under tremendous pressure to raise test scores. As long as they are in her classroom, she has to do a lot more blaming and “bribing” to get test scores to rise. She does not understand why she should have students in her class that have already been labeled and identified as being *too low*. In one of our conversations, she told me that she is going “to work” (put more effort in) to exclude those students from her classes next year. Maybe she will be offered a deal like Ms. Samson has this year—to place all of her students with IEPs into one reading class. In doing so, all of her reading groups in that class may have to be labeled as *Group D*.

Ms. Phillips is the special education teacher on the team and is very comfortable with her role as the “special educator.” She describes her students this way,

Like I said, if I compared them to their peers, then they wouldn’t be sitting in my classroom. If they could do everything all the other sixth graders were doing at the same level, at the same time, in the same way, then they wouldn’t need my help.

Ms. Phillips confirms what my participants all believe about their students labeled with disabilities. They are *different* and prone to fail as regular 6<sup>th</sup> graders. She explains that when students are as different as her students are from their peers, they need special help from specialized teachers, like her.

#### The General Education Intervention Meetings: Getting Students the Help They Need

Ms. Phillips maintains that special education students need *special* help. During my study, my participants met every Thursday afternoon to discuss student underachievement and how to find ways to help those who need it. This informal team meeting is labeled the General Education Intervention (GEI) meeting. The original intent of this planning meeting was to support students who are struggling with learning in general education classes. However, in my observations of classrooms and these meetings, I found that my participants often expressed that they were at the end of their ropes with specific underachievers and that many of the students they referred to in the GEI meetings *should be out* of their classrooms and placed into the special education arena. As a result of these assertions, during my observations, the GEI Meetings often became an effort to funnel students into special education.

At the time of this study, one out of four T-Sinclair students were in special education and slightly over 60% of those students were African American. While probing

my participants about this large number of special education students at T-Sinclair, I was able to elicit few comments. The special education consultant assigned to T-Sinclair 6<sup>th</sup> graders, closed the door of his office in order to tell me privately that there is something very wrong about the large number of students who are placed into special education at the school. He left the school soon after our conversation because of his persistent conflict with my participants over what he considered a communication problem. He told me that the teachers often take shortcuts with the GEI format and that they rarely follow through on collecting all of the information that they need in order to intervene for students and make the process work well.

During the GEI meetings, teachers are expected to use a sequential problem solving process to protect students from being over-placed into special education. The *formal* GEI process begins with a *Blue Folder*. Sometimes this folder is called the Problem Solving Plan (PSP). All students at T-Sinclair who are labeled with a learning difficulty must have a blue folder if teachers use classroom interventions not already mandated by an IEP or 504 Plan. In theory, all students who have a blue folder are being supported on a daily basis by special classroom interventions. These folders are to be reviewed at least once every two weeks by team members, and records of specific teaching interventions are to be reported and recorded in the folder. At the time of this study, 42 sixth graders were being tracked via blue folders.

According to my participants, this process is overwhelming and impossible to complete. After reviewing the data, I agree with them. As a long time educator, I realize that it would be very difficult to be a quality teacher and keep up with this extensive

paper work. In addition, this process guarantees that teachers are focused on documenting and charting student deficits for several hours a week; this is another confirmation to teachers that T-Sinclair is a tough school. This process alone makes it a tough place to work!

The district developed specific guidelines for preparing the blue folders and GEI plans. The plan must include a statement describing the candidate's learning problem (s), a list of interventions used by the teaching team to resolve the learning problem, an explanation of how the educational interventions worked, relevant educational history, and a data graph demonstrating the results of teaching interventions in measurable terms. Before a classroom intervention is considered complete, the teacher must have collected data showing use of an intervention at least 10 times, and the results of the collection must be measured and graphed.

The information that is gathered in the blue folder is collected and organized in order to report problem-solving activity to building administrators. A team representative must present every folder to the formal building committee, which meets bi-monthly.<sup>14</sup> The goal of the committee is to monitor how the needs of students are being addressed and support teachers in designing learning interventions. Theoretically, this process appears helpful. However, Ms. Dean explained that she rarely gets to present the learning difficulties of more than three students at each formal meeting and noted that some student folders may take several presentations before the appropriate interventions or

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<sup>14</sup> The committee consists of eight regular members: a school counselor, teachers representing each teaching team, special education consultants, and administrators. On occasion and as needed, parents and related service personnel are invited to the meetings (nurse, physician, social worker).

placement is found for a student. Logistically, this plan has some real problems. During my study in the fall of 2004, the 6<sup>th</sup> grade alone had 42 Blue Folders to present. If all 42 students were presented to the formal committee *only once*, which rarely happened, it would take 14 meetings or 7 months out of a 9 month school year for a first reading of all of the folders. It did not appear that there was enough time for teachers to be able to complete their assigned task.

As the data in this section of this chapter demonstrates, my participants believe that more students should be *excluded* from regular education and placed in special education. Michele Fine (1991) suggests that students tracked as *low achievers* are *exiled* early on from the mainstream of school life. If a GEI team member can demonstrate that they have tried every possible solution to help a student, the formal committee *may agree* that the student needs a new placement and should be recommended for special education testing. The 6<sup>th</sup> grade team members consistently complained to me that too many students who need special education services are overlooked for those services. As a result of this, they are frugal about who they present to the formal committee first, in case they are able to procure a rarely offered special education pre-referral slot (permission to test for special education). In order to procure one of these placements, the team must make sure that the special education candidates' folder is as complete and as convincing as possible. I will show that team members often exaggerate learning difficulties just to qualify a student for pre-referral testing.

When I first attended the GEI team meetings, I found it very difficult to follow the dialogue. I tried to tape the GEI team meeting once and realized that the teachers

consistently talked over each other and at the same time. It reminded me of television footage of the New York stock exchange. This chaotic atmosphere seemed to be a natural outflow of teacher desperation to get their concerns heard on as many of their students as possible in a short amount of time, generally 30 to 40 minutes.

A typical GEI discussion began with the mention of the student's name. At the sound of the name the teachers would brainstorm descriptive comments about the student's performance and school behaviors in list form. After listing their complaints, the teachers would deliberate in order to come to a consensus on which student problem they should highlight for their blue folder report. It appeared that it was significant to select a complaint about a student that would gain great attention from the formal committee. After the main complaint was decided on, the team members developed an intervention plan and decided who would keep track of the data collection for that intervention—the proof that their complaint was legitimate enough for special education referral. The teachers consistently ran out of time for this process and often had to meet during additional times in the school week to complete their work as best they could.

The GEI meetings give teachers an opportunity to find and impose an organized history of blame onto specific students. It is significant to note that, if a student has a blue folder at T-Sinclair, his or her record of difficulties are accumulated and can be used against them at any time over the three years they attend the school—a vita of sorts. According to T-Sinclair policies, if a student has a blue folder, they are labeled as an “at-risk” student (underachieving academically and on testing) and are more likely to be moved into low ability groups or special education than students without a *Blue Folder*.

Formal GEI administrators will not consider teacher requests for special education testing without it. In fact, my participants told me that they must develop strong and convincing arguments outlining student deficits to get administrative attention and referral options. The GEI process, at the time of my study, inclined teachers to trump up charges against their students in order to get them placed outside of their classroom. My participants were accountable for raising test scores and students who were not performing well in their classes were considered a mechanical defect in the wheel of federal expectations and testing performance. Getting students out of class was the first step in getting rid of one more low-test score.

#### The GEI Process, Problem-Solving, and Cherie

During one of my first GEI meeting observations, Ms. Dean, Mr. Roman, Ms. Craig, Ms. Thorndike, a special education consultant, and a school counselor worked through the problem-solving process for a student named Cherie. As usual, the team all gathered with their grade books and snacks and sat around a table in Ms. Samson's classroom. The team historically met alone; however, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, the teachers were not getting along well with the building special education consultant (SEC). They had complained that Cherie needed special education services and that the GEI process had not worked for her. The SEC rebuffed the complaint and said that the team was not working on quality interventions for Cherie. At this point in time, and after only three years of service at the school, he had already asked for a transfer to another building and was waiting for a new assignment.

Ms. Dean began the meeting by stating, "We are here to discuss problem-solving for Cherie. She stated more formally than usual, "Who would like to begin the process?"

Ms. Samson flipped through the forms inside of the folder and also checked her own notes. She spoke in a very business like manner, "She attended four schools through elementary. She had to be under a lot of stress." Ms. Samson expressed her sadness about Cherie's educational instability and shook her head. I was relieved to see this compassion and as a result had high hopes that Cherie had an advocate in this room.

She looked up and resolutely continued, "She seems to do okay with me one on one, but the minute I walk away from her in class, she gets confused and is not able to process multiple steps." She handed an example of Cherie's poor work to Ms. Craig and motioned for her to send it around the table. I knew what to expect now, Cherie was being set up as a "low student."

All of the participants took a moment to look at the Cherie's work. I was not sitting at the table, but I could see that the paper was almost empty except for a couple of division problems on it; her numerals looked oversized and poorly spaced. Ms. Craig turned the paper around in a circle as if to denote that she was not sure which part of Cherie's work was right side up. Ms. Thorndike smiled at the confusion and the paper moved from hand to hand as it made its way back to Ms. Samson. The fact that the student's work was not up to speed was funny to some of them.

The SEC immediately jumped into the conversation by introducing information he had gleaned from school reform literature, "A Framework for Understanding Poverty" by Ruby Payne (1996). He crossed his arms and nodded somewhat piously, "That is



consistent with what Ruby Payne says about learning structures. Poor kids need them badly.” He looked back to the teachers as if checking for a response. I was surprised at how general this statement seemed and I wondered what Ruby Payne had to do with this poor girl’s situation.

Mr. Roman paused as if thinking about what the SEC had just said. He responded in a slightly impatient tone, “Cherie doesn’t concentrate on school issues. Boys are her attention getter.”

By that time the school counselor had come in and sat next to me. She seemed irritated by that comment and said, “I don’t think that is unusual for her age.” Her eyebrows wrinkled. She scanned the group looking for support and wiggled in her chair at the table as if reconsidering where she had decided to sit for the meeting.

The SEC ignored the counselor’s statement and seriously added, “Hmm, that could be a concern; she has a history of sexual abuse.” It surprised me to hear him disclose this information to the group.

In an effort to change the direction of the conversation and to regain some credence about his perspective of the student, Mr. Roman explained, “We always have to redirect her learning. She is great one on one [an echo of what Ms. Samson had said earlier and an indication that the teachers believe that she needs a more restrictive placement].”

The SEC looked at his watch and then said, “Well, you have all of the data points and paperwork done for problem solving in math, but not for the other subjects.” He was polite but appeared annoyed that he had been called into the meeting and paperwork for

other academic subjects was not completed. When he mentioned the missing paperwork, the teachers caught glances of each other and appeared irritated. He added, “Are you watching her sexual advances? I’m wondering if you are picking up her real needs here.”

The teachers shifted around in their chairs as they were being scolded. They also seemed uncomfortable talking about Cherie’s sexuality. Ms. Samson and Mr. Roman sighed and leafed through their paperwork on the student. Occasionally the teachers would glance up at the clock. The meeting would be over in just 15 minutes and the group had not come to any consensus about Cherie’s *real* problem—a problem that was yet to be determined.

After a pause to make sure that the teachers all understood his dissatisfaction in their preparation for the meeting, the SEC continued, “You all need to get busy on collecting “assignment completion” data for the other subjects she is struggling in. We have to reinvent a baseline that wasn’t taken.”<sup>15</sup> This “reinventing,” suggested that baseline data would have to be forged a bit. Cherie’s *star* would have to be removed at all costs. He packed up his papers and then left the room.

As he walked out, and in an effort to demonstrate that the teachers were in fact prepared for the meeting, Ms. Dean piped up, “Her reading is *low* but not *that low* compared to her peers [she shook her head as she looked down at her reading record for Cherie]. I wish she was *low* enough to get assistance [special education].” Voicing disappointment, she went on, “She is not in the bottom 25%. She has what it takes to

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<sup>15</sup> This is a reference to the referral process. All teacher observations pertaining to underachievement must be accompanied by a 10-point data collection of some sort.

meet the demands of the curriculum at 6<sup>th</sup> grade level.” This was obviously bad news to the team.

Sounding impatient and seemingly more comfortable now that the SEC left the room, Mr. Roman stated,

We need to hold her more accountable and hopefully get her to school more often. We need a hypothesis, and then we need to devise interventions. We need to show an effort was made by the team to monitor and develop interventions for missing work.

Ms. Dean interjected,

Justification for services does not usually include attendance issues [pause] and not that we are looking at special education, but we need to show an effort was made in class to control her attention and completion of assignments [deep breath]. Look for things to attend to that might be addressed in an IEP.

Then she stated an important warning,

We need to be careful, because taking her to special education [the GEI] with attendance might disqualify her for any help, and it appears that she may only qualify for math. Retention might give her more and she can be retained for more than math.

The discussion ended without warning as the bell rang and the teachers had to leave.

By the end of this meeting, the staff members at T-Sinclair had blamed Cherie's underachievement on a myriad of causes, all pointing to reasons away from the teachers' control. Cherie was failing because she moved a lot, she had been under a lot of stress, she would become confused during instruction, she didn't understand or know relevant content material, she couldn't work independently from the teacher, she was sexually abused and distracted by the boys, she wasn't being held accountable, and because she was poor. As I listened to them discuss her problems and her learning behaviors, I

envisioned her being buried alive as each teacher threw in a shovel of evidence relating to her behaviors.

As the teachers listed their reasons for Cherie's underachievement, they worked to negotiate a consensus on how to characterize her failures as a student. Should it be math? Math didn't get much attention from the SEC. Mr. Roman believed that the team could get her placed if they decided on a strong hypothesis and worked to hold her more "accountable." The significance of the negotiation became apparent when Ms. Dean warned the contributing staff members that an underachievement story characterized by low attendance might thwart their plan to procure special services for the student. As can be noted from this discussion, the school staff negotiated Cherie's pathology and was working for a tight case—a foolproof and inarguable narrative of her inability to fit into the T-Sinclair normative landscape.

#### The GEI Team Process, Problem-Solving, and Matthew

On a Tuesday afternoon, the 6<sup>th</sup> grade teaching team all began to filter into the rear of Ms Craig's room. Most of the teachers that entered the room had their red grade books, at least one stack of papers to grade in case they had time to check them while discussing meeting topics, and bottles of pop and finger food to snack on. Their chairs squeaked across the green tiles on the floor, as they got comfortable around the table. You could hear soda bottles opening and the sound of food wrappers being torn open.

Mr. Roman walked over to the windows near the table to quickly use his cell phone to call and check about his car that was being serviced. It appeared that the dealer was not giving him good news about the extent of the mechanical problems with his car. I

heard a couple of teachers sigh and there was a tone of physical weariness around the two tables.

Ms Dean sat at the end of the two tables and looked down the row of teachers as if she was at the “head” of a corporate business table. She was the assigned team representative for the next formal GEI meeting. She quickly energized as she took a bite of a Snickers bar, and then complained to the group that two students had come to her during third period to request permission to go to band, but they were not on the band list. She said, “I didn’t let them go.” She appeared to look to a couple of teachers for approval. “The list he (the band teacher) gave us says the day and the names, but not the period. It’s his problem and he needs to work on solving it. We have enough of our own problems to solve!”

Ms. Craig said, “I just put student names on my attendance list with the letters SL for “student lesson.” She laughed as she said, “That’s better than SOL!” The teachers appeared to force a giggle about the acronym.

Ms. Dean quietly munched on her candy bar and took another swallow of Pepsi. She suggested that the team get on with their list of student needs. She asked who was first on the list.

Ms Samson, the math teacher started to speak. “Matthew is going to be back from the Education Discipline Center (EDC) on Monday.” You could hear voices groaning and the clicking of tongues from all the teachers around the tables. A couple of teachers pushed back on the table and folded their arms across their chests.

Ms Craig looked up to the ceiling and slapped her right hand onto her chest as she exclaimed, "Oh God!"

Ms. Samson pinched her lips together and nodded in a disappointed response. Her eyes moved back and forth between the teachers in jagged movements. I had not met this young man, and it amazed me that a sixth grader could bring this much consternation to a group of teachers. She continued, "We don't have his blue folder finished and he will be back. We won't have a plan in place." I took this to mean that the student was not on the list of students labeled as at-risk yet on account of the fact that he was not *Blue Folderized*. As a result, his teachers had no bargaining power when it came to getting help for him or *themselves*. They all started to complain about how the child was a behavior problem and the fact that Matthew should not be returning to them under any circumstance.

Ms. Dean, the reading teacher said, "Don't put him in my 5th period!" All kinds of sidebar conversations and negative talk ensued around the table about Matthew. I heard comments like, "it's just laziness, he belongs in special education, he's so needy, and his parents don't support the school."

Mr. Roman said, "Do we have to try and get dad up here again?" There was no answer. Teachers started to open their grade books to scan their class lists in an effort to be ready to propose a schedule for him that would best protect their own interests.

Ms. Thorndike said,

He does nothing in class and is gone so much! Before he left, he had a "U" from me, and we had done a lot of the work on our Tree Unit as a group. I think he has been retained twice before...once in 5<sup>th</sup> and [pause] maybe once in 1<sup>st</sup> grade.

When I asked him to come to my tutoring session on Thursdays, he didn't show up. He doesn't care.

Ms. Samson smiled at Ms. Thorndike and said, "Yeah, I chased him down a couple of times after school so that he didn't get onto the bus [a few chuckles]."

Mr. Roman questioned Ms. Samson, "Is he *low* for you? He isn't that *low* in social studies. Actually, he can be a nice guy if you don't bother him." Everyone around the table laughed at Roman's sarcasm. "One time he fell asleep and I didn't catch that he hadn't gone to 4<sup>th</sup> period until I came back in from hall supervision to begin my next class! The teachers around the table were shaking their heads in frustration and agreement.

Ms. Samson said, "He's really *low* in math. He struggles with his *basic facts*. I started keeping data on him before he left for the EDC. I have quite a bit of data to show to the formal committee." I thought back to my discussion with Ms. Samson about basic facts. Perhaps her assertion that her students are "low" because of their basic fact deficit was born at this GEI table in order to legitimate more blue folder arguments.

Ms. Craig said,

He struggles in language arts because he doesn't like to write. To tell you the truth, I don't know what he can do, because he never turns in anything. I end up sending him to the intervention room a lot of the time. His mom told me he was a good writer and I told her, "There is no way I could know that because he never does his work!"

Ms. Dean added,

Well, he didn't do that great on the Hasting Reading Performance Tests but his individual reading inventory shows that he is a good reader. I think he scores quite a bit above grade level in reading. I'm not sure about his state performance test. He is in my top reading group but is failing because he won't ever turn in his journal!

Ms. Samson responded, “Who can help me with his blue folder this week?” The teachers all looked back at her but no one volunteered right away. I wondered if their lack of response had to do with the fact that teachers were having trouble figuring out his “problem.” Her eyes watered and she raised her voice a bit, “I don’t have time to do these during my planning time, folks.”

Ms Dean responded in an exasperated but kind and apologetic voice, “Well he’s high in reading so it should be someone else.” She looked around at the other teachers. I found it interesting that she described Matthew as “high” in this instance.

Ms. Craig looked down at the table and said in a regretful tone, “Ok, I’ll do it. What kind of data should I collect? *We will want to make sure that we can show that it is his behavior!*” After questioning her about this, she let me know that the team would have a better chance at procuring a special education placement for Matthew if his performance problems were related to behavior because of his high abilities. The other teachers looked at her blankly and seemed relieved that they were off the blue bolder hook in this case.

Ms. Phillips, the special education teacher added, “If you need me, I can help you with the wording of the interventions [she told me that she generally does this to help the team, because well-worded interventions are received better by the formal GEI team].” I took this to mean that she has the language of “special education” and that special education words are more powerful to administrative staff when seeking to win a referral slot with the formal committee. Matthew appeared to have a star on his belly in reading (he is “high”); however, his star had to be removed or tarnished a bit in order to make



him look more like a Plain-Belly Sneetch. Ms. Phillips had the language to make this happen.

Ms. Samson looked at Ms. Craig and said, "Do you have any samples of his work?" The bell rang. All of the teachers jumped up from the table to go cover their enrichment classes. Ms. Samson and Ms. Craig continued to talk about the student's work in language arts as the two of them walked slowly to the door. Ms. Samson said to Ms. Craig, "Do you have outside duty tonight?" Ms. Craig shook her head as if to say, "No." Ms. Samson replied, "Then I'll come back in right after school and we can talk about how we are going to approach this [trying to get the special attention of the formal committee and possible special education placement]."

Several students were jammed up in the doorway, waiting to get around their two teachers and into their enrichment class. Ms. Samson wiggled through the students and Ms. Craig could be heard in a heightened voice, "Sit down and start reading your SSR (sustained, silent reading) book." Some of the students sat down right away, while others gave Ms. Craig a quick glance and then continued to stand in their small groups of peers visiting and laughing. One girl chased a boy around the back of the room because he had grabbed her reading book. Ms. Craig raced to the back of the room to corral the two students.

My participants were not looking forward to seeing Matthew again. He was sent out of the building to a discipline center because he refused to do his homework. It appeared to me that while at the EDC, Matthew had basically been "out of sight, out of mind" or as Isabel stated in Chapter 1, he had been "placed there in an effort to forget

that they [he] existed (Kozol, 2005, p.28). Now to their surprise, he was returning, they had to spring into action in order to protect their classroom *status quo*. He read above grade level and wasn't that much of a problem in social studies. As a result, he could not be labeled at-risk in those subjects. He had a list of general charges made against him by his teachers (laziness, does not do his homework, has been retained twice). I'm sure that Matthew had deeper issues than were being outlined here. However, my participants felt the need to place all of their teaching time and energy into finding a way to exclude Matthew from their regular curriculum—a set curriculum that made little room for Matthew's exceptions. They had placed the *hot potato* of blame and “no effort” securely into Matthew's hands at the discipline center, and to their great surprise, the potato (responsibility for his success), along with Matthew, was coming back their way. Exclusion was another way to blame a student for not performing as expected.

Special Education has traditionally been perceived as a sound alternative and caring placement for *low* performing students (Skrtric, 2004). Although many researchers have found this method of special education placement problematic, schools continue to practice this policy in an effort to preserve middle class privilege and the status quo (Sleeter, 1986; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996). Matthew and Cherie's teachers most likely thought they were doing the students and themselves a favor by pushing hard for special education placements. As a result, while they passionately worked through the system of negotiation to undo Matthew and Cherie's “mis-placements,” they were actually sealing their fates and locating them into a new world of labels (the place where *star-less* students learn). This world is a *different world, an exiled world* that will ultimately

stigmatize and limit their academic future (Brantlinger, 2004; Kliewer & Biklen, 1996; Reid & Button, 1995).

Before leaving this chapter on coercion and exclusion, I will share one more example of exclusionary practice at T-Sinclair—the Adventure Team.

#### Exclusion and the Adventure Team

Twice a month, district administrators (HSCA) visit T-Sinclair so that they can explain reform initiatives to grade level teams. Each team sends one representative to this meeting. The day that I observed the Building Leadership Team (BLT), there were 12 participants seated at a table in the library. One of the meeting participants was Ms. Thorndike, the science teacher from the 6<sup>th</sup> grade team. She had come to school at 6 A.M. this particular morning in order to be ready for this meeting and her teaching responsibilities for the day. She held two file folders full of BLT notes and was shuffling through them when the first district administrator began to speak. She looked at him intently and started to write notes almost immediately. She was taking her appointment to this committee very seriously. The administrator said, “We (the district administrators) want everyone to know that the HSCA are *here* and available for your support in raising test scores and eliminating the achievement gap.”

The “downtown” administrators in attendance were two curriculum officers, a special education administrator, and the associate superintendent. Very few questions were asked and in general, the HSCA was focused on dispensing information. Ms. Thorndike would occasionally look up from her notes and give each speaker a courteous smile and nod of attention.

The special education administrator cleared his throat slightly and began to explain that a new teacher was being hired for a *self-contained*<sup>16</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> grade classroom. He smiled as he described the program,

The program will be robust and full of integrated, literature-based learning [his description sounded like an advertisement for great learning]. On Fridays, the students will leave the school and go to learning experiences off of campus. This will be a 'catch-up' room for 7<sup>th</sup> graders who are identified in the 30-40% range on last year's state test.

The first curriculum officer interrupted and stated, "This teaching position is extremely important."

The special education administrator continued, "This room will contain from 23 to 27 students and it is our hope that we can hire someone for a 6<sup>th</sup> grade self-contained classroom just like it for next year. His voice lightened a bit as he smiled and said,

This room must be labeled carefully because we do not want this room to be stigmatized and equated as a special education classroom. These specific students are being selected for this experience so that we can give them that little extra boost on the standardized test.

It was obvious that these students were being targeted in order to increase T-Sinclair's chances of being eliminated from the SINA list.

Ms. Thorndike asked, "So, are these students being chosen and placed, or invited?" The special education coordinator smiled and looked down at his papers, shuffling them a bit, as he answered,

They are being *specifically targeted* according to their test scores, but they will be "invited" into the program. This classroom will be an exciting place to be and it is our hope that the students will want to be involved in it

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<sup>16</sup> Historically, self-contained classrooms are special education classrooms.

He looked to the associate superintendent as if he suspected that Ms. Thorndike was getting close to the truth— this new program sounds like special education.

The Associate Superintendent jumped right in,

This classroom is going to be a shot in the arm for those that are *selected*. Every Friday they will have an exciting field trip. We just sent the letters out to their parents explaining to them that their children have been specifically chosen [by test scores], and that they are fortunate to be invited to take part in this special school project...we have tentatively called it, "The Adventure Team."

I couldn't help but think, if this is such a great plan for students, why aren't all T-Sinclair students eligible for this special and success-oriented instruction?

At this point in the meeting, the second curriculum officer found a copy of the parent letter and read part of it out loud,

We are excited to announce that your student has been selected to participate in the 7<sup>th</sup> Grade Adventure Team at T-Sinclair, a new program designed to raise achievement. Your student was selected based on a combination of test scores, classroom performance, and teacher recommendation. Because we have only a few months left in this school year, we will offer you the opportunity to continue this advantage for your child by enrolling him or her in a special summer session. We need your support to make this a successful experience for your child.

This presentation led to many sidebar conversations around the table. One group of teachers close to me quietly expressed their surprise by the action of the HSCA and said that the program sounded exactly like special education to them. They cited that the students would think so, too. However, they were not invited to voice their professional judgment to the administrators. One 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher looked at the special education administrator and stated in a disconcerted tone that two of her 7<sup>th</sup> grade students had already received a letter and were upset because they were being placed into a "special education" class. She had not understood the meaning behind the students' concerns until

this meeting. This visibly upset her, but I could see that she was trying to keep her emotions under wraps in front of the administrators, especially in light of the fact that the Adventure Team was being presented in such a good light.

Later that week, a fight actually broke out during 7<sup>th</sup> grade lunch break because some of the general education students in 7<sup>th</sup> grade singled out and teased their new Adventure Team peers by calling them “special ed kids.” After the fight, Ms. Keys individually counseled each of the Adventure Team students about how fortunate they were to be identified for the project. She let them know that this selection would help them on their way to a great academic experience. She also told them that their grades would rise and that the placement would sharpen their leadership skills in the school. A couple of the students refused to enter the program but new recruits quickly replaced them.

#### The Chosen Students and Their Adventure

There were 24 students initially assigned to the Adventure Team, with parent permission, and 75 % of these students were African American, all had been low scorers on their state test. One-half of the students were tested at a 5<sup>th</sup> grade or below reading level. One-third of the students had less than a 2.0 grade average.

I spent a few hours with the Adventure Team (AT) because the school district had asked me if I would act as a curriculum consultant for the new teacher. The AT classroom was one of only two classrooms located behind the cafeteria. The classroom across the hall from the AT was comprised of students labeled as “behaviorally

disordered.” The two “special” classrooms shared a bathroom with each other and the cafeteria staff.

In an effort to regain order around the BLT table, the special education administrator glanced at each HSCA seated around the room and in what appeared to be a slightly guilty but stern tone stated,

These families have a choice. We are going to meet with each one of the students and explain that they have been chosen specifically because of their ability to be leaders in their class. This is not a *special education* program. And I hope that the teachers and other staff members will help clarify this to all the students.

For the first time, one of the T-Sinclair principals spoke up. Looking directly at the 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher she said,

“The Adventure Team is a leadership class and these families will be told that their children have been chosen specifically because they need a little extra help on test scores, and that students will have an opportunity to exhibit leadership qualities in their school. They have a *choice*; we have plenty of other students to choose from (a few giggles and quick glances were shared between both administrators and teachers.)

After that comment, the school counselor smiled and told a story about one of the nominated AT students. Each student on the list had gone through a battery of informal reading and math testing in order to establish a data baseline. This particular student had incorrectly generalized that AT was a “leadership class” and thought he was being tested to enter an accelerated class. He approached the counselor and wanted to know if he had *made it*. The counselor smiled and told the group that he had responded with, “Oh yes, you *made it* into the class.” A few team members giggled at the irony of the story. Soon the homeroom bell rang and the members of the BLT dispersed into their daily responsibilities.

The GEI process and the Adventure Team are clear examples of teachers consciously excluding their students from the mainstream of school in order to increase their chances of raising test scores and to ameliorate the every day headaches of teaching. Michelle Fine (1991) in her research on Comprehensive High School dropouts in New York City explains, “In urban areas, especially for low income African American and Latino youths, public schools may offer everyone *access* in, but once inside the doors of public schools, many low-income urban youths virtually disappear” (p.24).

She reports that exclusion, or what she sometimes pens as “social exile,” is implicit in the school experience on a day to day basis: when students are forced to attend a failing school, when they are disrespected in their classes, included in lower level tracks, and retained. At T-Sinclair, students are targeted early on for exclusion with the assignment of a blue bolder. Some are *exiled* out of advanced math, *exiled* into Ms. Samson’s first and second period math class, *exiled* into Group D in Ms. Dean’s class, and some were being *exiled* into the new *leadership class* (AT).

*Exile* begins early on in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade when teachers approach their students as culturally different, already prone to underachievement, and lacking in the grade level skills that they need. For some students not unlike Matthew and Cherie, this *exile* is so *effectively exiling* that they “simply disappear” before 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

#### Summary

At the beginning of this chapter, I used my study data to describe the technique that Ms. Dean uses to place blame onto her students for poor testing performance—bribing. I also revealed other instances when I observed the same practice being used in



order to force T-Sinclair students to conform to unexamined and misguided school policies. In Part 2 of this chapter, I used narrative data to describe the GEI process and the birth of the Adventure Team, and to further show that teachers work to exclude students from their classrooms (blame them right out of their rooms) in order clear their classrooms of the students thought to be the highest risk for underachievement.

## CHAPTER 7

## CONCLUSION

In the initial proposal for my dissertation study, I set out to examine what 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers at Tressell-Sinclair Middle School (T-Sinclair) believe about underachievement, and how those beliefs contribute to poor student performance. Initially, I thought my participants were blaming academic underachievement on student and neighborhood socio-cultural differences. However, in closer analysis of the data, I found that the 6<sup>th</sup> grade students are being subjected to a weak test-driven curriculum, and that my participants tacitly work to negotiate and shift the blame for testing failure onto their students in order to protect themselves from professional suspicion. This *blaming game* supports an ideology of failure and places both students and teachers at T-Sinclair in a long-term, losing or *no win* situation.

About one hundred years ago, the unequal treatment of 400 coal mine workers in Hasting initiated a history of segregated neighborhoods and racial exile in the Hasting Community (Riley, 1988). It was a choice made to seclude unwelcome Blacks from the mainstream of Hasting life and to label the neighborhood where they would live as inferior and *different* from the others. The *other* world has become more integrated and “politically correct” since that time, but the intent and consequence of this racism and the additional social segregation of the factory workforce from the rest of the community are still unmistakably evident in the Hasting community today. As a result, the children who live and attend school in the T-Sinclair neighborhood—a neighborhood believed to be *inferior and different* according to my data, are haunted by the ugly prejudice of social

and academic inequality. Hayman (1998) reminds readers that discriminatory ideologies such as the Hasting story are inherited, and live on, by choice,

We can make some groups intellectually superior to other groups, and indeed we have chosen to do so. We can make some groups the intellectual equals of other groups, and indeed we have chosen to do this as well. And all of the choices that we have already made invariably constrain the choices that now confront us. The history we have constructed makes the choices more or less difficult: some equality is now fairly easy to realize, some is not very easy at all (p.252).

### Difference and the World Inside Teachers' Heads

Research has shown, that racism and social class have a tremendous effect on the experience that students have in schools because of the way society is organized and schools are financed (Coleman, 1966; Irons, 2002, 1972; Kozol, 2005; Ogbu, 1994; Rist, 1973). In addition, many researchers have demonstrated that the majority of teachers found in these schools are caucasian and have established and used middle class traditions in their curricula—a well-intentioned but unexamined perspective that places students who are not middle class and white at a disadvantage (Delpit, 1995; Hale, 2001; Ladsen-Billings, 1994). All of the participants in my study, except Ms. Thorndike and Ms. Kent, travel to T-Sinclair from outside of the T-Sinclair community each day, and share misguided assumptions about their students that indicate that they are not from, nor do they understand, the T-Sinclair Middle School *world*.

Lisa Delpit (1995) explains that teachers have their own cultural *worlds* in their heads and that these *self-worlds*, if not examined, get in the way of how teachers perceive themselves and approach their students. As mentioned earlier, research has shown that teachers are more positive towards students who are like them and share the teacher's social experience and cultural values (Ladsen-Billings, 1994). My participants—

concerned, hard working, and passionate teachers in many regards, have reflected Delpit's findings with astounding clarity. They perceive the T-Sinclair's neighborhood as different and their students (from that *different* world) as prone to underachievement and difficult to teach. They complain about the negative stigma associated with the school and Mr. Roman recommends that the school be "white-washed" and a golden dome be placed on top to increase the value of the school. Unfortunately, my participants contribute to the inferior feelings about the school by approaching their students as incapable. As a result, in many ways, this study is about racism and prejudice and the damage that white privilege brings to the educational table.

#### Denying Cultural Differences

It is equally damaging if teachers are conscious of their students' differences but refuse to accommodate those differences. When teachers neglect to acknowledge who students *are* culturally (language, traditions, and values), the students are what Pinar (1993) describes as "fractured" from themselves and "repressed...by absences [in the curriculum], denials, and the incompleteness" of their own identity and history" (p.31). During my study, I observed that my participants have difficulty articulating social-cultural difference at T-Sinclair and are afraid to talk about them to me, each other, or to their students. Ms. Thorndike was the only teacher who dared to talk explicitly about culture and race. I suspect that she was able to discuss social and ethnic prejudice less awkwardly because she and her husband have experienced racism and the discomfort of explicit community boundaries. The other participants lacked the vocabulary, knowledge, or desire to talk about it, and also seemed apprehensive that they might

incriminate themselves. Regardless of the reason, my participants rarely acknowledged the social-cultural dissonance within the school. Their instructional focus narrowly targeted “tooling” the students for testing and preparing them for the workforce.

Mano Singham (1995) explains that there are several unsubstantiated theories in education about why there is an achievement gap—one being the socioeconomic myth. Teachers who blame underachievement on social pathologies believe that underachievement is the direct result of the effects of poverty. Rist (1973) agrees with this assertion and found that educational officials often develop a culture of blame and align it with poverty so that they can “relieve the school system of any blame for the failure of students and also take away any guilt from society at large” (p. 8). He labels this faux thinking as the “culture of poverty” and describes the pernicious thinking clearly:

When poor children enter school, they are unable to deal with the school curriculum...because of deficits in their families and environment. Secondly, the longer the child remains in a ‘deprived’ environment, the more pervasive and permanent his ‘damage.’ Third, schools will never succeed with such children as long as the parents live as they do. And fourth, given that some environments are believed to be better than others, it is the obligation of the ‘betters’ to offer assistance to the ‘lessers’(p. 9).

He goes on to say that the “culture of poverty” myth allows teachers to continue on with faulty pedagogy because teachers are able to blame their failures onto the students’ lack of response to the school curriculum. The data I shared throughout my study confirmed that my participants have adopted the “culture of poverty” ideology in order to escape professional responsibility for poor test scores—an act of self-preservation. The T-Sinclair students and their families are the “lessers” and my participants have tried to

make a difference, but it appears [to them] that their students are “unable to respond” (Rist, 1973, p. 9).

This has been a challenging study to complete in light of my own discomfort with living in a neighborhood and attending schools that are considered to be inferior. In addition, it was difficult to face the understanding that schools in America are organized to create winners and loser, and that I taught in the Hasting community many years insensitive to the needs of many of my students. Oakes (1993) explains it well when she states, they [teachers] rarely examine themselves or “press for equality” because they are infatuated with the myth that opportunity is equality and that they are doing a good job of “develop[ing] quite fixed individual potential[s]” (p. 86). I want to express my gratitude to my committee who was willing to direct me to good literature and ask me the kinds of questions that illuminated the findings in this study and spurred me onto a clearer consciousness about equality.

#### Curriculum and School Policy

My participants are all well-intentioned professionals who work harder than most teachers I have known and appear to be passionate about their work. However, they are wrapped up, as I was, in their own middle-classness and meritocracy, and fearful of professional embarrassment. As a result, they hold their students responsible for their own underachievement and surrender to a weak curriculum that exacerbates poor student performance. Sacks (2000) explains that current testing policies predictably place urban schools like T-Sinclair in a failing position because high-stakes testing (testing used to secure government entitlements and competitive standing with other schools) encourages

poor teaching practice. Testing curricula, such as the one I have described in this study, encourages teachers to focus on increasing test scores for the sake of securing professional, government, and public affirmation.

Although it is morally incomprehensible to ignore the fact that teachers have contributed to a long history of social and curricular inequities at T-Sinclair, I must also agree that my participants have been victims too. The No Child Left Behind legislation has transformed their work to such a point that they have become mere “actors” using a “pre-specified curricula, repeated testing, and strict and reductive accountability systems” (Apple, 1993, p. 262). Teacher work has become harder, more routine, and more intensified—leaving teachers with little professional efficacy or given time to go to the bathroom (p.261)! As a result, they have had little time to think or reexamine their personal or professional understandings.

#### Exclusion at T-Sinclair

In this study I found that students have been tracked and excluded at T-Sinclair because it is thought that they are incapable and cannot connect to the regular curriculum. In my study, this was exacerbated by the fact that teachers are concerned about difficult students and teaching efforts (raising test scores). As I searched the literature for research discussion about student exclusion, special education was the logical source of information. I found that educators are often shortsighted in their approach to the curriculum. Students who struggle with standard curriculum are often labeled and stereotyped, which precludes placement in self-contained rooms or the back corners of

general education classrooms (Oakes, 1985; Rist, 1973; Reid & Button, 1995; Sleeter, 1986; Smith, 1997).

Rebecca Blomgren (1992), in her discussion of curriculum and student dignity in special education, describes the educational process and practice as mechanical and inhumane. She described it this way,

How do we respond to the 'animal faces,' the 'misshapen,' the 'noble faces' and the 'empty ones'? Our current and for the most part unexamined response becomes one of efficiently and thoroughly categorizing, tracking and controlling those who come before us year after year. Our educational efforts center upon being absolutely certain that we can label and identify the 'animal face' and the 'empty ones' so that we may direct and divert those students into more appropriate programs where we deceive ourselves, our students and their parents into believing that this Special Education process will enable those 'animal faces' to fulfill their potential and be the most they can be (p.231).

Blomgren's observation almost mirrors what I have observed at T-Sinclair. The students are looked upon as *different* and as a result are tracked and categorized in order to meet school goals and unexamined instructional policies. At the time of this study, 80% of the student body at T-Sinclair had been labeled as underachieving. One out of four of the students had been categorized as special education students. Forty-two of the students in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade had blue folders, and according to Ms. Keys, some of the current 8<sup>th</sup> graders were planning on dropping out of school and others would struggle in reading in high school. Some of the special education students at T-Sinclair were scheduled into special academic classes (Ms. Samson's 1st and 2nd period math class) because these students were considered *low* and *difficult*. As Blomgren explains, we are deceived and not doing these students a favor. Educators must examine the consequences of meritocratic



assertions and the decision to remove students from their classrooms. Until then, we continue a legacy of ignorance and school inequality for generations to come.

### Self-Examination and Choice

Ellen Langer (1989), in her book titled, *Mindfulness*, writes that human beings often go through life in a mindless, unconscious manner. In fact, she suggests that our routines and work “take on a life of their own” and that life and what feels good to us becomes so automatic that we become “victims” of our own “realities—blind to the fact that they are constructs, ideas”(p. 11). Perhaps this is true to an extent at T-Sinclair. Teachers are mindlessly following their own cultural norms and the bidding of bureaucratic policy and approach their own realities as the *only* reality. They accept the current condition of the school and their role in students’ lives as “what has been given to them.”

In her writing on consciousness and dealing with the fear of disabilities, Lous Heshusius (2004) explains that it is natural for us as humans to “maintain the images that create a safe, stable, and socially desirable notion of “self” for ourselves, fearing those selves that threaten those images” (p. 286). My participants did not consider themselves in relationship to the neighborhood, the history of the West Side, or as teachers of students who have been perniciously labeled as *low* in ability and lazy. In order to face their teacher-selves, their human being selves, they will have to confront their middle class privilege and the injustices that their students have endured at the hands of their own community. This is a startling challenge that comes with sacrifices—painful and

hurtful realizations. The governor's action shows that there is at least some consciousness about the *no-win* environment.

I hope in reading this study, others will become more mindful about T-Sinclair and step into that *other*, different world to wonder, question, and take courage so that another generation of students do not feel as Isabel does, "like we're being hidden...as if you have been put in a garage where, if they don't have room for something but aren't sure if they should throw it out, they put it here where they don't need to think of it again"(Kozol, 2005, p.28). Think deeply about the Plain-belly Sneetches, T-Sinclair, and other schools like her. I challenge readers to think deeply about "the "history we have constructed" (Hayman, 1998, p. 252).

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