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Trusting Teachers as Educational Experts: Implications of a Teacher-positive Framework for Educational Policy

Leigh Yakubowski

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TRUSTING TEACHERS AS EDUCATIONAL EXPERTS:
Implications of a Teacher-Positive Framework for Educational Policy

By Leigh Yakubowski

Senior Thesis in Sociology and Educational Studies
Thesis Advisor: Professor Eréndira Rueda

Vassar College
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Abstract

As neoliberal education reform policies reliant on test-based accountability take increasing hold on the public education system of the United States, it is important that we hold such policies “accountable” for what they set out to do: improve the quality of student learning in America, and decrease the “achievement gap” that separates low-income students of color from middle- and upper-class white students. This thesis empowers the voices of teachers as necessary sources of information on both policy impact and policymaking for the future. I introduce a “teacher-prioritizing” framework that centers teachers as educational experts. This framework holds that respecting teachers as experts in their complex professional field, and listening to their valuable input throughout the policymaking process is the key to ensuring effective the creation and implementation of effective educational reform policy.

Chapter 1

Teachers as Reformers: Introducing a Teacher-Positive Framework

“Last year was the first year that my morale was down. I was impacted by what was going on outside of my classroom... and now, it’s in my classroom” (Karen James).

Karen James has been teaching chemistry at a public high school in rural New York for 21 years. She discusses education reform, and the public discussion that surrounds it, as if it were a disease: an outside force that has, after a long battle on James’ part, finally infiltrated and infected her classroom environment. Despite their important lessons of how education policies impact their classrooms, teacher narratives like James’ have been either ignored or greatly distorted in the discourse on high-stakes accountability policies such as No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and the Common Core initiative¹. “Teachers” and “reformers” have been placed on opposite sides of the high-stakes fight to improve public education in America (Goldstein 2010:567), and this disconnect has “tricked down” to have important implications at the classroom level.

“Anti-Teacher” or “Anti-Reform”

Critics of the education reform policies of the past fifteen years have used the term, “anti-teacher” to describe the explicit and implicit ways that policies such as No Child Left Behind override teachers’ beliefs in the classroom. Interestingly, supporters of such reforms embrace the “anti-teacher” identity as a positive indication of their

¹ From this point forward, the terms “test-based accountability policies” will be used interchangeably with “recent reforms/policies,” to indicate No Child Left Behind, Race to

commitment to overhauling the current public system. “Getting tough on teachers,” identifying and getting rid of “bad teachers,” and working to bust teachers unions are seen as necessary components of modern education reform (Ravitch 2010). In her analysis of the ways in which teachers and education reform policy are represented in the media, Rebecca Goldstein observes, “the media frames school reform (and justice) as a process that must occur outside the realm of teachers and unions” (2010:554). Test-based accountability policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) are aligned not only with ingrained capitalist beliefs of freedom based in the free market, but also with the belief that privatizing education will create a flexible “meritocracy” that will provide historically oppressed and “underserved” student populations better quality education and the opportunity to succeed. The fight to close the “achievement gap” between low-income Black and Brown students and middle-class White students provides the justification for the wide-reaching and standardizing influence of recent policies.

When privatizing reformers align their policies with this social justice mission, the critique of such policies is construed in public dialogue as an opposition of their underlying goals of social justice and equality. This conflation of policy opposition and “equality” opposition is evident in a comment made by Rod Paige, former secretary of education, who called a prominent teacher union, the National Education Association, a “terrorist organization” for opposing No Child Left Behind legislation (Pear 2004). Teacher unions and teachers are consistently characterized as “anti-reform,” parts of a powerful, anti-equality, outdated, unmoving, bureaucratic “establishment” (Goldstein 2010:567). The nuanced concerns of teachers like Karen James are quickly lost in this dangerous binary. One cannot oppose reform policies without being characterized as a

bigot, and associated with the education “establishment” – that is said to be “anti-reform” in order to keep the “status-quo”: one is characterized immediately as both “anti-reform” and consequently “pro-teacher” (Goldstein 2010). Similarly, one cannot purport to be in support of reforms, or a “true reformer” without opposing the education establishment in favor of a market-based vision for the future: in order to be “pro-reform,” you need to be “anti-teacher.” In this way, the teacher-reformer binary simplifies and deeply limits the current conversation surrounding reform of the U.S. public education system.

Over-simplifying the Conversation

As Goldstein notes, the “anti-teacher,” “anti-reform” binary permeates the current national discussion on education reform, and works to narrow how arguments made by participants on all sides are portrayed to the public. This binary-focused discussion did not arise out of thin air: it is the product of our national, historical, and sociological context. The danger of the binary is not just in the loss of individual realities – the everyday, complex work of teachers. Goldstein is quick to point out that the powers that have supported this binary-focused discussion, which labels teachers and their unions as “powerful, obstructionist” and maintaining the “status-quo” are ironically the most powerful members of our society (2010:553). Education historian Diane Ravitch writes that although the bipartisan, political support for market-based accountability reform has been unusually cohesive, the strongest financial and ideological support for recent policies comes from private foundations (2010). This trend is “fundamentally antidemocratic”: “when the wealthiest of these foundations are joined in common purpose, they represent an unusually powerful force that is beyond the reach of

democratic institutions... The foundations demand that public schools and teachers be held accountable for performance, but they themselves are accountable to no one”

(2010:200-201).

The Anti-Teacher Stance: Origins and Implications

Theorists who operate with an anti-teacher framework ride a slippery slope. If we consider an anti-teacher framing to be one that assumes teachers and their unions represent an enemy to positive reform of the education system – defined as market-based, privatizing reforms – we must question whether these theorists consider teachers to be educational professionals, experts in their work, at all. The shaky status of teaching as a profession in America is a theme that relates deeply to the disconnect between teachers and education policy today. The lack of “prestige” associated with teaching in America originated before the universalization of education through the Common School movement of the 19th century (Reese 2010). For men especially, teaching tended to be something to do on the side or before launching a ‘real’ career: in the early days of American schooling up until the early 19th century, most teachers *were* men, but were likely to be “farmers, surveyors, even innkeepers, who kept school for a few months a year in their off-season” (PBS). For young men who aspired to long-term careers in the church or the law, teaching for a few years was a good way to network and build strong relationships in a community before “they moved on to their *real* professions” (PBS, emphasis added). This “stepping stone” trend is continued today through post-college programs such as Teach for America; it continues within the education profession itself when teachers go on to administrative positions after only a few years of teaching experience (Sahlberg 2013).

The conceptualization of teaching as an important, but not prestigious career also has its roots in gendered decisions made by reformers during the Common School movement. The rise of free, universal education meant a high increase in the need for quality teachers (PBS), but because of teaching's low status as a profession, there were not enough young men to fill all of the new positions that would be created. The reformers turned to the "next best" option: college educated, middle-class, white women (PBS). Reformers' push for a female teaching force may have been the result of a lack of interest from men, but it also was based in an argument of "innate ability" and economic efficiency. In an 1849 report, the Littleton, Massachusetts School Committee wrote that, "God seems to have made woman peculiarly suited to guide and develop the infant mind, and it seems...very poor policy to pay a man 20 or 22 dollars a month, for teaching children the ABCs, when a female could do the work more successfully at one third of the price" (PBS). By arguing that women had an "innate" talent for teaching, Common School proponents justified the low salaries of the new employees and ensured a smaller price tag for the universalization effort. They also committed a grave disservice to the profession itself: in a sexist society, stating that women were qualified to work based on inherent traits undermines both the qualifications and knowledge that these women increasingly brought to their careers, as well as promoted a false sense of simplicity of the work that remains today.

Frederick Hess displays this lack of appreciation for the complexity of educator's work when he asserts, "school reform is the province of utopians, apologists, and well-intentioned practitioners who inhabit a cloistered world where conviction long ago displaced competence... the result is schools where success is often a happy accident"

(2004:16). Michelle Rhee, Chancellor of Washington D.C. public schools, continues this condescending portrayal of educators in an interview for Time Magazine: “People say, ‘Well, you know, test scores don’t take into account creativity and the love of learning...if the children don’t know how to read, I don’t care how creative you are. You’re not doing your job” (quoted in Goldstein 2010:562).

The opinions of Hess and Rhee, both powerful supporters of test-based accountability, “tough on teacher” reforms, represent the profound disrespect and misunderstanding of the teaching profession that spurred this thesis. As the daughter of two teachers, I have spent my life listening to the triumphs and frustrations of working in the classroom. As an aspiring teacher myself, I have learned from the best: witnessing the energy and care that my parents put into their work on a daily basis has set the bar high for my own career. Teaching is complex work: Hess’ assertion that “success [in schools] is often a happy *accident*” and Rhee’s separation of “creativity and the love of learning” with teaching children “how to read” suggest that an “anti-teacher” position is based in an assumption that teaching is not professional or complex work. Ravitch extrapolates this logic to demonstrate the impact it has on teachers like Karen James, and the quality of public education in general: “Can teachers successfully educate children to think for themselves if teachers are not treated as professionals who think for themselves?...If a get tough policy saps educators of their initiative, their craft, and their enthusiasm, then it is hard to believe that the results are worth having” (2010:67). Education reformers who view teachers’ insights as unnecessary or antithetical to their goals fail to recognize teachers as professionals, as educational experts whose knowledge is vital to the creation

of effective educational policy. The resulting policy, therefore, often works against the goals and needs of professional educators.

Positive-Teacher Framework

This thesis seeks to move beyond the anti-teacher, anti-reform binary into a place where teachers are necessarily viewed as reformers: they are constantly striving for the improvement of the education system, and their expert knowledge on education positions them as vital pieces of any movement attempting to reform education in America. I term this re-framing “teacher-positive,” and it has important implications for educational policy. In Table 1, I break down the roots and implications of a teacher-positive framework, as well as look at alternative frameworks for policymaking: teacher-neutral, and teacher-negative. Together, these frameworks can be referred to as “teacher-prioritizing” – they consider the ways in which policy makers conceptualize teachers as experts and the roles that teachers play in policymaking to have important implications for the impacts that these policies will have.

Table 1: Teacher-Prioritizing Frameworks: Roots and Implications for Teacher-Positive, Teacher-Neutral, and Teacher-Negative Frameworks

Framework	Are teachers educational experts?	When should teachers' input be listened to in policymaking?	What are the implications for policy's impact on teachers?	What are the implications for policy's impact in general?
Teacher-Positive	Yes	All the time – teachers' input should be listened to in all aspects of educational policy	Policies have a professionalizing impact on the teaching career	Meets the complex needs of the education system.
Teacher-Neutral	Neutral	Sometimes – teachers' input should be listened to when it aligns with existing frameworks, such as neoliberalism	Policies have a mix of professionalizing and deprofessionalizing impact on the teaching career	Sometimes meets the complex needs of the education system, sometimes does not.
Teacher-Negative	No	Never – teachers represent a stagnant, anti-reform interest group whose input will lead to bad policy.	Policies have a deprofessionalizing impact on the teaching career	Does not meet the complex needs of the education system.

This thesis utilizes a teacher-positive framework to analyze the roots and implications of current educational policy. I strive to answer the question: According to a teacher-positive framework, how do the ways in which policies do or do not conceptualize teachers as experts and value their input in policymaking predict the ways in which these policies impact teachers and the education system in general?

Method

Rebecca Goldstein advises that in order to step outside of the existing frames of viewing reformers as necessarily “anti-teacher” and teachers as inherently “anti-reform,” we need to provide “alternative frames” for conceptualizing education reform policies (2010:569). This includes viewing school reform as “more nuanced” and teachers as “on the whole...dedicated to students and their learning” (p.569). To do this, I position teacher voices as a central, valued source of expert and relevant knowledge on the topic of reform policy and professional identity. I use eight teacher interviews as a continuous thread in my work, both as a tool to constantly be reminded of the complex nature of teaching work and different work experiences of teachers, and also to identify similar trends and themes that emerge in teaching work, mirroring the research purposes of qualitative research: “seek[ing] pluralism [and] complexity” as well as “search[ing] for patterns” (Glesne 1999:6). Although these may seem like contrasting motives, I feel it is extremely important to appreciate the complexity and differences in teachers work whenever we find common themes: it means that these common themes and experiences have that much more weight.

In asking my teachers what they thought they would “bring to the table” in policy decision-making, “reality” and “relevancy” emerged as a major theme. All of my interviewees thought that their perspective as workers “in the trenches” would be a valuable and much-needed “reality-check” for policymakers, and aid in making educational policies more relevant and useful for schools and educators. To this end, I would like to use the imagery of teachers being able to bring theoretical, government- and business-driven reform policies “down to earth,” and mirror my thesis in the

trajectory of a hot air balloon: although the body of this paper will focus on various historical and theoretical trends in education policy over the past thirty years, it will begin and end “on the ground,” drawing directly from the voices of my teacher interviewees as they talk about the complexity of their work in the first chapter, and in the final chapter about how their work is directly and differentially impacted by the three reform policies I will be focusing on. Because focusing on theoretical ideas and trends “at the top” can tend to bring us away from the real-life impact of these policies and theories, much as a hot air balloon is lifted from the ground, I will put as many workers “at the bottom” as possible in the figurative basket of the hot air balloon as I discuss historical trends and policies from a theoretical perspective. Theoretical discussion will be mirrored by voices of teachers, students, parents and others for whom school is an everyday part of their lives, and for whom these policies ultimately play out in real time. In this way, I will consistently weigh the hot air balloon down with voices and perspectives that are usually silenced, bringing it closer to earth and real experiences throughout this paper.

As I have stated, a major piece of my methodology rests in the eight teacher interviews that I conducted as the central “grounding” voices in my work. Relying on qualitative research was an important aspect of my inquiry; to counter to often simplified and number-based discussion of teaching and learning that dominates discussion of education in the neoliberal era, I wanted to use a research perspective that, as Corrine Glesne says, is based on a foundation that “reality is socially constructed, complex and ever-changing” (1999:5). I know from growing up in a family of teachers that the profession of “teaching” is extremely complex and multi-faceted in reality, and that different teachers experience the profession very differently. Incorporating teacher voice

as a “reality-check,” to make this thesis relevant to the everyday experiences in schools, thus necessitated a qualitative, open approach that would allow room for all teachers to express the complexity of their work and different personal experiences into a discussion of reforms and professional identity.

Locating my interview work as traditional or critical ethnography is complicated, and I believe that my interviews strive to describe “what is” and “what could be” (Glesne 1999:10). According to Glesne, critical ethnography “attempt[s] to understand and describe the experiences, consciousness and cultural context of people living in asymmetrical power relations” (1999:11). I argue that teachers’ perspectives and expertise has historically been devalued and disrespected, and that over the past thirty years, the neoliberal reform movement has only magnified this trend. My interviews document teachers’ goals, identities, and everyday experiences. However, they “do more than understand and describe...they want to transform unequal power relations” (1999:12). My interviews serve as spaces of empowerment and change in that they place teachers in positions where their views on the current educational environment are sought after and valued. I also use my teachers’ views and dreams for the future of education as a foundation for thinking about moving forward and what that “change” should look like.

Participant sampling

To select teacher participants for my interview research, I looked for what Michael Patton terms “information-rich cases” (1990:169). I had one requirement for my participants: that they have fifteen or more years of teaching experience. This requirement stemmed from a desire to interview teachers who had begun teaching before

the passing of the first national education reform policy I wanted to analyze, No Child Left Behind, which was passed in 2001. I also wanted to interview teachers with a range of work environments, particularly along the public to private school spectrum. As a researcher of public education policy, it was important for me to find teachers whose work environments would be directly impacted by public policy and compare them to teachers at private schools, whose work was not directly impacted by public policy.

In addition, as I thought about the critical aspect of my work, and looking towards change for future policy, I wanted to interview teachers who taught at non-charter “mixtures” of public and private schools: “independent public” schools. That is, schools that were publically funded, but that were created with a specific, independent “mission” in mind, much like private schools. To quote an private school interviewee, the existence of an “independent school...means that at one point someone, some group, some visionary, decided that they had something to offer above and beyond what was already in place” (Stewart, Personal Communication, 2015). I feel that this definition describes the independent public schools schools that I sampled for my interviewees as well as matches the goal of this thesis as an example of critical ethnography. Independent public schools are public schools created by *educators* - they exist because *educators* believed that there was a better way to conduct public education. Their existence in itself is a study in empowering teachers as experts in the structuring and support of schools. I want to take the time to distance these schools from the seemingly similar charter school movement: while charter schools represent a diverse group of publically-funded, privately-run schools, the reasoning, and more importantly the people, behind their creation often represent the business-driven, anti-teacher and anti-public education

movement that this thesis ultimately finds to be so harmful. Finding independently-minded schools that were not affiliated with the charter school movement and still run by people within the public school system provides an alternative to neoliberal-minded improvement: we can continue to support and work towards unique, teacher-driven, quality public education in ways that exist outside of the market-based reform movement.

In order to find teacher interviewees that had both been teaching for over fifteen years, as well as represent private, public, and “mixture” schools, I used a “network” or “snowball” sampling method (Patton 1990:182-183, quoted in Glesne 1999). I refrained from interviewing close relatives or friends who were teachers, but used the existing network of connections that I had to find teachers that matched my requirements. The resulting sample is a mixture of my relatives’ colleagues or teachers – four out of eight teachers I interviewed match this description – teachers that I work with myself in various capacities (two out of eight), and teachers that were referred to me by Vassar College professors (two out of eight). Due to the nature of this sampling process, in which I related a loose thesis topic and requirements to my connections and then they referred me to various teachers, I believe my sample is biased by virtue of being “interested” and available for my work. By using a networking method that divulged my research topic and questions, my connections referred me to people who they thought would be “information rich cases,” and interested in my work. While this is slightly detrimental to my research, in that it provides a sample that may be “atypical” of teachers in general, I also found it valuable to talk to teachers who I knew were both deeply respected by their colleagues and who were often already involved in thinking through many of the issues that I asked them about.

In addition to selecting teachers that were diverse in their work environments, I also tried to achieve diversity in terms of race and gender, being aware that these were factors that could influence a teacher's experience (cite possible sources). I interviewed two teachers from independent, non-denominational private schools, two teachers from "mixture" schools, and two teachers from public schools. In addition, I interviewed two teachers who were recently retired (within the past two years) from the public school system. For each of these "pairs" I achieved an equal ratio of men to women – one private school teacher was male, and one female, for example. This is not representative of the current gender ratio in teaching, which has been steadily getting more and more unequal over the past thirty years, and in 2011 stood at 84 percent female to 16 percent male (Feistritz 2011:12). I was not able to achieve the same diversity in terms of race, but still achieved more diversity than current national levels: six (75 percent) of my interviewees are white teachers, and two (25 percent) are teachers of color. This compares to a slowly racially diversifying teacher workforce over the past thirty years, which in 2011 was 84 percent White and 17 percent of color - identifying as "Black," "Hispanic," or "other" (2011:15).

Interview questions

In the following list of questions, I give a main question as well as possibilities for follow-up questions. Each of my interviews followed the same trajectory and lasted about 30 minutes to an hour. For some interviews, I was unable to ask the full list of questions because time was cut short. For transcription purposes, I took handwritten notes as well

as an audio-recording of each participant's interview, and then transcribed each of the interviews while listening to the audio-recording for a full account to reference.

1. Tell me a little bit about your background in teaching.
 - a. How long have you been teaching for?
 - b. In what schools have you taught?
 - c. How did you get into teaching?
 - d. Describe your training.
 - e. Why did you begin teaching at your current school?
2. Why do you teach?
 - a. Has this mission/reasoning changed since you began teaching?
3. What does it mean to you to be treated as a professional?
 - a. Do you feel treated this way in your current job? How so?
 - b. How does salary relate to feeling treated as a professional?
4. How would you describe the general public's perception of teachers and teaching?
 - a. How have you come into contact with/interacted with this perception?
5. Do you think the way teachers are perceived and treated as professionals has changed since you began teaching?
 - a. How have these changes impacted your role as a teacher?
 - b. How have these changes impacted you personally?
6. How do you decide what to teach in your classroom, and how to teach it?
 - a. In what ways are these decisions your own, and in what ways are they out of your control?

- b. How your level of control shifted since you began teaching? Why and how?
7. What role do you think unions play in today's educational environment?
8. People with a variety of backgrounds contribute to organizational and policy decisions in education. How do you feel having a background in teaching would impact these decisions?
 - a. Do you feel it's necessary to have a teaching background to make educational policy?
9. What are some of the changes that you would prioritize in educational policy right now?
 - a. How do you feel about the current changes being made?
10. Would you want your kid to be a teacher? What would you say to them if they did?
11. Is there anything else you feel would be important for me to know, given my topic?

Overview of Thesis

In the following chapter, I look at the findings of teacher-prioritizing researchers: when we prioritize teachers as important sources of information on educational policy, what do we find? Immediately afterwards, I present a brief overview of my own work listening to teachers, and introduce the eight teachers whose experiences and knowledge will be used to ground discussion of theory and policy throughout the paper. In chapter four, I present two theoretical frameworks for analyzing the recent trends in educational

policy: neoliberalism and professionalization, and discuss how they relate within a teacher-prioritizing framework. In chapter five, I look at the recent historical roots of the two policies I will be looking at in depth (No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top) and employ a teacher-prioritizing framework to study both the roots of trends and their eventual impact on the classroom. In chapter six, I bring the discussion to the present: what does a teacher-prioritizing framework tell us about No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and their impacts on the classroom? In chapter seven, I summarize the findings of my personal teacher-positive research and discuss their implications for the future.

Chapter 2

Listening to Teachers: A Review of Teacher-Prioritizing Research

“We are the front line, we are the ones who are going to institute whatever you’re going to change here, how can you not include us in the dialogue?” (Kevin Dunbar)

To date, the literature studying the impacts of test-based accountability, and specific policies using this framework (such as No Child Left Behind) is extensive and often highly polarized in its conclusions. In contrast, the section of this literature that draws directly on teacher voices is relatively small, but extremely nuanced and complex (Sunderman et al. 2004:7). Because this collection of literature is unique in that it values the input of teachers within an educational movement that has largely overlooked educators’ input, I call it “teacher-prioritizing” work. Teacher-prioritizing literature is not unified in its conclusions, or even in its respect of the teaching profession, but its recognition of the need to consult teachers on educational policy separates it from the rest of recent education policy analyses. This literature *listens* to what teachers have to say about market-based education reforms, drawing upon surveys, interviews, focus groups and other qualitative methods to document the experiences of those “in the trenches”.

Researcher motives

Why listen to teachers? Teacher-prioritizing authors give a number of reasons for their decision to focus on teacher voices in their analysis of market-based educational trends, ranging from reverent to merely functional. Some authors, such as Barnett Berry, argue teachers’ “insights” on policy implications “are a crucial tool” for “refining”

market-based policies such as No Child Left Behind (Berry 2007:i, Sunderman et al. 2004). Berry maintains that teacher input is not only helpful, but provides a “necessary and overdue counterpoint to the numerous existing perspectives on No Child Left Behind” (2007:i). Authors such as Gail Sunderman’s team at Harvard University’s Civil Rights Project made a similar, logical argument – since most test-based accountability policies – specifically NCLB² – are ultimately “aimed at teachers, [they] wanted to know what teachers think about the law and how they, and their schools, are responding to its strategies for change” (2004:3). In contrast, Laura Hamilton and her fellow researchers at the RAND Corporation listened to teachers in order to “[understand] the actions they take in response to the [state accountability] systems” (2007:3).

Overall, I found the reasoning that different “teacher-prioritizing” studies give for listening to teachers has a profound impact on the value they attribute to the information they collect; nevertheless, they collect information on a very similar host of topics. On a basic level, researchers who set out to listen to teachers because, like Berry, they consider teachers opinions to be “necessary” to discussion about education policy on a developmental level – they consider teachers to have valuable insight that few other stakeholders in the current educational reform environment have – tended to talk about teachers as thoughtful professionals, experts on education and policy. Others, like

² Authors generally found that “No Child Left Behind” and “test-based accountability” were interchangeable for teachers. Murnane and Papay note that “none of the teachers in our focus groups could differentiate between their state accountability system, and almost all attributed their concerns about test-based accountability to NCLB. However, in many states, concerns about dysfunctional responses to test-based accountability antedate NCLB and would still be present if NCLB were repealed” (2010:152). For the purposes of representing market-based education reform as a long-term trend larger than individual policies, I often use “test-based accountability,” “market-based reform policies,” as stand-ins for individual policy names.

Hamilton, who listened to teachers for the purpose of seeing how well accountability systems like NCLB were functioning in influencing teachers' behavior, were more likely to challenge teachers' point of view. For example, when teachers related difficulties they were experiencing as a result of NCLB, Hamilton et al. were more likely to attribute these difficulties to the failures of school districts and administrators than were other authors (2007:44).

For this thesis, I will be providing a "teacher-prioritizing" analysis of market-based policy that borrows from the precedent of writers such as Barnett Berry and Gail Sunderman, whose motives behind listening to teachers recognize their participants as valuable educational experts within educational reform policy. I believe that this approach adequately recognizes the complex, professional nature of teachers' work, as well as acknowledges that leaving teachers out of the discussion on education reform is not an option: it represents a grave mistake on the part of our policymakers, and has had serious implications for our public school system. From this perspective, teachers must be given open opportunities to demonstrate their expertise, knowledge, and recommendations through qualitative research: in my case, in-depth, loosely structured interviews.

Sampling trends

The existing "teacher-prioritizing" literature samples a range of teachers, mainly from public schools. As Lisa Abrams has noted, "most studies tend to focus on a single state" (2003:19). This one-state focus is problematic due to the vast differences in state-implementation of national education policy. The studies cited in this brief review,

therefore, include more diverse samples. Abrams' work includes a nationwide survey; Berry's analysis of a focus group discussion with the Teacher Leaders Network, a "virtual community of some of the nation's best educators" also lends his work a nationwide focus (2007). Hamilton's team compared teacher surveys from three states: California, Georgia, and Pennsylvania (2007). Sunderman and her fellow researchers studied at a more localized level, comparing surveyed teachers from the school districts of Fresno, California and Richmond, Virginia (2004). Finally, the work of Richard Murnane and John Papay, a more recent study drawing upon teacher voices, uses a mixture of existing nationwide surveys, state-wide surveys, and personally executed work in the Massachusetts area (2010). Although the teacher interviews that I conducted for my own "teacher-prioritizing" research were almost exclusively done in New York State³, I draw heavily upon the teacher voices collected by these authors throughout my thesis in order to provide a continuous "counterpoint" narrative to theoretical analysis of policy trends.

Conclusions of teacher-prioritizing researchers

The majority of authors who prioritize teachers' perspectives in their work find that what teachers have to report about their experiences of market-based policies is incredible nuanced: it aligns neither with people who view the policies' impacts as extremely negative nor those who view their impacts as extremely positive (Sunderman et al. 2004). The complex and very diverse nature of teachers' everyday work is reflected in their detailed and varied responses. However, a few common trends do emerge from

³ Out of eight total interviewees, seven taught at schools in New York State, one taught at a private school in Connecticut.

the woodwork: as Sunderman notes, given the differentiation of teachers' work, and the very different ways that policies are implemented at the state and district level, "the fact that two teachers from two very different cities in two very different states that are three thousand miles apart often agree is noteworthy," and demands both our attention and action (2004:5).

One of the biggest trends to emerge from teacher-prioritizing research is that teachers generally support the *goals* of test-based accountability policies, but find issue with the *practices* involved, particularly when they play out in the classroom (Sunderman et al. 2004, Berry 2004, Hamilton et al. 2007, Munane & Papay 2010, and Abrams et al. 2003). Specifically, teachers believe in systems of accountability that hold schools "accountable for educating all children well" (Munane & Papay 2010:152). Berry adds that effective teachers have a good reason for "embracing" accountability: "it's a part of their classrooms already"⁴ (2004:3). In addition to the concept of accountability in general, many teachers support the rigorous demands that market-based reform policies make for highly qualified teachers (Munane & Papay 2010, Sunderman et al. 2004), as well as clearly defined, high academic standards (2004). Some teachers report that calls for rigor and cohesion have had a partially positive organizing impact on schools. For example, expert teachers report that "NCLB and its accountability measures have set clearer expectations for what students need to learn and what teachers need to teach" (Berry 2004:3). Murnane and Papay found that "teachers reported an increased focus on

⁴ Berry clarifies that expert teachers from the Teacher Leaders Network "can describe how their teaching improves student learning, both on standardized tests and on other more authentic measures, such as regular formative assessments, that they consistently use in their classrooms." This point is not to say that teachers are already under the forces of accountability-focused policies, but personally create creative and authentic means of maintaining accountability in their classrooms on a daily basis.

student achievement in their schools as a result of NCLB, as well as increased curriculum coordination and increased rigor of the school's curriculum" (2010:155-156). At the very least, teachers in Hamilton's study note, the universal impact of national test-based accountability policies provides a "starting point, teachers are on the same page" (2007:42). Other teachers appreciate the disaggregation of data that is a prominent feature of NCLB, because it forces school systems to pay attention to inequities in the education system (Berry 2004:i).

The "impact spectrum" of policies

Despite the support, many authors point out that a teacher's experience of test-based accountability is deeply dependent on where they teach. Murnane and Papay observe that high-stakes policies such as NCLB create a clear difference between the work environments of classified "low-performing" and "high-performing"⁵ schools. For teachers at high-performing schools, "NCLB may be an annoyance, but no more" (2010:153). In contrast, for teachers at low-performing schools, high-stakes reforms "may threaten their jobs" (153). Abrams' breakdown of states into "high-stakes" states, where policies have highly punitive repercussions for schools, teachers, and students, and "low-stakes" states, where repercussions for failure are relatively low-pressure, provides an important analysis of market-based reform policies' differential impacts on schools (2003). In "high-stakes states," teachers report the negative impacts of reforms – of which more detail will follow in subsequent chapters - to be much more detrimental: for

⁵ Schools' classification as "low-performing" and "high-performing" under NCLB legislation depended on their ability to demonstrate "adequate yearly progress" through increased scores on standardized tests (Murnane & Papay 2004:151).

example, they are more likely to report narrowing of the curriculum (p.23). In addition, teachers generally “feel more pressure” under reform policies in “high-stakes” states than in “low-stakes” states (p.25). The implications of this differential impact are important, especially when considering that schools serving the low-income students of color that No Child Left Behind was created to help are disproportionately classified as “low-performing”, and are more likely to experience the type of pressurized, high-stakes environment documented by Murnane, Papay and Abrams (Murnane & Papay 2010:153).

Thus, one can begin to imagine a disturbing spectrum of policy “impact” resulting from the reported experiences of teachers: schools that are highly impacted by test-based accountability policies, and impacted in the most negative ways, are those that serve the highest percentages of poor and minority students. In contrast, schools that are “low-impact”, for whom NCLB may be simply “an annoyance”, tend to serve the highest percentages of middle and upper class white students. If we extend this spectrum beyond public schools, we can include schools that are virtually “no-impact,” and which also tend to serve the highest percentages of middle and upper class white students: private or independent schools. The negative impacts of test-based accountability policies, as reported by teachers in various districts, are disproportionately felt by student populations depending on their race and class.

One of the most disturbing and unique trends to arise from teacher-prioritizing literature was a tension that, although present for all teachers, would also logically differentiate along this “impact spectrum”. Nearly all of the authors concluded in one way or another that, under the influence of test-based accountability policies such as No Child Left Behind, teachers experienced a sense of “great conflict between what they

were told to do to raise test scores and what they felt they should do to best serve children” (Munane & Papay 2004:165-166). This conflict was expressed as a “disconnect between the approach to teaching being adopted in schools and teachers’ own beliefs” – notably, Hamilton’s study found that only under a third of teachers in two of the states surveyed, Pennsylvania and California, agreed that “state accountability systems supported their personal approach to teaching” (2007:57). Munane and Papay noted that this disturbing “disconnect” was more likely to be reported by teachers “working in under-resourced schools serving high concentrations of disadvantaged children” (2004:165).

This thesis comes from a perspective that values teachers as not only educational experts, but as professionals who have devoted their lives to pouring their energy out for students. As one of my teacher interviewees communicated with particularly impassioned disgust in reaction to a politician claiming that anti-teacher reforms were “all about the children”: “Please, I’ve been getting up for 19 years in a row staying hours on top of hours [in school]. I’m not getting rich, I’m not doing it for my colleagues, I’m doing it for children” (S.S.). The “conflict” and “disconnect” in beliefs that teacher-prioritizing researchers consistently find between teachers and the policies that impact them is no small conclusion: it is indicative of a larger, highly-problematic tension that is both woven into the fabric of market-based educational policy as well as its inevitable result.

When we respect teachers as educational experts and trust that they are emotionally invested in their students, this tension, this small crack in the earth between policymakers and teachers, begins to tear open, running deep with implications before our eyes. How do teachers experience this fundamental tension, which, according to

teacher-prioritizing research, prevents them from exercising what they know to be best practices for students on both an academic and emotional level? When teachers are not recognized as professionals to be trusted by policymakers, when their input and expertise is neither respected nor even sought out in some cases, this disconnect, and the deep, disturbing implications it has for our classrooms, will always be present.

Chapter 3

When I Listened: Profiles of Teacher Interviewees

In this chapter, I present brief introductions of each of the eight teachers that I interviewed for this thesis. The experience of these educators is an important grounding point for moving forward, as a teacher-positive analysis of policy is committed to prioritizing the experience and opinions of *teachers*. In the spirit of qualitative research, this chapter will be spent highlighting both the differences in teachers' work, but also the patterns that emerged from my conversations with them.

As noted in the methodology, the majority of my questions were open-ended, and invited teachers to fill in the blanks. Although this thesis specifically focuses on recent policy and viewing teachers as professional, educational experts, I wanted to find out what these themes meant to teachers. I found that asking broad questions about teachers' personal missions or changes they had seen over their time as a teacher were important links to the "big picture" in which policies and smaller concepts, such as business-driven policy and professionalism, are set.

Additionally, it is important to note that these profiles necessarily omit important themes that individual teachers talked about in the interest of avoiding a repetitive summary. However, as a group, I believe that these profiles successfully communicate the complexity and diversity of work that my interviewees are doing, in addition to touching on important themes that many of them discussed within my conversations with them.

Rachel Jennings – Connecticut Day School⁶

Rachel Jennings is in her third year of teaching fourth grade at Connecticut Day School (CDS), an independent school in the suburbs north of New York City. Before CDS, Jennings taught in various public and private environments, including teaching at a public school in rural North Carolina. Jennings' profile is an important comparison of her experiences in these work environments – while she finds many elements of her job at CDS to align with her definition of professionalism – a sense of trust from administrators, freedom with the curriculum, and freedom from state testing – she also misses certain aspects of her work in North Carolina. Namely, she notes that the professional development system in North Carolina was extremely supportive, and, along with a great principal who fostered a personal, collegial work environment at her school, created a culture that valued the “growth of teachers.”

When I ask why Rachel Jennings left the public school system, she gives a few different reasons. On the one hand, there was the disconnect between what how she envisioned her role as a teacher, and what she was asked to do in the classroom: “It didn’t seem like what had led me to teaching – I wasn’t allowed to do it everyday.” She notes that her limitations were related to the frequency of high-stakes testing in North Carolina, where “every nine weeks we paused to test for six days.” This environment narrowed her curriculum and flexibility: “if there was something I felt passionate about teaching the kids, I really had to be creative to find ways to infuse it into the curriculum.” Jennings notes that her resistance to an increasingly “less balanced” testing culture became a

⁶ In order to preserve anonymity, the names of participants and schools have been changed.

decision to leave when she learned that the test scores were going to begin to impact retention and teacher pay:

It was possible that teacher retention was going to be determined based on proficiency of their students in their classes, and as the teacher who always volunteered to take the inclusion class I felt it like it was unfair, because I was going to be punished for volunteering to take the lower students. They definitely had the most room for growth, but also struggled with so much else in their life.

Rachel Jennings has found a freer and more teacher-driven environment at Connecticut Day School. She believes that a good administration sets a tone of treating teachers as professionals by “support[ing] your decisions and your philosophies”, and her bosses at CDS certainly fit the bill. “I get the feeling that this school is, here are your individual goals as a teacher and how can we support you in those... they figure if you’ve been hired here you have a basic set of teaching skills.” With her team of fellow grade level teachers at CDS, Jennings has worked to make important curricular changes and contribute to a dynamic learning environment that matches her own personality as a teacher. She loves teaching because of its “creativity - everyday is not monotonous, it’s something new and unexpected.” Her ability to constantly switch things up, combined with a flexible teaching environment, means that she is able to reach a wide range of students by teaching things “five different ways,” compared to what she terms the “spray and pray” method that became common practice in her public school classroom.

Rachel loves watching kids experience the “aha moment,” especially when it’s in uncharted territory, and enjoys breaking out of gender norms by attracting “girls to math and boys to reading.” She has brought a fresh and socially aware perspective to her curricular work at CDS as well, working to rethink “Eurocentric, white, male” social studies units and bring a new book to the language arts curriculum along with her

teaching colleagues. Nevertheless, she feels that some of the structure that was mandated in North Carolina would be helpful for ensuring skill-based teaching and supporting continuous professional growth. One of the things she misses most about her job in the public school system are the professional development opportunities; teachers in her district were required to participate in and teach professional workshops. She reflects, “I loved teaching those classes because you’re teaching other teachers who want to learn, and then can bring it back to their own classroom... I think in terms of professionalism they valued growth of teachers more than I think this school might.” The more hands-off environment at CDS, where professional development is more rare and less teacher-driven, indicates a sense of trust in teachers as experts. Jennings complicates the notion of blind trust in teachers by voicing the need for professional growth.

Jennings’ thoughts on current reforms and the policy environment are mixed – after all, it was an accountability- and testing-heavy regime that pushed her to seek out an independent school environment at CDS. However, she notes that there are good intentions behind policies like NCLB and Common Core, which “get these evil clouds around them.” “I think just having standards and having objectives really guides teaching...as mundane and burdensome as it was, it held me accountable for teaching skills, where as some teachers who don’t have that can just read aloud to students.” However, she maintains that policies need to reflect the big picture, and not just focus on numbers and assessment. “It was too quantitative...obviously [qualitative assessment] is a lot more work for people who are making the decisions... [but] there has to be a better way to make sure that kids who are struggling... [that we are] meeting their needs and not just holding them back.” She recalls that NCLB went against what felt right in terms of

student support. Jennings says that holding students back was “awful, that’s not a conversation you want to have with any parent, [but] with NCLB there was no other way.”

Rachel Jennings’ sense of autonomy and control over curriculum are important aspects of feeling valued and trusted in any school environment. In general, the teachers in my sample all expressed a sense of ownership over their classroom, characterized by personal philosophies of what characterizes “quality” learning. Wayne Stewart, the second private school teacher in my sample, provides a clear picture of what “quality” learning in an environment unconstrained by accountability policies can look like.

Wayne Stewart – Belfast Academy

When it comes down to longevity within the career of teaching, Wayne Stewart is the winner out of all of my interviewees. He’s in his 40th year at Belfast Academy, an independent school in upstate New York. Wayne connects the clear sense of mission at his school to a deep sense of mission and teaching philosophy in the classroom, but he also grounds his philosophy in the beginning of his teacher career, when he taught in North Ireland amidst interreligious violence between Catholics and Protestants. Wayne represents the deep sense of purpose that teachers feel in their work, a purpose that, for all the teachers I interviewed for this thesis, transcended the shallow conceptualization of education in public policies and the media.

Wayne Stewart can trace a distinct common mission from his beginnings as a teacher to his work in the classroom today; he began working in Northern Ireland during interreligious violence between Catholics and Protestants that broke out in 1969, at “a

Catholic school that was on the interface area between Protestant and Catholic enclaves.” He would soon immigrate to the United States, where he interviewed for a job at “a school that was attempting to merge a Protestant and Catholic school.” His early work within conflict taught him a powerful lesson that would carry throughout his teaching career: “In that classroom I could create or attempt to create an environment that allowed students to...take charge of something that they weren’t feeling any control over outside... that’s kind of been my sense of what teachers should be doing.”

Stewart views his long career as a teacher as one whose success is based in a complex notion of knowledge and commitment to common mission at both the school and classroom level. He notes that “teachers’ greatest calling is to reduce ignorance, not just in terms of knowledge, but in terms of each other, the world, relationships, [and] possibility.” He acknowledges that teachers’ success is deeply rooted in the depth of mission and commitment to reflection in their school environment. “We’re an independent school, which means that at one point some group, some visionary decided that they had something to offer above and beyond what was already in place...I think mission in an independent school is a critical starting point. I think everything comes out of that and if you don’t go back to it and reflect on it and hold it up to the light and decide what’s working and what isn’t, you’re falling short of what you should be doing... In a good mission-driven school the teachers are inspired to give students charge, to make them empowered, to make them believe that they’re in charge of their own education.”

Stewart is committed to providing a space of deep and lasting transformation for his students. He relates a “eureka” moment he had while teaching a physics class the previous day, when he spun two seemingly identical tops to demonstrate rotational

movement, and one suddenly turned upside down while spinning. “My point to them was here are two apparently ordinary bodies - it could be events, moments - that... could be considered mirror images. Suddenly it is discovered that they behave absolutely differently. A lot of learning is looking at the world and seeing ordinary things as having discreet or major differences that aren’t noticeable until you start asking questions or experimenting.” As a teacher who designs his own curriculum for both math and science classes, in addition to leading a 7th grade homeroom, he credits his independent school teaching environment with his freedom to be creative. “I think independent schools have an advantage, we don’t have the constraints, the sense that there’s a direction that’s linear that’s got to be journeyed...you can dwell...meander...stop and smell the roses.” Like Rachel Jennings, Stewart finds that this type of environment enables teachers to better support a wide range of students: it “really allows you to hit different learning styles, making sure everyone’s accommodated.”

Above all, Wayne Stewart tries to step away from a content focus, and instill in his students a way to “approach” life. He says that the big idea “overriding” his curriculum choices is the commitment “not to take it all too seriously in terms of material information. Bottom line is none of us really remember all the stuff we learned, it always can be looked up...don’t freak out over the details and yet don’t think that they’re not important... you got to walk that fine line between teaching stuff that does matter, but not making it totally at all dependent on information. That’s tough. That takes a lot of experience, and it’s something I’m still working on.”

For Stewart, the mission of trying to create a space of empowerment and life-long learning for students is deeply supported by Belfast Academy’s equally strong sense of

mission. “To me that is in the fiber of this place and...you don’t have to be here forty years to understand that...there’s a way of doing things, a way to treat students, a way you treat each other, an understanding that teaching is more than the communication of information. And when you take that view, you are moving light-years away from what some people think of teaching.”

It is interesting to compare Stewart’s experience working at a mission-driven private school with the experiences of the public school teachers in my sample. While these teachers also had a strong sense of mission and a complex philosophy of learning, they did not feel the same sense of surrounding support within their larger environment. For my public school teachers, they spoke of a sense of professionalism and autonomy that was contained within “the four walls of their classroom” (N.C.). Some, like Karen James, spoke of fighting to maintain this professionalism despite clear forces to dismantle it in her surrounding work environment.

Liz Green – Clifton School District

Liz Green recently retired as a reading specialist after 38 years working in the Clifton Public School District, a low-performing, high-poverty urban school district with a high concentration of Black and Brown students. Like Stewart, her extensive experience as a teacher lead her to have a highly developed, clear vision of what makes for a successful classroom and work environment. However, unlike Stewart, her experience is defined by having to “protect” the environment she works to create against outside forces. Like Jennings, she is frustrated by the direction of public education, and

speaks out against high stakes testing and a lack of respect for the teaching profession. She also adds a strong endorsement of teacher unions to the conversation: it seems that, for her, they provide a professionalizing protection that her public work environment cannot.

When I ask Liz Green for her definition of professionalism, she makes important additions to the themes of “trust” and “respect” that my interviewees have agreed on. Green says, “To be given...the understanding that I’m here to do my job and what I’m doing is focused on the students. And don’t make it harder for me to do what I’m doing – that’s professionalism. And don’t talk trash about teachers when we’re just standing there.” Green’s definition is an important reflection of her time as a teacher in the Clifton Public School District. She recalls that she was able to achieve this kind of professionalism in the classroom, but administrators and politicians often threatened it:

That was very important to me to always be professional with my students and with my colleagues when we were in a school environment – one word, just respect, respect for my students, students have respect for each other, colleagues have respect for each other. I often found that the administration did not treat teachers professionally. And political figures also didn’t. And because of that going on I’ll always try to go up one more to be more professional.

Green’s reflection that she had to always “go up one more to be more professional” in order to keep her work environment a safe a productive one is indicative of the ways in which top-down policies often work against what teachers are trying to achieve. She sees a direct correlation between a decrease in professionalism and the current reform movement: “I thought that once politics and federal money became involved with education in the significant way that it is I felt that the professionalism declined greatly.”

She talks about administrators and politicians making demands of teachers that evidenced both their lack of understanding of the profession and their lack of respect for teachers:

[Disrespect was seen] in the way [administrators] spoke to you, in the way they didn't understand your day to day dealings with students and teachers and parents, giving you timeframes that were workable, giving you the tools you needed to do your job. Teachers are often only in the business for intrinsic reasons because they get very little gratitude. You get a lot of it from parents and students but I often found that that never really was there. That's a lack of professionalism to recognize the strengths of people that work for you.

For Green, the connection between respecting teachers as educational experts and making work environments relevant and supportive was visible at a local level: administrators who were condescending and disrespectful towards teachers also failed to match their demands and support with teachers' realistic needs. She attributes the existence of relevant demands and support with the presence of the local teacher union, noting that, "The union creates a level of professionalism that has to be maintained." When she hears others talk about unions from a negative perspective, she "cringe[s]" because she's "seen unions protect classrooms in a way that if they weren't there it would be horrible."

Green's nuanced understanding of unions moves them beyond the way that they have been portrayed as mindlessly protecting teachers in current discussion (Goldstein 2010). The strict limits that unions put on teachers' jobs allows them to "be able to give everything you can to the students and the parents," says Green. She follows her reasoning up by giving an example from the Clifton Public School District: "There's a union limit of 28 kids in [Clifton]. [Imagine] within the context of 28 kids you have 9 classified, 6 ESL, 2 homeless. What does that do to your ability to reach out to those kids and get to everybody, if you add 7 kids rather than create another classroom to facilitate the overflow?" Green sees the ability of teachers to effectively meet all of the diverse

student needs in one classroom as closely tied with the class size limit enforced by the union. She echoes this class size example with another one emphasizing the importance of set course loads for teachers at the high school: “At the high school you can only teach two different courses. What if you had to teach five different courses? What kind of effective strategies could you develop? The union protects and creates that level of professionalism so that it can be transferred to the students.”

For policymakers who complain about the bureaucratic and input-focused nature of the education system, Green’s experience is a wake-up call. She argues that to maintain professional and high-quality teaching, unions are necessary to protect teachers and students against work conditions that would overwhelm and lessen the quality of teaching that educators are able to provide. Green’s experience correlates with that of another specialist from the same district, Chris Ortiz. Ortiz compares his experience within the Clifton School District with his night job teaching at a local college – a contrast that highlights the tough work environment that both he and Green teach in within a low-performing, high-poverty school district.

Chris Ortiz – Clifton Elementary School

Chris Ortiz is an ESL teacher within the Clifton Public School District. Although he currently teaches at an elementary school, he began as a high school ESL teacher within the district. Ortiz has extensive experience teaching ESL, and currently also teaches night classes for adults at a local college. The contrasting work environments of his day and night jobs gives him unique insight into how different levels of

professionalism, as well as different levels of policy-impact, determine the pressure and stress experienced by teachers, as well as the ownership they feel over their classroom.

Chris Ortiz is a true “full-time” teacher. When he first started out in public schools, he was “working full time as a teacher, teaching at night, teaching after school, teaching Saturday programs, teaching in the summer...I was even teaching emergency sub. So I got to know everybody, I got to know all kinds of students.” Chris’ specialty certification in English as a Second Language (ESL) allows him to keep up that day and night job schedule to this day; this will be his 14th year teaching in the Clifton City School District, and his ninth year teaching night ESL classes at a local SUNY college.

Ortiz strives to create lasting hands-on experiences for his students: “I want them to have the experience, I believe in episodic memory. Kids have an episode in their lives and they won’t forget it, the idea is that you give them a real life experience, they can take that, it just drills in their brain and it’s something they can always reach.” His mission supersedes age: “You have to reach down and help [students] up, little by little, in increments... people don’t see that, that’s why my philosophy everywhere I go is BID: Break It Down.” He notes that especially for students without English proficiency, the big picture can be overwhelming, whether you’re talking about a single academic assignment or a plan for the future. He uses the same approach to make a student feel at ease writing an essay as he does helping high school students understand the importance of graduation: “They think they’ll get a job for 10 an hour and they’re set for life... dude, let me just show you what’s going on, let’s say you work 50 hours a week...now how much is rent? How much are your cool clothes? Cell phone? Car? So I’m breaking these

things down and they don't really see it." He uses his own knowledge of where students are coming from to meet them in the middle: "For me to not understand where these kids are coming from would be a lie, I've experienced it in my own family... and you're taking [the family, home country support] away from them by bringing them here... they have the movie images in their head of what America or New York is like, they don't show you what it's like to go to school every day, they don't see how hard it is, they're so busy trying to fit in."

Despite the similarities in the way Chris approaches his work teaching ESL adults and children, the work environments he experiences in the Clifton Public School District and the local college are very different. The low-performing standing of CPSD has meant a constant "policy churn" (Sunderman 2004): "We're under a lot of pressure, a lot of stress right now – the only constant right now is change. I'm used to it already in a sense, you just sigh. It's another year, but to be honest at this point in my life I'm counting backwards, 12 more years to my 30 years." Ortiz loves the aspect of his work that allows him to create a positive, "safe haven" for his students – his work as a specialist allows him more freedom with policy requirements, but the pressurized work environment at his school has him counting down the years to retirement. He echoes Greens' frustration with mandates that aren't realistic or aren't followed up by the proper support: "they want you do it (claps) BANG! – but nothing is (claps) BANG ready – so in that sense, we're not respected." Making sure that teachers are provided with the supplies to meet mandates may seem like a simple complaint, but for Ortiz and other teachers under enormous pressure to meet the many demands put on them, it translates into feeling both successful

and respected. He describes the condescending top-down structure of reform as relating to this sense of professional success:

It's not teacher-to-teacher, that's governor to chancellor to superintendent to principal. Then I get the trickle down, all the way at the bottom. It's like a totem pole, and I'm at the dirt, but then we're the only ones out there in the trenches, in real life, in real time, and that's why, in that sense I feel that the professionalism sometimes is something that's like, "Oh, well we're patting you on the back because you're doing a good job," but I don't feel like I'm doing a good job because I'm not doing what I should be doing, because you're asking me to do this but not giving me the materials.

Chris' experience demonstrates that the hierarchical origins of recent policies result in real-time difficulties for schools and teachers. These everyday lapses in support add up to create a stressful work environment for public school teachers, to the point where "a pat on the back" signifies a fundamental lack of understanding of what teachers need to feel valued in their jobs. For Chris, administration following up demands with proper resources meant that he could be professional in the work he was doing. In the absence of these resources, the message that he was doing "a good job" felt meaningless.

This frustrating work environment is contrasted by Ortiz's night job teaching adults, which is characterized by less oversight, more resources, and a sense of trust. He draws direct distinctions between the two settings:

Talk about professionalism, it's like the trust that's [at the college], where here it's almost like everything's coming down, everyone's afraid looking out for themselves and they want to make sure you're doing your job. It trickles down to the teacher from the principal, where at the college it's not like that. My boss is cool, all laid back – the idea is that when we need to communicate we do, but it's not like "you gotta do this" – you feel like, in the four walls of your classroom, it's your domain.

The enhanced sense of professionalism that Chris feels at his night job comes from increased autonomy and control over his work. He confesses, "if I could do the college

thing all day long, just get to teach, and really have good conversations, and see them develop the way I do, if I could do that full time I totally would.”

Chris’ linking of a professional work environment with “just getting to teach” is telling. He indicates that the lack of autonomy he feels over his work at the public schools and the hierarchical nature of policy demands leaves him wanting to seek a more personalized space, where he is free to teach. He represents a kind of would-be Rachel Jennings: feeling constrained and disrespected by his current environment, he wants to leave and teach full time in a setting where he has more independence and trust. Do these settings exist in a public school scenario? The experience of Ethan Zimmerman, a teacher recently retired from a relatively high-performing school district, show us that a lack of autonomy does not have to be the norm in public schools.

Ethan Zimmerman – Lexington Public School District

Ethan Zimmerman is another recently retired teacher, with experience totaling 36 years. His time as a teacher was divided between a number of districts, as well as grade levels: he taught English at the high school and middle school levels, and also was a classroom teacher in the fourth and fifth grades. His experiential approach to learning was largely supported by administrators, and although he is highly opposed to standardized testing, he was able to find a balance between personal teaching philosophy and “teaching to the test” within his career. Overall, he says, he was “lucky” to have the level of support and autonomy he did as a public school teacher.

Ethan Zimmerman views his mission as creating meaningful learning experiences – a goal that is reflected by all of my interviewees. By making his curriculum experiential, or based in hands-on, active experiences, he hopes “kids will not only learn something but they’ll actually retain it.” He contrasts this model with what he terms “fragile learning” – “you give kids a body of information and you ask them to memorize it – they do very well in the short term but don’t remember it in the long term.” He sees this type of “fragile learning” reflected in the New York State curriculum and the standardized testing movement, where “certain topics are taught over and over again but there’s still no guarantee that they’ll know the content by the time they graduate.” This mission of replacing “fragile learning” with “experiential learning” drives his definition of professionalism:

Being trusted to know what I’m doing and to be given the freedom to deliver a curriculum to kids that is meaningful. That would be true during the years when we were given a tremendous amount of autonomy, also true during the years when the state had prescribed lots of things that had to happen – just to be trusted to know that you were doing the right thing with kids.

When he first started teaching in the 1970s, Zimmerman says, it was “very different – you were handed a key to a classroom and given the charge to make something dramatic happen. There was a tremendous amount of autonomy.” He later adds that “I just feel really fortunate to have come into teaching when I did, when the overall mission was to empower teachers to be as creative and as successful as possible.” This contrast of the work environment in public schools over time is an important one. Though the majority of comparisons evidencing the impact that national policies have had on teachers’ work environments we have seen so far are public vs. private, Zimmerman’s contrast of the support for teachers as professionals before the neoliberal era, which began in the 1980s,

and support for teachers today is a major indicator of the ways in which market-based policies have impacted work for teachers, and disrupts the argument that public school teachers are simply impacted by the disorganized, bureaucratic nature of the public system. Such an argument is frequently used by modern “reformers” to justify the move towards privatization: public schools are inherently flawed and inefficient, and moving to a market-based system will improve outcomes for both students and teachers (Chubb & Moe 1988). However, Zimmerman’s experience of autonomy and support early on in his career, fostering his development of a meaningful, long-lasting alternative to “fragile learning,” supports the view that public work environments are, in some ways, policy-dependent. Furthermore, Zimmerman notes that the current policy impacts are not supportive, even though he was able to work against them. When I asked Zimmerman if he felt any of the decisions he made as a teacher were outside of his control, he answered:

Well, certainly the last fifteen years of my career with the introduction of high-stakes testing, we’ve clearly had to spend a little bit more time addressing that. I worked with a number of other teachers on a team for 13-14 years. I didn’t allow the testing to take over what we were doing but I couldn’t ignore it either. I tried to de-emphasize that, I would often tell parents at the beginning of the year - fourth grade parents are very aware of the testing – I would always tell them that we don’t have to specifically spend all of our time thinking about the test.

When comparing Zimmerman’s experience to that of Chris Ortiz or Liz Green, it is important to point out a few key differences in factors determining their work environment. As Lisa Abrams noted in her work differentiating “high stakes” and “low stakes” districts, the district that Ortiz and Green teach/taught in is more “high stakes” due to the perennially low-performing nature of the school. It is also important to contrast the difference in administrators: where both Ortiz and Green found administrators to be disrespectful and misunderstanding of what teachers needed, Zimmerman noted that a

key factor in his experience of professionalism was “to be trusted by the administrators that I’ve worked with – I’ve been very lucky, I’ve always been given that trust.”

The role that administrators play in determining the environment that teachers experience is echoed by nearly every one of my interviewees, including the two “independent public” school teachers, Eva Mendel and Kevin Dunbar.

Eva Mendel – City Academy

Eva Mendel is in her 19th year at City Academy, a small public school in New York City that is part of the New York Performance Standards Consortium, a group of 28 schools in New York State that “opposes high stakes tests, arguing that ‘one size does not fit all’” (performanceassessment.org). City Academy has a structure that allows its students to opt out of state test graduation requirements in favor of performance based assessment tasks, or “PBATs”. While City Academy serves a student population that is high poverty and majority students of color, which are often tied to a “low performance” of schools in the high-stakes accountability era, Eva notes that her school’s alternative approach to public education leads to a professional and engaging work environment for teachers, as well as a challenging, authentic experience for students.

Eva Mendel lasted one year in a traditional New York City public school classroom before she got out. Her escape, a program called “City Academy” was not yet a school, but it was modeled after other, alternatively minded programs in the city. Eva says that many of the notable aspects of City Academy didn’t exist at first: “PBATs didn’t exist yet, our core values didn’t exist yet, but the idea of small classrooms, theme-based classrooms, and discussion” provided a strong basis for today’s school and an

attractive option for Mendel, who “felt burnt.” “I was so tired of the cynicism and the traditional way of teaching.” It doesn’t take long to sense Mendel’s thoughtful, big-picture view of both the education world and her role as a teacher. “I feel that I’m in contradistinction to the dominant media which is very dumb and unreflective...[it] doesn’t respect diversity or different threads of thought so you get to feel kind of like you’re a radical, just by teaching and making kids think and revisit their work... [it] seems to be the antithesis of what the dominant society tells you to do.”

Eva briefly comments on her role as a professional before getting at the dark, dirty underworld of society, played out in the microcosm of our education system. To her, being treated as a professional means “a little bit get out of my way” – she doesn’t buy the “paternalistic or maternalistic attitude” that “teachers need to be continually monitored every moment, that you need to have your goal out every day.” She dismisses the assumption that teachers need to be controlled or that the general public knows best:

I think people feel that because they’ve been educated they know about teaching... you’re actually more likely to reproduce the very bad things that you didn’t like unless you actually talked about or challenged [them], so many conversations you hear strangers saying that kids need it much rougher, but then if you slow it down and ask them what they liked they liked the art project in English.

Eva shapes her curriculum to meet students’ prejudices and gaps in worldview: “I try to challenge wherever they are.” She pushes a male-dominant class with an especially “intense” unit on heroines – “the class is very male, and the dominant kids are kind of like, they want to put through their prowess...we’re going to clip that a little bit with some theory here, in all the stories the men don’t get what they want, [and] the women do.” A class prone to homophobia reads *A Zoo Story*, the story of a gay man divulging his life to

a stranger and then committing suicide. A class heavy in students of color reads *Wuthering Heights*.

When asked to discuss the changes in education over her time in the career, Eva focuses on the assumptions and social systems at work within the field of education. Hard at work is the ‘white savior’ ideal – as Eva puts it, “So much of the white identity in America is channeled into managing other people. It’s not conscious... [it’s just] I’m going to move up and organize other people. Versus, ‘I’m going to listen, I’m going to be part of the masses or make a change within or be an artist.’ It’s like, ‘I’m going to manage.’” Mendel’s comment on the difference between “managers” and “listening” activists as a problem rooted in the white savior complex is important, especially within the rich, white, male dominated policy environment. Eva makes the point that those who are “organizing” the public sphere are often at odds with those who “listen” and try to “make a change within.” She then connects the “white savior” “management mode” down to a current trend in education, where young teachers are being funneled through teaching corps programs and into un-unionized charter school environments.

A lot of people are in that missionary mode, which is part of the management mode, this idea that your individualism and your enthusiasm that’s going to destroy this... so you get this KIPP’s⁷ model in your mind, you don’t even know the word KIPP’s, but you think that your enthusiasm is going to destroy all the cynicism around you and not realizing just how enormous, how Dickensian⁸ the New York City world is for many kids, that kids’ lives are rough, rough.

Eva’s criticism of the “missionary mode” is derived from a better vision she has for the teaching force – one that is able to realistically address the poverty stricken New York

⁷ “KIPP” refers to a charter school organization serving majority low-income middle school students of color that is famous for their “get tough” disciplinary policies and high demands on teachers.

⁸ “poverty-stricken” (www.thefreedictionary.com)

City student population through proper training and supportive school environments. One change she would make to “missionary” programs like Teach for America is the number of teachers sent into struggling schools and their roles in the classroom. Mendel says, “If you’re sending in 50 teachers that are going to help other teachers, I think that’s what helped make [City Academy] work – we had so many student teachers. You need three, four teachers in a classroom to interrupt poverty, and that thinking with a lot of one on one attention and hope.” Working towards a model of collaboration and wraparound services is an important piece of what Eva sees as a key role of education in America, working towards an authentic goal of social justice and equality. What is notable about Eva’s approach as a teacher is its focus on inputs and sociological context rather than a business-model of outputs and punitive accountability. If politicians are serious about making education reform policies that actively and effectively address the achievement gap, a teacher-positive framework provides a much different strategy.

Like Mendel’s school, the school that Kevin Dunbar works at was created by teachers who envisioned a different type of education to catch kids who “fall through the cracks.” Dunbar’s experience within a similarly teacher-driven school with a strong professional environment is further indication that public schooling, if restructured and controlled by educators, can have a powerful impact on both teachers and students.

Kevin Dunbar – Green Valley Lab School

Kevin Dunbar teaches at a lab school within a high-performing, suburban public high school. Since the lab school was created by educators in 1992, it has provided an alternative to students entering the Green Valley public high school. The lab school is

noted for its attention to “project based learning” and use of technology in the classroom. However, its most distinctive quality is its “smaller environment,” and Dunbar characterizes it as a school experience “that allows everyone to get to know each other.” Dunbar’s experience as a teacher at the lab school is notable, because although he is subject to much of the same policy pressures as teachers at the larger public high school, relative autonomy within the smaller school creates a much more autonomous and professional work environment.

Kevin Dunbar’s personal goals for students encompass his specialty in English - to “have a joy” for reading - as well as life skills and future plans - he wants students to “go out and be a productive member of society in whatever way you can contribute.” This goal of social responsibility for his students is fostered within the tight knit community of the Green Valley Lab School, whose smaller scope serves to “catch kids that would fall through the cracks,” and enable “parents, students, and teachers to make decisions together as a team.”

He sees the lab school’s experimental model as one that could be “replicated in any district, especially in tiny schools... you could take the research projects, seminars, field trips, etc.” and bring traditional public school curriculum outside of the box. Dunbar blames high stakes testing with squelching such creative possibilities in public schools: “There’s just this fear now with the testing and the money tied to it, there’s no courage to be different any more. It’s, we’re all going to do the same thing and produce the same kid and cookie cutter here we go... it ratchets up the anxiety for kids who aren’t test takers, [telling them] nope, you’re all going to have to walk down this line.”

The lab school has wide differences in curricular approach from the rest of the high school – Kevin does “a lot more project based learning, using technology a lot more in the classroom than [he] would in the traditional program.” Block scheduling, combined with a small student population that has “bought in” to the lab school model and won a competitive lottery for a spot in the school, enables different teaching styles to flourish. Despite all this relative autonomy, Kevin also sees his classes and the lab school in general being constrained by the standardized narrative. A switch in school board control brought in new members who looked at the program as “in our way, an annoyance” instead of the support previously received from members who had overseen the lab school’s creation. Now, the portfolios that the lab school students send to colleges instead of transcripts are in danger of being rejected, and the pressure of wanting to take top courses to get into colleges prevents many students from even applying to the lab school lottery in the first place. Students don’t like the group focus of the lab school because “it’s not about me,” and the heterogeneous makeup of the small, 30 member classes is widely different from the heavily tracked classes students take in the traditional public school. As an English teacher, Dunbar would also enjoy further specialization among the school’s English teachers to highlight their specialties – in poetry or journalistic writing, for example – to let students see that teachers are “all different, so kids can get a different experience in whatever classroom they go into.”

For Dunbar, there’s a large disconnect between the policymakers and educators’ ideals, and it’s having a disastrous impact on students. “This group of kids that are going through this right now, it seems like educational malpractice for them.” He notes that “This is like changing something in the medical field and not asking a doctor to be

involved...I think they've been absolutely remiss in the fact that...these committees [related to Race to the Top and Common Core] very few, if any involve classroom teachers." Despite feeling that the recent reforms and attacks on teachers negatively impact his classroom and the lab school program in general, Kevin Dunbar maintains that he wouldn't give up teaching for the world. "I have an enormous desire still after 19 years to come into this classroom, see young people, and help them get through another day and realize their value in this world and that they have something they can offer."

Although the small independent public schools that both Mendel and Dunbar teach at are good examples of teacher-driven structures that have led to measured success (both Mendel and Dunbar have ideas on how their schools could better serve students) they both require buy-in from students in the form of application, and have the ability to kick students out (though, in keeping with the models and goals of these two schools, it isn't used very frequently.) This ability should not be dismissed: after all, it represents one of the major complaints of public school teachers when talking about the unrealistic expectations of current accountability policies. In one of my favorite analogies so far for the reasoning behind a business model not translating to public education, Chris Ortiz notes that a blueberry salesman has the ability to throw away his rotten blueberries. However, "students are not blueberries – you can't throw students in the garbage." This truth, along with a further exploration of the ways in which a business model fails to line up with the public school reality, are explored by Karen James.

Karen James – Belmont High School

Karen James has been a high school chemistry teacher in the Belmont Public School District, a district in a rural area of upstate New York, for 21 years. Her

perspective as an honors teacher – teaching upper-track chemistry students – makes her uniquely poised to discuss various controversial reform policies that tie teacher tenure and pay to student performance, such a “merit pay.” Although James would likely benefit from such policies, she strongly opposes them on the grounds that they are a fundamentally flawed way in which to structure public schools.

When I ask Karen James how she began teaching, she laughs. “I feel like I’m one of the few people in the world who fell into a job that is for them... I feel like I’m where I’m supposed to be. I love teaching.” James, who has a PhD in chemistry, had a successful, if brief, career as a scientist – she was winning awards for her research as early as undergrad, but hated the career. When she “fell back” on her teaching certificate, she viewed the job as one that would carry her “until I figure[d] out what I [was] going to do.” Though she may have started out with a view of the job that has roots in its historically low prestige, she embraces the complexity and challenge of the job. Even though she began teaching in 1994, she says, “I’m just starting to get it.”

James prides herself on a sense of professionalism throughout her work and a mission in shaping her students’ cognitive development. “My goals are to help in the development of their brain. The reality of my students going into chemistry are slim...but I firmly believe that when we use our brain, challenge our brain, we form new pathways...we’re developing pathways for higher thinking processes. It’s still helping them develop thinking for decisions and evaluating their life,” she notes, emphasizing that she teaches much more than chemistry – she teaches responsibility, life skills, and strong work ethic. James is constantly reflecting on her teaching style and her delivery of content – she’s amused when people ask her if she gets “bored” teaching “the same thing

every year,” because, as she says, “I might teach the same thing, but my approach can be different, how I say it can be different. How I teach the same thing at the end of the day will be different than at the beginning. It is constant reflection throughout the day, throughout the year.”

For James, to be treated as a professional means “to be trusted to make decisions relevant to what happens in my classroom. Trust and respect, for what I do, and how I do it.” She has worked hard to achieve this at a local level, within “this building”: “I think that I go out of my way to help students, and parents see that, even if they don’t like my decisions. I have a long history of being consistent [with administrators and colleagues] – just proving myself over time, and part of that is constantly learning, not only personally but in my profession as well.” However, this respect is not reflected in the “current environment,” and James thinks that the general attitude towards teachers has changed substantially in the past 30 years. “I think in the 80s there was a great deal of respect for teachers. I think it started changing in the 90s and in the last 10 years it’s gotten increasingly worse.” She identifies Governor Andrew Cuomo as a local ringleader in the crusade against teachers, but notes that the difference between what is being vocalized in the media and what the general public feels towards teachers is hard to distinguish: “Is [the level of disrespect for teachers] changing? Or is it ‘more out there’?” James notes that it feels like an unwarranted and cruel attack. “I make the mistake of reading an article and then...reading the comments from the general population, and sometimes it makes me cry. I don’t know where it’s coming from.” Although James has worked hard to make her local environment one that supports and respects her as a professional, she notes that the criticism has started to seep into this protected bubble. “Last year was the

first year that my morale was down. I was impacted by what was going on *outside* of my classroom... and now, it's *in* my classroom.”

The fact that James teaches honors students does not lessen in any way her opposition to a business model of education.

In a business you have control over your product. We're dealing in humans, and humans, teachers, and students are flawed. We do our best to overcome those [flaws], but we can pick our students, we can't pick our products. If we did merit pay, I'd probably get paid a lot more because I have honors students. It's ridiculous.

Like other teachers in this sample, James connects the unrealistic nature of merit pay and other business-model reforms to policymakers' lack of relevant experience in education.

They have no idea what they're talking about. Not only have all these politicians who are screaming about us not had the education courses or experience in teaching, their children are not even in public education. [They] have had the gold experience of their child's class are all motivated learners, I think that they think that that's what school is like.

James' analysis further clarifies the teacher-prioritizing framework through a clear example of how a “teacher-negative” framework has had negative effects on her classroom work environment. A lack of relevant experience and disrespectful view of teachers has led policymakers to ignore teachers' perspective when crafting policy, and the result is a negative infiltration of the professionalized bubble she has worked to maintain, as well as what Kevin Dunbar termed “educational malpractice” for students. “The educational research says that everything we're doing is against what we've seen works.” What remedy does James propose? “We need educational professionals to take control of our field, not politicians.”

Chapter 4

Conceptualizing Teachers as Educational Experts:

How a Neoliberal Theory and Deprofessionalization Theory Intersect

After creating a brief, but thorough pool of teacher knowledge and input to draw upon through a review of teacher-prioritizing literature and personal research, I now apply a teacher-prioritizing framework, centering teachers as educational experts whose input is vital to effective education reform policy, on the policy trends of the past thirty years. In order to effectively contextualize this framework in recent history, it is necessary to introduce two theories that help organize policy trends and teachers' experience of them within the teacher-prioritizing framework: neoliberal theory and deprofessionalization theory.

A Review of the Teacher-Prioritizing Framework

Teachers' input indicates that there is a disconnect between educational policy and teachers' professional goals, resulting in a rarely positive, sometimes neutral, and often negative impact of policies on both teachers' sense of professional authority and the education students are receiving in general. By nature, education reform policies serve to change the educational environment so that the quality of education improves; teachers' experiences of these policies indicate that this has not been the effect of policies such as No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and the Common Core initiative. Following the logic of the teacher-prioritizing framework leads us to believe that this ultimate failure of policies to improve education for students is due to an original failure of policymakers to

recognize teachers as educational experts and value their input in the creation of reform policy. To review teacher-prioritizing framework, here is Table 1 from the first chapter:

Table 1: Teacher-Prioritizing Frameworks: Roots and Implications for Teacher-Positive, Teacher-Neutral, and Teacher-Negative Frameworks

Framework	Are teachers educational experts?	When should teachers' input be listened to in policymaking?	What are the implications for policy's impact on teachers?	What are the implications for policy's impact in general?
Teacher-Positive	Yes	All the time – teachers' input should be listened to in all aspects of educational policy	Policies have a professionalizing impact on the teaching career	Meets the complex needs of the education system.
Teacher-Neutral	Neutral	Sometimes – teachers' input should be listened to when it aligns with existing frameworks, such as neoliberalism	Policies have a mix of professionalizing and deprofessionalizing impact on the teaching career	Sometimes meets the complex needs of the education system, sometimes does not.
Teacher-Negative	No	Never – teachers represent a stagnant, anti-reform interest group whose input will lead to bad policy.	Policies have a deprofessionalizing impact on the teaching career	Does not meet the complex needs of the education system.

The teacher-prioritizing framework is made up of three separate frameworks that operate relative to one another.

1. The *Teacher-positive* framework states that approaching educational policy with the belief that teachers are educational experts will lead to the valuing of their input during the policymaking process. This inclusion of relevant, expert educational knowledge leads to a positive, professionalizing impact on teachers, and the success of educational policy through its sufficiently complex approach.
2. The *Teacher-neutral* framework states that approaching educational policy with the belief that teachers are no more educational experts than any other stakeholder in reform will lead to the valuing of their input *only* when it aligns with existing

- frameworks in place for educational improvement. This inclusion of relevant, expert educational knowledge only when it serves the needs of existing stakeholders leads to a mixed impact on teachers that is alternately professionalizing and deprofessionalizing; the education system in general also undergoes a mix of positive and negative transformations.
3. The *Teacher-negative* framework states that approaching educational policy with the belief that teachers are less of educational experts than other stakeholders in policymaking, and in fact represent a completely “anti-reform” interest group, will lead to the devaluing of their input. This exclusion of relevant, educational knowledge will lead to a negative, deprofessionalizing impact on teachers and an oversimplifying approach that will have a negative impact on the improvement of the education system.

Neoliberal Theory

In order to understand the approach to educational improvement that the most recent reforms have taken, it is vital to understand the overarching theory of neoliberalism that has been increasingly relied upon for reform policy in all sectors of America since its global rise in the 1980s (Harvey 2005). Neoliberalism can be concretely linked to teachers’ experiences and their frustration with “business-style” reforms that treat students as “products,” as well as the increase in efficiency and quantification of the system through a reliance on standardized testing, among other policy trends identified by educators. However, neoliberalism, though a good umbrella term for reform policies that are “market-based,” “privatizing,” “business-style,” or reliant upon “test-based

accountability,” is a much broader movement outside of the education, and even reform policy, world.

According to David Harvey, neoliberal theory “holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market. This requires technologies of information creation and capacities to accumulate, store, transfer, analyse, and use massive databases to guide decisions in the global marketplace” (2005:3). Harvey notes that neoliberal theory is ultimately based in the idea of individual freedom:

“[neoliberalism] proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey 2005:2). Essentially, neoliberalism believes that the ideal structure of the capitalist economy, with its hands-off approach and emphasis on individual flexibility and power, is the most effective way to organize all areas of life. As Henry Giroux notes, recent education reform policies stem less from a desire to directly improve the quality of education in America than move it towards a hands-off, privatized market model: “Far from a genuine call for reform, these attacks largely stem from an attempt to transform schools from a public investment to a private good” (2010:137). In a neoliberal model of education, the government’s only role is to “create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to [free market] practices” (Harvey 2005:2) – the rest is left up to the forces of the market and private entities.

Henry Giroux’s teacher-positive critique of the neoliberal role in public education articulates clear connections between the teacher-prioritizing framework and neoliberal

theory. He writes that neoliberalism has changed public education by emphasizing “standardized testing, a use of top-down curricular mandates, an influx of advertising in schools, a use of profit motives to 'encourage' student performance, an attack on teacher unions, and modes of pedagogy that stress rote learning and memorization” (2010:137).

As outlined by Harvey, these changes are rooted in neoliberal tenets:

1. Individual *self-interest and competition* as the ultimate motivating force: Students and teachers are incentivized to improve via “profit-motive,” through the introduction of merit-pay and student rewards and advancement dependent upon standardized test performance (Giroux 2010).
2. Government’s role in the *creation of a market-friendly sector*: The increase in top-down mandates that are increasingly privatizing in nature, as well as movements to weaken and bust teacher unions (Giroux 2010).
3. The creation of *data systems* to “guide decisions in the...marketplace”: Standardized testing has had an increasingly large role in decisions made within education, from student grade promotion, teachers’ evaluation, pay and ability to keep their jobs, and school closings. This has led to the term “high-stakes” testing, as grades on standardized assessments being used to determine very important decisions, and more so in low-performing, high-poverty, high-minority student schools (Abrams 2003).
4. An increased focus on *output, or product*: The concept of test-based accountability, punishes or rewards participants in the “education market” based solely on their quantified output, or test scores. Student learning is increasingly

quantified so that students, teachers and schools can be informed and held accountable for producing good “outcomes” for students.

When we listen to teachers, we find that many of the goals of increasing accountability and quality of teaching and learning are supported (Berry 2004). However, the neoliberal methods of reaching these goals raises serious concerns for teachers, and many find that there is a “disconnect” between their methods and approach and what they are asked to do in their work environments. To summarize teachers’ experience in relation to each of these “neoliberal tenets”:

1. Individual *self-interest and competition* as the ultimate motivating force: teachers repeatedly reported that “collaboration” and “teamwork” were successful aspects of their work environment. Additionally, some teachers spoke of the negative impacts that competitive policies had on this collaborative spirit. For example, Kevin Dunbar noted that bonuses based on evaluation score might lead him to not lend material to new and struggling teachers. Rachel Jennings said that similar test-based-pay policies had led to “student shopping” at her public school in North Carolina.
2. Government’s role in the *creation of a market-friendly sector*: Many teachers noted that a top-down policy framework led to a disconnect felt between policymakers, administrators, and teachers. Chris Ortiz linked this “trickle-down” method to resource oversights that caused stress in his classroom. Others, like Liz Green, opposed union-busting by giving strong endorsements of the ways that that unions protected teachers’ professional work environment.

3. The creation of *data systems* to “guide decisions in the...marketplace”: the high-stakes nature of testing led many teachers to talk about the stress or pressure that they felt negatively impacted their work environments. In additions, many noted that tests failed to accurately measure or encourage “meaningful,” “long-term” student learning – the fact that life-changing decisions were increasingly dependent on these scores was an extremely frustrating aspect of neoliberal reform for teachers.
4. An increased focus on *output*, or *product*: This was one of the most nonsensical aspects of reform for teachers. Public school teachers noted their lack of control over their “product” – students came to them already having been impacted by many different factors in their lives, and their success was largely dependent upon their personal work and effort. To hold teachers accountable for scores that they did not have sole, or even large, control over was repeatedly identified as an extremely “unfair” aspect of legislation.

Professionalization – Increasing the Quality of Teachers

Increasing the quality of teaching has been a major goal of educational reform policy – and it is widely supported by teachers (Abrams 2003, Berry 2004, Murnane and Papay 2007). Many reforms have used the language of professionalism and professionalization to describe the ways in which they want teachers to get better, as well as how their policies will help teachers get there. Before we dive into specific policies, it is vital to define what “professionalism” and “professionalization” mean within the context of this paper.

Professionalization theory

Richard Ingersoll's work on teachers as professionals uses a distinct sociological framework to describe professionalization, including:

1. "Credential and licensing requirements for entry"
2. "Induction and mentoring programs for entrants"
3. "Professional development support, opportunities, and participation"
4. "Specialization"
5. "Authority over decision making"
6. "Compensation levels"
7. "Prestige and occupational social standing" (Ingersoll 2004, p. 103-4).

Ingersoll notes that sociologists are careful to distinguish between professionalization and a sense of professionalism – one does not necessarily indicate the other. Given the variety of teaching jobs in America, which differ in type of school employer, subject taught, age level taught, unionization, degree held, and many other factors, it is difficult to find a teacher whose job meets all of the requirements listed above. However, these seven indicators of professionalization are helpful in that they can help assess to what degree a reform policy treats teaching as a profession. In general, teachers in my sample focused mostly on the "authority of decision making" aspect of this definition – while other pieces came in briefly, nearly every teacher talked about their autonomy and the ways in which their control over decision making impact their sense of being treated as a professional, as well as the ways in which reform policies had decreased their control over this process.

Complexity

Although a checklist like the one above can certainly help in categorizing reforms, Ingersoll also notes that, “to sociologists, the underlying and most important quality of occupations is the degree of expertise and complexity involved in the work itself. In this view, professional work involves highly complex sets of skills, intellectual functioning, and knowledge that are not easily acquired and not widely held” (2004 p. 104). Therefore, to the itemized checklist above we must add “complexity,” a concept which facilitates both the ways in which teachers’ work is viewed as “expert” as well as sheds light on the potential of policies to have positive impact on the education community. If such policies are sufficiently complex in the way they appreciate the diversity and deep, meaningful nature of teachers’ work, then they are one step closer to success. However, the neoliberal strategy of reducing teachers’ work to “outputs”, belies a dangerously simplified view of education, and predicts the insufficiency of such reforms to meet the many, complex needs of educators, schools and students.

“Trust and Respect” – a teacher driven aspect

Because all of the teachers in my sample responded to the question, “What does it mean to you to be treated as a professional?” in similar ways, I want to include their experience in this outlining of what professionalization means for teachers. Every single one of my teachers mentioned the themes of “trust” and “respect” when they were outlining what constituted a professional work environment; furthermore, they indicated that for them, recent policies often worked against this sense of trust and respect. When reformers say they are working to increase teacher quality and effectiveness, but do so

through policies that decrease teachers' sense of being treated as professionals, they are in fact doing the opposite of professionalizing teaching: they are *deprofessionalizing* the career.

Deprofessionalization

To encapsulate both the aspects of professionalization and professionalism listed above and shift them to a theory that more accurately describes teachers' experience of reforms, I will clarify that what begins as a goal to increase teacher quality through various reforms through a language of "professionalization" and "professionalism" often takes a reverse form: "deprofessionalization." This term has been used by various authors to describe the impacts that recent policies have had on teaching, and in order to give a clear, cohesive model, I revert the aspects of professionalization and professionalism reviewed previously into a new "checklist of deprofessionalization":

1. Reducing the requirements for entry through alternative certification programs
2. De-emphasizing the importance of induction and mentoring programs for new teachers
3. Decreasing the existence of meaningful, teacher-driven professional development support, opportunities, and participation
4. Asking teachers to decrease the specialized nature of their work by narrowing curriculum and focusing on tested subjects
5. Shifting authority over decision making at the classroom level to administrators and policymakers
6. Reduction of salary
7. Reducing prestige and social standing
8. Using a simplistic, instead of complex, approach to conceptualize student learning
9. Failing to respect and trust teachers' knowledge and autonomy

Neoliberalism and Deprofessionalization within a Teacher Prioritizing Framework

Neoliberalism and deprofessionalization are both powerful concepts within the teacher-prioritizing framework. Because neoliberal theory holds that the ultimate key to improving the education system lies in privatizing its structure, and that moving schools to a model based in self-interest, competition, data systems, and an output-focus will increase its ability to function as a market, it is clear to see why neoliberal reform policies often fail to recognize educators as experts and value their input, especially when it contradicts the neoliberal mission. Deprofessionalization refers to the process that occurs when this failure to recognize teachers as educational experts plays out in policy: although many policies claim to work towards improving the quality of teaching, their lack of understanding of what it means to teachers to be “treated as a professional” – which involves important themes of trust, respect, and autonomy in the classroom – means that such policies are in reality “teacher-negative,” and have a deprofessionalizing impact on teachers.

As we move forward in observing the trends in education reform from 1980 to today in the next two chapters, it is important for the reader to not only notice many of the core tenets of neoliberalism and deprofessionalization that have been outlined in this chapter, but also to understand the ways in which they are connected within the teacher-prioritizing framework. Together, neoliberalism and deprofessionalization define the approach and implications of a “teacher-negative” framework, which fails to recognize teachers as educational experts, and, as a result, fails to meet the complex needs of the education system.

Chapter 5

Neoliberal Roots: *A Nation at Risk to No Child Left Behind*

Neoliberalism is larger than individual business-style reforms and standardized testing: it is a movement to privatize the education system, and “open” this public institution as a market for private interests. Neoliberalism has proven to be an economically polarizing force in America and around the world, increasing levels of inequality and decreasing our sense of “social responsibility” in its individualistic emphasis (Giroux 2010:143). Henry Giroux notes that, with the evidence of our recent economic crash, it has been proven “discredited,” and “outmoded” as a successful structure for the economy, and even less so for other sectors such as education (2010:142). Nevertheless, neoliberalism continues to be embraced by policymakers, and it continues to have important implications for our school system.

In this chapter, I outline the ways in which neoliberalism began to be considered a successful model for the education system in the years leading up to the first prominent and impactful neoliberal education reform policy, No Child Left Behind. Using a teacher-prioritizing framework, I connect the neoliberal push to a decrease in valuing teachers as educational experts as they were increasingly left out of important policy discussions, setting the stage for policies that would have a detrimental impact on teachers and our school system.

A “Hands-off” Approach: Government Involvement in Education Pre-1980

When considering the significant role that the federal government seems to have in shaping how schools function today on an organizational and even content level, it is surprising to consider that before WWII, even the fiscal support we take for granted today was minimal. In 1920, for example, the federal government provided 0.3% of support for elementary and secondary education; the vast majority of funding – 83% - was provided locally, and the remainder by state governments (Cross 2004:2) For generations, the American public school system cycled through various movements and trends that did not involve heavy government involvement. The idea that the federal government should play a large role in funding education did not take hold until after World War II, when the GI Act gave considerable higher education funding to veterans (p.2).

However, even in this low-involvement period, the roots of current policies could be seen growing. The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, which was “the first legislation to provide direct federal program support for schools,” specifically aimed to increase educational access for lower class students as a way of increasing competency in basic skills: in this case, literacy (Cross 2004:2). The idea of supporting educational access as a means of increasing the average levels of education for American students, or raising the “minimum competency” levels of mastery in subjects like literacy and mathematics, is a theme that can be clearly seen in the standardized testing push of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, and the standardized curriculum push of the Common Core initiative (2004:71).

It is important to note that during this pre-WWII era efforts to bring the organizational and content aspects of education under federal reach were not absent: they just failed to be pushed into law. Efforts to replace the Education Bureau in the Department of the Interior with a full-fledged Department of Education were popular, as were measures to support literacy and teacher training (2004:2). However, these initiatives failed to take hold due to the widely held idea that the federal government should not try to define *what* schools did or *how* they did it. As former politician and historian Christopher Cross notes, “federal rationale for support other than fiscal...was simply not sufficiently compelling to gain approval” (p.3).

The Reagan Administration and A Nation at Risk

In 1983, deep in the conservative, neoliberal heat of the Reagan administration, national education reform rocketed to the top of American priorities. With the publishing of *A Nation at Risk (ANAR)*, a nationally commissioned report on the state of American public education, the U.S. flew into a race to improve its schools that would morph into an unprecedented era in educational history. The nationwide, political struggle to reform education that began with the authors of *ANAR* continues to deeply impact schools, teachers and students today.

At the time, the new focus on public education was a somewhat unexpected one. President Reagan had come into office committed to defunding the federal Department of Education and working to privatize a public system over two centuries old (Cross 2004:71). However, the urgent, patriotic and idealist language found in the report written by Reagan’s National Committee for Excellence in Education (NCEE) is a well-worn

rhetoric similar to the social justice themes outlined by Rebecca Goldstein, drawn from 19th century reformers who initially pushed for universal schooling in America through the Common School movement.

Social responsibility: the beginning of public education

Horace Mann, a passionate leader of the Common School movement, frequently published essays promoting the social importance and national potential of public schools (Reese 2011). In his 1848 *Twelfth Annual Report*, Mann writes:

Without undervaluing any other human agency, it may be safely affirmed that the Common School...may become *the most effective and benignant of all the forces of civilization*....If administered in the spirit of justice and conciliation, *all the rising generation may be brought within the circle of its reformatory and elevating influences* (2011:80, emphasis added).

Mann and his fellow Common School reformers spoke of public education in terms of the social institution that it would become, integral to democratic society and a model for countries who committed to increasing educational access across class – but importantly, not racial – divides (2011). Supporters of universal public schooling promised that it would lead to a veritable golden age in America: a whole generation of citizens would be more financially stable, academically literate, morally righteous and politically informed. It was a call to arms that appealed to both the protestant and democratic roots of the nation (2011). In many ways, it is similar to the goals of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top today: both policies cite the strengthening of public schooling as a strategy for achieving social equality and global competitiveness as a nation (Ravitch 2010).

The perception of public education as a panacea to all social ills was present from the very beginning. In 1839, a recent immigrant to the U.S. wrote:

Give to education...a clear field and fair play...and your poor houses, lazarettos, and hospitals will stand empty, your prisons and penitentiaries will lack inmates,

and the whole country will be filled with wise, industrious, and happy inhabitants. Immorality, vice and crime, disease, misery and poverty, will vanish from our regions, and morality, virtue and fidelity, with health, prosperity and abundance, will make their permanent home among us (Reese 2011:13).

Investing in universal schooling was seen as a necessary step in growing as a young nation and holding on to democratic ideals, but also as a solution to societal problems that would bring all Americans together in common experience and cause. Although a variety of free schools existed, they were stigmatized as schools for poor families accepting charity (p.13). Similarly, private schools served to reproduce existing social inequalities by giving students from rich families a fast track to success and dividing them from the rest of society (p.23). Unifying the existing, sprawling, de-centralized and highly localized school system under federal funding would increase its quality, attracting rich parents, while removing the stigma of charity schooling, making it a viable option for poor families as well. The “common” school would provide a “common” experience: it would teach students “in the same house, the same class, and out of the same book, by the same teacher” (23). Standardization of schooling was seen in the 19th century, as it is today, as a viable strategy for reaching two key goals in American education: excellent quality and universal access.⁹

The education nation: A Nation at Risk

Politicians from the 1980s onwards have pursued aggressive policies in education reform, proudly declaring themselves “education governors” or “education presidents” as a way of demonstrating their dedication to authentic and meaningful change for American citizens (Ravitch 2010:95). Education historian Diane Ravitch notes that,

⁹ Brief footnote explaining the boundaries of “universal” access in the 1800/1900s. Brief explanation here of who that did not include.

“some governors made their mark as education reformers by expanding funding for pre-kindergarten or raising teachers’ salaries (or both), but most of the time their reforms consisted of new requirements for testing and accountability” (p.95). This boom in education as a national movement “compelling” enough to garner extensive federal support and attention has clear roots in the Reagan administration and *A Nation at Risk* (*ANAR*), a report written about public education in America. This report represents, in many ways, a teacher-positive approach to policy: the National Commission of Excellence in Education, which authored the document, was headed and appointed by education secretary Terrel H Bell. Bell was considered by many conservatives to be a threat to neoliberalism because he was too involved in the education community (2004). Nevertheless, the recommendations put forth by *ANAR*, varied as they may be, represent a holistic and complex approach to education reform (NCEE 1983).

A Nation at Risk accomplished two things at once. Firstly, it pulled at the heartstrings of centuries-old reform goals, focusing on democratic values of accessibility and citizenship, and bemoaning a lack of universal educational quality as a key concern. The writers eagerly proclaim that “a high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom” (NCEE 1983:7). However, just as it harkened back to 19th century reasoning, *ANAR* and the administration in which it was passed foreshadowed new neoliberal trends in education reform: international competition and test-based accountability.

One of the very reasons why *ANAR* made such waves when it was published is its undeniably patriotic and alarmist tone: “Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged

preeminence in commerce, industry, science and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world” (p.5). It framed the lack of educational excellence in terms of a security threat with the statement, “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war” (p.5). As proof, the authors cited “indicators of the risk” that were predominantly test-based – 9 of the 13 indicators listed referenced test-based performance, such as “Average achievement of high school students on most standardized tests is now lower than 26 years ago when Sputnik was launched,” and “Over half the population of gifted students do not match their tested ability with comparable achievement in school” (p.8).

However, *ANAR*'s recommendations for action were fairly broad and balanced. Despite the authors' focus on international competition and test-based performance, their recommendations for improvements included an increased focus on a core curriculum of basic classes and adopting rigorous and measurable academic standards (NCEE 1983:70-75). However, the recommendations also included sections on “teaching” and “leadership and fiscal support,” and attempted to define the role that American citizens would play at each level of control to improve education (p.76-78). Politicians would be responsible for “providing the leadership necessary to achieve” reforms, while citizens – presumably at the state and local government level, but also through private initiatives – “provide the fiscal support and stability required to bring about the reforms we propose” (p.78). Ultimately, teachers would be the ones implementing the reforms at the ground level, and *ANAR* recognized that measures to “improve the preparation of teachers” and “make teaching a more rewarding and respected profession” were integral to making education

reform take hold in classrooms (p.76). This top-down hierarchy of power with clearly defined roles would continue to change and develop over the following decades, but the basic structure remained: federal and state government would design and fund reforms, and schools and teachers would be accountable for implementing them successfully in the classroom.

Notably missing from the authors' recommendations is any mention of standardized testing. Yet standardized testing and its high-stakes role in modern education reform is one of the most controversial topics in the field today, and has its roots in *ANAR*'s broad call to action. In the years following the report's publication, Christopher Cross paints a picture of politicians racing to respond to the need for systemic overhaul. The education community had fought hard for this issue to be of national prominence, and *ANAR* had delivered. Cross writes of the federal "bully pulpit" as coming to important prominence in education during this era: increased visibility of education as a public issue meant that the government could more effectively "embarrass and goad schools into improving" (2004:71). Suddenly the attention that the education community had pushed for came back to bite them: "having worked hard for its creation, the education community, especially the NEA [National Education Association], found that the bully pulpit had become a sharp instrument for promoting reforms that were *not of its making*" (2004:80, emphasis added).

After-effects: the education community's decreasing role in federal policy

Although *ANAR* had been published during the Reagan presidency, the lack of continuity between Reagan's goals and the NCEE's goals resulted in a clash of wills during Reagan's second term. Terrel H. Bell, who had pushed *ANAR* through to fruition,

is widely considered the behind-the-scenes wizard of the education boom in the 1980s. Although the Reagan administration would ultimately take credit for the report, it was Bell that pushed against Reagan's conservative goals to represent the education community's needs. Having partially achieved the goal of bringing the issue to a renewed sense of importance, Bell was frustrated by Reagan's second term budget cuts, which cut more from the Department of Education than any other federal agency (Cross 2004:82). Bell wrote of the classically political move of the Reagan administration to use education as a rallying platform for reelection, then fail to support its promise financially: "There was no longer a need to 'stay out front' on the 'sensitive area of education.' We would have changed the course of history of American education had the president stayed with us through the implementation of the school reform movement" (Bell 1983:158-159, quoted in Cross 2004). Ted Bell appealed the cuts at a budget review; when it became clear that the president had no intention of listening to his needs, he resigned (Cross 2004:82).

Bell's resignation was a sign of the times, and an increasingly teacher-negative, or at least teacher-neutral, framework for reform. Although the education community had achieved its desired prominence, it found itself increasingly left out of the reform conversation. When George H.W. Bush took office in 1989, he appealed to business executives at an annual meeting of the Business Roundtable, challenging them with each taking on the responsibility of supporting a specific state and its reform efforts. This invitation to business leaders, combined with a selective guest list for the Charlottesville Education Summit in 1989, made it clear that education was moving into the realm of state government and business leaders. Christopher Cross notes that although "every

cabinet member was required to attend, and 49 of the 50 state governors came...no educators were invited, nor were any members of Congress other than those from Virginia.” (2004:93).

The positioning of educators – and even education-focused politicians – as unwelcome at the Charlottesville summit would predict the lack of teacher input, and increasingly neoliberal focus, of education reform. President H.W. Bush reported that the major agreement from governors convened at the summit was to compile a list of “national performance goals” (2004:94). H.W. Bush was also quick to note the support of educators: “This is the first time, ever, that any group of public officials have ever committed themselves to a national effort to restructure the schools of the United States – something every educator who studied it says is the single most significant thing we could do” (p.94). However, the focus on *performance* goals – the product, or output, of education versus the input – reflected a distinctly neoliberal and teacher-negative model. It was an intentional move away from what politicians felt was an overly bureaucratic and detail-oriented education community, who “had remained preoccupied with issues like the number of books, the number of students per teacher, the dollars available for this, the number of that, while failing to look at what the educational system was producing: Are students learning a year’s worth of education for every year of teaching?” (p.94-95).

The move to quantifiable production was certainly well matched for goals of accountability outlined in *ANAR*. Yet for educators, important inputs like numbers of students per classroom and availability of resources *did* matter. Students brought life experience and resources of their own into classrooms, and teachers worked with

multiple factors – poverty, school funding, students’ previous education - to try to make the biggest difference possible in a child’s learning (Ravitch 2010). Performance driven goals failed to account for these inputs, and even the politicians elected to “hammer out the precise language” of the summit’s goals found themselves beginning to struggle with the focus on output as well (Cross 2004:95). Cross, who participated in the writing himself as the current assistant secretary for educational research and improvement, details the struggle:

There had also been agreement that goal number one should be about school readiness. However, no one had any idea about how to write that in a way that did not focus on inputs, such as the number of low-birth-weight babies – since there was also agreement that testing 4- and 5-year-olds was not yet feasible and that school readiness was a complex issue (Cross 2004:96-97).

Policymakers forced to deal with the nitty-gritty of educational realities found themselves necessarily including the inputs that educators consistently say are relevant to their work. Cross goes on to say that any mention of input that they included in the goals was ignored by policymakers who eventually read the document: since it didn’t line up with a neoliberal framework, it was considered unimportant (p.97).

Prioritizing neoliberal theory over the knowledge of educators was a trend that would emerge to haunt even those who had initially been in favor of the business-minded focus. Diane Ravitch, after being involved in the federal reform movements of the ‘90s and initially supportive of No Child Left Behind legislation, later wrote that her lost confidence in the reforms of this era stemmed simply from seeing “how these ideas were working out in reality” (2010:2).

Neoliberal goals, driven by and continually combined with a leading force that failed to listen to educators, continue to have a profound impact on our country’s public

system of education, as evidenced by the experiences of public school teachers. Even in the period before No Child Left Behind, neoliberalism went hand in hand with a teacher-negative framework – in the early years, educators were listened to, but pushed out of the way when they were no longer needed, evidenced by the experience of the National Commission on Excellence in Education and Terrel Bell. As politicians and business leaders became increasingly involved in education policymaking due its new high-profile status, educators' focus on inputs and the bureaucratic complexity of the education system in general was viewed as a backwards, anti-neoliberal way to approach reform policy.

The actions of President H.W. Bush foreshadowed those of his son, George Bush, who in 2001 passed the most intense, federally-funded and test-based accountability driven legislation seen in the history of American education: No Child Left Behind. The teacher-negative framing for education policy that began in the 1980s would continue in full force with this policy, and have important implications for its successor, Barack Obama's Race to the Top. As we begin to focus on specific policies, however, it is important not to lose sight of the political and business-driven context within which these policies are written.

Chapter 6

“Common Sense” Reforms: Educational Policy 2001 – Present

The following chapter follows two prominent national education policies that have been passed in the past 15 years: No Child Left Behind, passed under President George W. Bush in 2001, and Race to the Top, passed under President Barack Obama in 2009 (Ravitch 2010). Both policies claim increasing the quality of education as their goal, yet their teacher-negative, neoliberal framework and deprofessionalizing influences are evidenced in both content and the description of their impact by educators.

No Child Left Behind (2001)

The year 2001 marked the passing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation under President George W. Bush. The speed and bipartisanship with which NCLB moved from announcement to law is truly remarkable: the executive summary notes with pride that passage was secured “less than a year” after it was announced, “despite the unprecedented challenges of engineering an economic recovery while leading the Nation in the war on terrorism following the events of September 11” (No Child Left Behind 2001:1).

Overview of No Child Left Behind

NCLB focused on four key shifts: “increased accountability,” “more choices for students and parents,” “greater flexibility for states, school districts, and schools,” and “putting reading first” (2001:1-4). Additional focuses include teacher quality, support for

limited English proficient students, and making sure schools were “safe and drug-free” (p.3).

The language of the executive summary clearly communicates a framework that works to create a wide base of information on school performance through widespread and regular testing, and to ensure that “no child is left behind” by quickly working to improve or replace failing schools with successful ones. States were responsible for creating “statewide accountability systems” that not only tested elementary and middle school students yearly in grades three through eight for math and reading proficiency, but also worked towards a goal of 100 percent proficiency within 12 years – by 2014. Thus, states would not be judged by their existing proficiency levels, which the government realized were extremely varied, but by their ability to make adequate yearly progress, or AYP, towards their goal of complete student proficiency in 2014 (p.1).

Matched with the measurement of AYP was a detailed series of sanctions levied against school districts who failed to measure up each year. These sanctions ranged, over five years, from notification of failure to complete restructuring. In the years in between being put on notice and being completely overhauled, a continually failing school was required to spend funding on measures that would allow their students to transfer to a better performing school, as well as specific actions to try to improve their own offerings: “free tutoring to low-income students” and “corrective action,” which might mean curriculum changes, staff changes, or a longer school day or year” (Ravitch 2010:97). When faced with overhaul itself, a school had five options. Three meant relinquishing control to outside groups: handing things over to either private management or the state, or converting to a charter school run by a private entity. The fourth was just as drastic:

replacing the entire workforce, including the principal. Given these recommended options, it is no surprise that schools often opted for “other,” a fifth route that demanded “major restructuring,” but could feasibly be done without a major turnover of control (2010:98).

Teacher-negative origins of NCLB

Thirteen years after the passage of NCLB, it would seem that hindsight is, as they say, “20-20”. We now know that the problems stemming from No Child Left Behind were foreshadowed by its predecessor’s failure in Texas. When President Bush came to office with his plan for the accountability-based restructuring of American education, he did so based on his experience as governor of Texas, where test-based accountability reforms had led to long-term test score increases. However, even in 2000, some scholars were able to see through the leaps in performance – they observed that low-performing populations of students, overwhelmingly students of color, were being repeatedly held back in the new state structure due to low test scores, and dropped out in frustration (McNeil 2000). In Linda McNeil’s assessment of the “perverse” effects of the “Texas Accountability System” – based off of the standardized test, TAAS, she focuses on teachers as “jugglers” of prescribed curriculum and their personal philosophies.

Even if they had to teach two contradictory lessons in order to ensure that students encountered the “real” information (as well as test-based facts), many teachers managed to do so in order that their students did not lose out on a chance for real education. Under TAAS, there are fewer and fewer opportunities for authentic teaching (2000:2).

McNeil’s assessment of the disastrous impacts that a high-stakes, punitive test-based accountability policy was having on Texan teachers and students was published two years before No Child Left Behind – and yet she speaks to many of the same concerns that

come through in teacher-prioritizing literature today. She notes that teachers' control in the classroom was increasingly interrupted by administrators' calls for increased test prep and a highly narrowed version of curriculum.

However, the impact on teachers was filtered down to the students – narrowing the curriculum to test prep meant that many students failed to learn to read, and at low-performing schools with majority Black and Brown students, drop out rates soared (McNeil 2000). McNeil notes that the policy's impact on low-performing schools was to effectively decrease the quality of education being delivered, under the auspices of a “back to basics” curriculum. She relates the clear inequalities that emerged between the kind of education that policymakers and funders expected for their children and the kind of education that was considered by those with few connections to actual schools to be “a step up” for Black and Latino students:

After one group of children had exhibited their skills in adding, he looked over the heads of the Latino parents to the white corporate and community leaders standing around the room and said, “Isn't this great? Now, this may not be the math you would want for your children, but for these children – isn't this just great? (2000:5).

The negative impact that the TAAS had for teachers and students alike was clear far before NCLB was signed into law – however, it is clear from the support that it was given from the get-go that few had bothered to look into educators' experience or opinions. McNeil importantly notes that this racist, classist system – which effectively increased the achievement gap and graduation gap between white students and students of color – was ironically the blueprint for a policy entitled, “No Child Left Behind” (2000:4).

Race to the Top (2009)

With *Race to the Top*, President Barack Obama furthered America's educational focus on competition and test-based accountability. Signed into law in 2009, the legislation aims to focus on four areas similar to the goals of NCLB: "Adopting standards and assessments", "building data systems", "recruiting, developing, rewarding and retained effective teachers and principals", and "turning around our lowest achieving schools" (2009:2). The business-style language has gone nowhere – the executive summary for *Race to the Top* notes in the very first paragraph that it aims to support strategies "most likely to lead to improved results for students, long-term gains in school and school system capacity, and increased productivity and effectiveness" (p.2). It would seem that education is a growing industry, not a generations-old public institution: Better students! More students! Faster! Faster!

Origins of Race to the Top

Barack Obama's endorsement of a neoliberal model for education is indicative of the popularity to which it has grown. Henry Giroux observes that in the larger context of *Race to the Top*, Obama's appointment of Arne Duncan as secretary of education was a telling sign of whom the president trusted as an educational expert (2010). Duncan's history using a market-based model for making over the Chicago Public Schools was prioritized over Obama's longtime counsel on education, particularly during his campaign – Linda Darling-Hammond. However, it is rumored that, just as Terrel Bell before her, Darling-Hammond was passed over because she was too favoring of teacher empowerment and too involved in the educational "establishment" (Giroux 2010). Duncan's prioritization of neoliberal reforms and teacher-negative framework comes

through loud and clear in Race to the Top legislation, and predicts more of the same for our education system.

Methods for ensuring accountability

Race to the Top, which is based in block grants, requires that states further embrace accountability measures in order to be merely eligible for consideration for funding: there cannot be any barriers “to linking data on student achievement (as defined in this notice) or student growth (as defined in this notice) to teachers and principals for the purpose of teacher and principal evaluation” (2009:4). Student achievement and student growth are both factors which are open to a wide interpretation, and every school defines what they want students to achieve and how they want students to grow differently. However, Race to the Top is clear about its definitions: it means test scores. Specifically, scores on the state tests introduced by NCLB; in the case of “non-tested grades and subjects,” it encourages the use of “alternative measures of student learning and performance, such as student scores on pre-tests and end-of-course tests; student performance on English language proficiency assessments; and other measures of student achievement that are rigorous and comparable across classrooms” (p.14). Just as NCLB policymakers failed to think outside of the testing box when conceptualizing “good education,” even “alternative” measures of assessment are based on tests. Furthermore, Race to the Top zeroes in on school staff, not just school districts: it assumes, as Ravitch notes of NCLB, that “low scores are caused by lazy teachers and lazy principals, who need to be threatened with the loss of their jobs” (2010:111). Standardized evaluation of school staff based in test scores is critical to its success, and it makes this clear by requiring this stipulation of all grant applicants.

Neoliberal language

Race to the Top is a dramatic step-up from NCLB when it comes to the quantification of the education world. Every concept is clearly defined in terms of scores and rates where possible. This is most visible in the definition of “highly effective principal” and “highly effective teacher,” whose students must achieve growth of “one and one-half grade levels in an academic year” (2009:12). Token recognition of the complexity of these jobs can be found in the “supplemental measures” sections of these definitions, but often ring robotic: “high school graduation rates; college enrollment rates; evidence of providing supportive teaching and learning conditions, strong instructional leadership, and positive family and community engagement; or evidence of attracting, developing, and retaining high numbers of effective teachers,” for principals (p.12).

Furthermore, the document itself is quantitatively weighted by priority level of various factors. “Great teachers and leaders,” and “State success factors” make up the largest selection criteria, counting for 28 percent and 25 percent of selection criteria respectively. These sections are further broken down by weight as well: “improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance” counts for 58 points, over double any of the other factors in its section (p.3). Race to the Top seems to recognize more than NCLB that the reform’s success stands on the shoulders of individuals in the classroom, but is committed to increasing the effectiveness of these individuals through quantitative evaluation more than anything else.

Teacher Experience of Neoliberal Reforms

The existing literature on teachers' experiences specifically with No Child Left Behind is fairly robust, and a few important themes emerge to challenge the way that NCLB and Race to the Top attempt to increase the quality of teaching and learning, which include the narrowing of curriculum, the negative impact of a pressurized work environment, and an overall failure to match the complexity of real classrooms and schools.

Narrowing the curriculum

All five of the teacher-prioritizing studies cited in the literature review found that teachers reported narrowing their curriculum to test prep – Murnane and Papay (2010) referred to this practice as “shrinking the curriculum” (2010:157, Sunderman et al. 2004, Berry 2004.) Teachers also reported that shrinking the curriculum to focus more on testing is balanced out by cutting out more meaningful, important pieces of the academic curriculum, as well as reducing class time for extracurricular activities (Berry 2004). Kevin Dunbar discusses how, even in his independent public school environment, he has to teach to the test for what he says are “not the right reasons”: “You’d be remiss to not show it and teach to it a little bit, which makes me cringe, but you have to, you have to not for the right reasons, you’re not doing it for the kids and you’re not doing it because you think it’s a good educational moment, you’re doing it because your score is going to effect my score (SS).”

Negative impact of pressurized work environment

Many of my interviewees and teacher-prioritizing researchers used the term “demoralizing” to refer to the ways that No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top impacted them in the classroom – as expert teachers in Berry’s teacher-prioritizing study noted, more scrutiny and pressure does nothing to actual improve the quality of leadership or provide more effective instructional strategies (2004). The pressure of high-stakes testing was in fact compounded by policies that demanded “high quality teachers” in every classroom – Murnane and Papay found that in many cases, it actually made it difficult for schools, and especially low-performing schools, to find enough quality faculty (2010). This in turn would be likely to put even more pressure on existing teachers and administrators.

Overall, teachers reported that the mismatch between what reform policies provided and what they needed to succeed was frustrating: Sunderman (2004) reported that teachers thought more collaboration time within school faculties would be more helpful than structured professional development, and Berry’s group (2004) pushed for authentic and high-quality mentoring and preparation programs. The pressure of punitive accountability policies combined with a lack of necessary tools to increase the quality of teaching led to an overall feeling of decreased morale among teachers (Abrams 2003, Hamilton 2007). This report of decreased morale is reflected by my interviewees, who report that they were either negatively impacted or saw those around them negatively impacted. Liz Green recalls: “I sometimes felt like a ra-ra cheerleader keeping [my colleagues] up even though someone in the administration was putting them down.”

Failure to match the complexity of real classrooms and schools

One of the major complaints of neoliberal policy is in its incongruence with the diverse needs of schools in America. Kevin Dunbar relates his experience of Race to the

Top and Common Core:

There have been other little things, pet projects that have fizzled out, but this one has lots of money behind it, Pearson's contract totals 30 million with the state – until that contract's up we're giving Common Core exams...That part is frustrating because what works here, the needs of a student here are so different from rural students, urban students, or a charter school...That money is gone that could've been used for other things.

Dunbar directly connects the business side of educational policy with a lack of complex approach. He notes that big testing companies benefit from the high-stakes testing trend, while in reality it represented an ill-fitting way to measure such a wide range of school and students, much less guide their instruction. This concern was echoed by many of my interviewees, who were concerned that students with different learning styles or needs within one school were being ignored and left out by a system that relied on a single format being delivered to everyone. McNeil breaks down this “myth” of standardization:

The myth that standardization produces sameness – and therefore equity – is based on the notion that standardization “brings up the bottom.” The idea is that everyone should get the fundamentals. First, students have to “get the basics” before they can get to the “creative” or “interesting” part of the curriculum. According to this myth, any good teacher or good school will “go beyond the basics” to provide a creative, interesting education.

Listening to teachers breaks down this myth very quickly – it becomes clear, as Lisa Abrams found, that low-performing schools are often more pressured to stick to the “basics” and therefore further narrow their curriculum, while high-performing schools may have more freedom to go outside the box. In a racist, classist society giving racist, classist standardized tests, the difference between low-performing and high-performing

falls across lines of race and class, meaning that the students whose curriculum is being more narrowed are overwhelmingly low-income, Black and Brown students.

Chapter 7

A Teacher-Positive Framework For Reform

At the end of each of my interviews, I ask my interviewees, “Would you want your child to be a teacher?” The responses are similar, even though some teachers answer yes, and some no. Unanimously, all of the teachers express the amount of love and appreciation they have for their job. For some, this love translates into wholehearted support for their offspring entering into the same profession. Kevin Dunbar, who teaches at a lab school, responds, “Absolutely. I think it’s a calling. I would say yes, because all of this other stuff aside, I don’t think any of us would remain in the profession if the rewards didn’t far outweigh the difficulties.” Others similarly nuance their answers, saying that they would want to make sure their child was supported and in a good environment for the first few years of teaching in particular. Some teachers respond differently. For Karen, a public school teacher, the “work environment [isn’t] going to improve enough in time for [her daughter] to enter the workforce” even though she knows that she would be an amazing teacher. Liz, who has two grown children who are both teachers, recalls that she told them both not to do it. They both entered teaching anyways, despite the fact that they “saw what [she] had to go through” growing up. Liz adds, “They know it’s hard. They really get it now.”

Ethan Zimmerman would have supported his grown children going into teaching, but he also put this sentiment into important perspective: “I would say that the profession now is more difficult and some of the opportunities and freedoms that existed when I was hired don’t exist to the same extent. New teachers are burdened with a lot of these new

mandates and policies, but it's new to them, so it's not as if they're losing anything, their reality is just different. I just feel really fortunate to have come into teaching when I did, when the overall mission was to empower teachers to be as creative and as successful as possible." Zimmermann's reflection seems to get at the crux of this thesis: teaching remains a creative, challenging, and amazing profession for those who choose it.

Nevertheless, the environment that teachers, and specifically public school teachers, work within has changed drastically over the past fifteen years. It has gone from an environment that trusted and supported teachers to define and reach success on their own terms to a system that more often dictates what success should look like – often through quantified, standardized measures. It has gone from a system that more often than not was willing to work *with* teachers to one that now seems to work *against* them.

A Teacher-Positive Framework: Lessons for the Future

One of the largest themes to come out of a teacher-positive approach to looking at the ways in which neoliberal reform policies have shaped teachers' work environments is their ability to create and maintain a sense of professionalism, which they see as vital to the success of their work. All four of the current and former public school teachers that I interviewed for this project were proud of the way that they had been able to professional "bubble" that mirrored their personal teaching philosophy and allowed them to have a relatively empowering experience at the classroom, or even local, level. For Ethan Zimmerman, this "bubble" was highly supported by trusting administrators; Liz Green, Chris Ortiz, and Karen James were not so "lucky," as Zimmerman described himself to be.

For teachers in independent schools, the conversation about professionalism was a bit different, and focused more or less on how larger forces, such as administrators or a school mission, set the stage for a professional work environment. For Rachel Jennings, who had taught at a public school before coming to a private school, the conversation centered on how school administrators supported a professional environment for teachers. – similar in a way to Ethan Zimmerman. In both the public school and private school Rachel now works at, “good bosses set an important tone.” She expanded, “They support you as a teacher. You’ve obviously been hired for a reason, and they support your decisions and your philosophies.” Wayne Stewart cited the mission of a school as having an important impact on professionalism and purpose: “I think mission in an independent school is a critical starting point, I think that everything comes out of that. If you don’t go back to it and reflect on it, and hold it up to the light, and decide what’s working and what isn’t, you’re kind of falling short of what you should be doing.” Stewart elaborated that a strong commitment to school mission set the tone for a respectful and creative work environment. “To me that is in the fiber of this place, and you don’t have to be here 40 years to understand that there’s a way of doing things, a way to treat students a way you treat each other, an understanding that teaching is more than the communication of information.”

For teachers at independent public schools, such as Eva Mendel and Kevin Dunbar, both mission and a greater sense of autonomy in their “bubbles” helped create a more free sense of professionalism – although they were not completely outside of the impact of national policy, small, mission-driven learning communities had provided an empowering space to learn and develop as a teacher. Dunbar felt that his lab school’s

model was an effective one for learning and should be expanded to other districts – even though he felt increased pressure from testing, he acknowledged that he still enjoyed more freedom than the teachers in the adjoining high school. Mendel’s experience of professionalism sheds light on an alternative, authentic system of accountability – she didn’t feel like her principal was “constantly monitoring” her, but the presence of “peer observations” and a culture of student feedback provided a more authentic sense of checks and balances: “we encourage the kids to take us to task if they’re not learning. I don’t feel like professionals should be exempt. Kids should feel like they have the right to say, ‘You didn’t teach me that, I don’t know what’s going on.’”

Overall, a teacher-positive analysis of policy from a professional perspective shows that neoliberal reform policies have been relying on a largely teacher-negative approach, which fails to recognize teachers as educational experts and fails to invite their input. The impact of these policies falls along a clear “impact spectrum” for teachers – in the example of professional work environment, teachers at private schools felt that there were aspects of their school environment, such as trusting administrators or philosophical mission, that helped them find autonomy in the classroom. However, the value of this autonomy was questioned in some senses – Rachel Jennings noted that she missed the professional development and support of “professional growth” that she found in public schools.

In contrast, public school teachers largely had to constantly fight to keep a professional and positive work environment for themselves – they had worked extremely hard to gain the trust and respect of administrators and colleagues, and rarely described their schools as supportive of these professional spaces – in fact, sometimes the school

environment seemed to work against the teacher, to the point that public school teachers constantly had to put more energy into their work just in order to ensure a safe and productive work environment for themselves.

The experiences of Kevin Dunbar and Eva Mendel suggest a happy medium of sorts – a place where mission and administrative trust is present and supportive of professional work environment, but there are also important accountability systems in place and the entire school community works together to achieve goals that match the personal teaching philosophies of educators at the school. Dunbar and Mendel’s experiences suggest that such workspaces, which support teachers as educational experts and give them the trust and respect that they deserve, can exist without privatization and neoliberal reform. These spaces, in fact, present a vision for public education where educational experts shape work environments in ways that match the complexity of what teaching and learning means to them. If we are willing to place our trust in teachers, the possibilities for our education system are endless.

Listening to Teachers: Policy Recommendations

I want to conclude this project with a policy recommendation – but one that follows a teacher-positive framework by listening to what teachers recommend for change. I believe that the complexity and diversity of their recommendations is a necessary counter-narrative to our current neoliberal trend of over-simplifying and standardization that has resulted in the increasing stratification of our society along race and class lines. In order to reverse this trend, we must recognize the roots and

implications of teacher-negative policy, and work towards a teacher-positive framework for change.

Eva Mendel

Eva advocates firstly for more “holistic support” in schools, including family therapy and providing parents stipends – or job support- to help combat absenteeism in students. Similarly, she recommends housing stipends for young teachers – a measure she says would make job more livable at the entry level, as well as be a deterrent for teachers becoming administrators just to make enough money to pay off student loans or pay for housing. She wants all teachers to have a better awareness of the contexts in which they are teaching – she says that new teachers need to come in sociologically aware of the level of poverty and injustice in our society, and recommends programs to give teachers both experience and awareness before being sent into the classroom. Finally, Eva wants policy to promote school environments that are anti-racist, anti-prejudice, discussion based and empowering, which are supported by and consequently create what she calls a “reading and talking” culture among students.

Kevin Dunbar

Kevin supports school environments similar the lab school he works in, and believes that they can be successfully created outside of the charter school movement. To this end, he advocates for capping charter schools, and instead having a larger push for alternative programs in existing public schools. Given the current environment, he strongly supports preserving unions and tenure protections, partially because he thinks

that poor tenure protections will be a deterrent for prospective teachers down the line. Finally, Kevin loves the idea of increased specialization for teachers – having each teacher really embrace their niche and enable a curriculum where teachers build off of each other’s strengths instead of all teaching the same things.

Karen James

Karen believes in looking towards successful international systems with regards to standardized testing in an effort to match testing policies appropriately with brain development. She notes that Finland, “[doesn’t] give standardized tests until students are 16, they allow the brain to develop and grow without all the testing.” In general, she wants policies to be based more in brain development and research in order to best meet students’ learning needs. Additionally, she wants to bring back the focus on mentoring programs, to give new teachers a longer stint with mentor teachers before they are able to become student teachers, and then have their own classroom. In general, James believes that an increased focus on the preparation of teachers will increase the quality of teaching in our schools.

Wayne Stewart

Wayne’s recommendations for the future include a more authentic and thoughtful approach to how rigor, technology, and student empowerment play out in schools. He wants to figure out how to “celebrate” rigor instead of “glorify” rigor. He notes that technology is a huge change in education that hasn’t been properly or thoughtfully addressed enough, and that spending more time on this question could provide both

teachers and students with meaningful, relevant answers for how to incorporate technology into their classrooms and lives in general. Finally, he says, “Schools need to be places where students arrive, feeling somehow it’s not being done to them, but they’re taking charge of their own learning.”

Rachel Jennings

Rachel Jennings is a big proponent of how class size influences work environment, and believes that it should be a consideration moving forward. She also believes in the further development of authentic and relevant standards and objectives that hold teachers accountable for teaching skills. Finally, she advocates for reworking the testing system to be less quantitative and encompass “the big picture”: “There has to be a better way to make sure that kids who are struggling, [that we’re] meeting their needs and not just holding them back.”

Ethan Zimmerman

Ethan is a big advocate of experiential instruction, which he believes does a great job of “creat[ing] memorable experiences for kids that they take with them for years to come.” For teachers, he feels that a more portfolio-style evaluation system would improve the quality of such evaluations as well as encourage “ongoing discussion and collaboration between principals and teachers.” He also wants to find a way to help teachers “become comfortable in their own skin” and really embrace the profession. Lastly, he echoes the theme of student empowerment, and recommends including

“multiple intelligences” in instruction as a way to bring kids into the curriculum and really involve them in their own work.

Liz Green

Liz Green finds that wraparound services would make huge strides towards addressing the growing poverty in both her former school district and around the country. She wants to move schools from being “isolated institutions” to places where “there’s a continuation and cohesive grouping of what families need.” She wants schools and educational policies to reflect the difficulties that students living in poverty deal with on a day to day basis: “To not understand what it means to be hungry, to not understand what it means to be food insecure... there’s a lot of reasons for what goes on but it’s *those* policies that need to change.”

Chris Ortiz

Chris Ortiz’s experience in schools leads him to support professional work environments that give teachers more autonomy and respect so that they are able to teach to their fullest potential. He wants school’s treatment of teachers to reflect the energy and emotion that they put into their careers and respect the relationships and bonds that they create with their students. He relates a moment where his input was included in restructuring the ESL program in his district, but then he was “taken out of the equation” and moved to a different school. He says, “After I left, 15 kids dropped out, 25% of the population – it just killed me.” Nevertheless, he made it to graduation to see the last high school freshman class he had taught walk the stage: “That was my closure...I felt good, it

really put a stamp of approval on everything I had worked towards at that school. Three years before wasn't when I left the high school, it was when those kids graduated that I left, when they walked the stage.”

As Henry Giroux concludes,

Educators have the strength, numbers and courage to redefine the meaning and purpose of education to reflect the ideals and practices of a critical citizenry and a meaningful democracy. Let us hope they harness their collective insight and strength into an organized movement that demands a radical departure from the limited vision of education that has [been] dominat[ing] the United States (2010:175).

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